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Beauty Crosses the Border of Justice in the Retablos of Nicario Jiménez Quispe: A Theopoesis of Hospitality

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Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes.

Leon Trotsky
Literature and Revolution (1924)

Introduction

Through his art, the poet John Keats seems to express the ethereal character of human life in "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.[1]

These lines of Keats's poem point to the intrinsic relationship between beauty and truth, between *aesthetics* and *aletheia*. Through this poetry, we can remember that humanity has always been on a search for beauty, truth, and goodness.

[1] John Keats, *Poems of John Keats*, eBook, Generic NL Freebook Publisher, https://searchebscohostcom.ezproxy.barry.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2008521&site=eds-live.

Yet, in the United States, something appears to hinder this pursuit for minoritized populations such as the U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities.[2] To be "Hispanic" or "Latino/a/x" in the context of the United States, whether first, 1.5,[3] second, or third generation, is problematic at best or violent at worst. This reality is more difficult to navigate in specific socio-cultural, geographical, and historical settings, for instance, South Florida. The coauthors of this paper grew up as a second-generation Cuban-American and a 1.5 generation Nicaraguan-American, respectively. We posit that navigating this dual reality involves violence, or at least a pronounced epistemic disjunction. Living in politically charged, culturally diverse, multilingual South Florida means engaging in the quotidian attempt to reconcile competing hegemonic views. It means trying to occupy liminal spaces while at the same time resisting assimilation. Living in such a space implies constantly crossing and traversing borders in order to make sense out of life. Theologian Daisy L. Machado eloquently describes the existential effort that many face on a daily basis in what she terms "the Borderlands":

[2] For this article, our choice of nomenclature for persons from Latin American descent who either migrated to the United States or were born in this country is "Hispanic/Latino/a/x." The term, although not unproblematic, refers to Hispanic/Latino communities who identify with populations from Latin America, South America, or who have lived for many generations in the United States. We realize that the terms Hispanic, Latino, Latina, and Latinx are contested terms that were imposed by governmental institutions. We choose "U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x" as opposed to other terms being used, such as Latinx, because such terms are not amply employed in the South Florida context. We must also declare that the term we are using is not a perfect categorization because it leaves out many Indigenous populations from Spanish-speaking nations who have migrated to the United States and who do not identify with Spanish culture or speak Spanish as a first language.

[3] The term 1.5 generation refers to first-generation immigrants who migrated to the new country before or during their early teenage years. They were brought to the United States by their first-generation parents or crossed borders unaccompanied. Some 1.5 generation immigrants, like their parents, maintain strong ties to their country of origin, may be fluent in their heritage language, and may have to learn English as a second language. They often find legal obstacles to perform basic tasks such as driving, voting, or attending higher educational institutions.

> The U.S. Borderlands are *that* place where Latinas and Latinos live, struggle, love, fight, and strive to define who they are in the midst of a society that has for centuries kept them an invisible mass, a footnote in the homogenizing historical process of an entire nation. In this broader sense the Borderlands have no geographical boundaries and are both a symbol and a reality. . . for the millions of Latinas and Latinos who currently make up the new diaspora.[4]

Keeping Machado's understanding of the Borderlands, we can see that in the case of U.S. Hispanic/Latinos/as/x living in South Florida, daily life exists in the clash between at least two cultures, two languages, and a myriad of political viewpoints. One way to navigate this oppressive reality, Machado asserts, has been to protest these historical patterns of dominance and repression. U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities resist the false notion of a melting pot, the idea that a common culture is created where language, cultures, and selfhoods are fused into a utopic reality.[5] Clarifying the places from where we theorize and theologize is an imperative for those who come from diverse realities. This helps the theologian not only to discern and prioritize what sources to use but also to analyze these sources in light of the circumstances in which U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities live.

Relying on traditional academic models does not fully help in the articulation of coherent answers to the questions faced by minoritized communities in the struggle for justice and validation of who they are. Samuel Solivan expresses this conundrum in the following manner: "The task of locus identification is . . . complex and fluid, subject to a number of competing and

[4] Daisy L. Machado. "Kingdom Building in the Borderlands: The Church and Manifest Destiny," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 63.

[5] Machado, "Kingdom Building," 63.

at times conflicting factors always under consideration. Moreover, in identifying and articulating a Hispanic theological locus, one is also immediately confronted with the fact that the principal identifying tag, whether 'Hispanic' or 'Latino,' is itself a disputed question among us."[6] Sociologists, cultural historians, theologians, and other academics have attempted to elucidate satisfactorily this question of identity and distinctiveness that has inundated U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities for decades. Theological reflection on the concept of *mestizaje* as the best category of understanding,[7] such as the one championed by Virgilio Elizondo and others, may ignore an important dimension of other tools that minoritized communities possess to slake their questions of identity and survival.

Beauty and Art

Another important way, perhaps even a fundamental way, that U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities have used to navigate such tumultuous waters is their appeal to beauty through art. Performers, musicians, and painters, through their craft, are point to art as the locus for the interaction of beauty, justice, and truth. Ana María Díaz-Stevens sees the significant role that art plays in culture and how it even transcends philosophical and theological reflection. In her essay, "In the Image and Likeness of God: Literature as Theological Reflection," Díaz-Stevens describes the role art plays in the following manner: "[Art]… serves to express and to shape our longings and inner emotions because it speaks about the spirit and to the spirit. However, art also transcends the personal worldview to reflect the values upon which a society is either maintained

[6] Samuel Solivan. "Sources of a Hispanic/Latino American Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, ed. Isasi-Díaz and Segovia, 135.

[7] See Virgilio Elizondo's *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) or Eduardo C. Fernández's *Mexican American Catholics* (New York: Paulist, 2008) for a reflection on the concept of *mestizaje* as a *locus theologicus* for U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities.

or transformed."[8] Artists, especially popular artists, have heralded the demise of rational thought and beckon us to (re)discover truth, beauty, and ethics through different media. Thus, art can be seen as an act of defiant defense, or subversion, against forces that demand that minorities adhere to dominant ideas. Artists who use their media in significant ways attempt to connect their audiences to the truth that brings about beauty, and vice versa. In other words, artists map for us the border that beauty constantly crosses to force us to engage in ethical commitments. Citing Hungarian thinker Georg Lukács, Díaz-Stevens continues to build her argument in favor of the transcendental character of art in human imagination:

> Lukács believed that artists, writers, poets also had the power to offer society a way of escaping from a world in which only the status quo was perceived as rational. Precisely because they had to manipulate the abstract relationships to bring forth their creations, they had to understand somehow that the world they described was not necessary to itself but could in fact be *remade* into a more just reality.[9]

Argentine popular singer Atahualpa Yupanqui epitomizes the role of the artist in the manner that Díaz-Stevens and Lukács portray them. Artists can be envisioned as prophets who beseech other creators not to be silent in the face of injustice:

> *Si se calla el cantor calla la vida*
>
> *porque la vida, la vida misma es todo un canto.*
>
> *Si se calla el cantor, muere de espanto*
>
> *la esperanza, la luz y la alegría.*

[8] Ana María Díaz-Stevens, "In the Image and Likeness of God: Literature as Theological Reflection," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, ed. Isasi-Díaz and Segovia, 87.

[9] Díaz-Stevens, "In the Image and Likeness of God," 89.

. . .

¿Qué ha de ser de la vida si el que canta

no levanta su voz en las tribunas

por el que sufre, por el que no hay

ninguna razón que lo condene a andar sin manta?

Que no calle el cantor porque el silencio

cobarde apaña la maldad que oprime,

no saben los cantores de agachadas

no callarán jamás de frente al crimen.

Si se calla el cantor calla la vida. [10]

Given the intimate relation between beauty and justice, we declare that theology, ethics, and the other social sciences used to elucidate human reality cannot be fully grasped without appealing to the Beautiful. Theology, which has been traditionally expressed as faith seeking understanding, cannot be grasped without its celebratory, ritual-performative, and aesthetic dimension. If ministers and theologians are to capture the essence of the ethical, they must realize that they need to let beauty speak. In the introduction to the book *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen affirms the necessity of beauty in the life of believers and non-believers alike:

[10] All translations, unless otherwise specified, are our own. This song translates as: "If the singer is silent, silent life will be for life itself is a song. If the singer is silent, hope, light and joy will die of fright. What would life be like if he who sings does not raise up his voice in the squares for those who suffer? For there is no reason that condemns some to live without shelter. Let the singer not be silent because silence cowardly covers up the evil that oppresses. Singers do not sidestep, they are never silent when it comes to crime. If the singer is silent, silent life will be." Mercedes Sosa, "Si se calla el cantor," in *Mercedes Sosa interpreta a Atahualpa Yupanqui* (Buenos Aires: Universal, 1977).

> Beauty is not an extra, it is essential to all existence. Truth or goodness without beauty becomes dull, lifeless, boring, formalistic, and cold. It is beauty–sensuous and spiritual, spiritual in the sensuous, and sensuous in the spiritual–which excites and nourishes human feeling, desire, thought and imagination. It is the splendor of beauty that makes the true and the good whole.[11]

Beauty, art, and aesthetics, or more precisely theological aesthetics, may be understood as those instruments or vehicles that in human endeavor are used to dismantle or bridge the perceived divide between the sacred and the mundane, the beautiful and the pragmatic, the ethical and the unjust. According to Simone Weil, seeing or experiencing something beautiful "de-centers" the human person: it makes us give up our position as the imaginative center of the world.[12] The Beautiful, and its connection to the Good, shakes us to our core. It awakens in us a profound sense of other possible realities for our worlds. Beauty allows us to differentiate between what is just and unjust. Indeed, we believe that rediscovering beauty creates a revolution, in the strict sense of the word. Beauty prompts reality to change.

As we stated above, our contention is that the rich and diverse culture that U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities inhabit prepares us to grasp this revolutionary effect that beauty has in our worlds. Alejandro García-Rivera, in *The Community of the Beautiful*, calls forth the need to bring U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x theology into a conversation with the cultures that are rediscovering the interplay of beauty and ethics. He writes:

[11] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 6.

[12] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 104.

> Hispanic theology prompts the twin questions about the meaning of difference and the relationship between cosmic order and redemption. As such, it urges the theologian to explore the problem of good and evil as the struggle for meaning in light of human and cosmic difference . . . Such struggle, Hispanic theology has come to realize, involves the aesthetics of sign and symbols. Von Balthasar then joins the conversation. Indeed, von Balthasar affirms, aesthetics is the key to such questions, but it is not simply a philosophical aesthetics. What is at stake is the *capax Dei*, the human capacity to perceive the unperceivable, the finite capacity to experience the infinite, the naming the unnamable. . . [This is] found in the very structure of Being in the insuperable yet analogous difference between Creator and creature. As such, the *capax Dei* is, in essence, the capacity to experience Beauty, the site of the beautiful.[13]

Nicario Jiménez Quispe, *Retablista*

Another artist who epitomizes this revolutionary task that brings forth the question of difference is Nicario Jiménez Quispe. An artist who fled from his native Peru, he migrated to the United States and took up residence in the volatile sociopolitical and culturally disparate suburbs of South Florida. As an artist, Nicario Jiménez Quispe carried in his luggage the ancient traditions of the native peoples of Peru and the centuries of colonial violence inflicted on them. More than that, Jiménez Quispe is a person familiar with crossing borders, political and otherwise, in his native country and in the United States. Scholars Carol Damian, Michael J. LaRosa, and Steve Stein, in *Immigration in the Visual Art of Nicario Jiménez Quispe*, write that given Jiménez Quispe's experience of crossing borders, in his artistic creations, he has been able

[13] Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 155.

to transform the genre in which he works, the *retablo*. Typical Peruvian *retablos* are popular art pieces made of wooden boxes that are hand painted and usually have bucolic themes. Damian, LaRosa, and Stein write: "Jiménez began in the 1980s to convert the historic *retablo* into a creation with political content and as a means to explain contemporary social issues. His early work focused on social protests and the struggles of his Andean peers during the bloody Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) insurgency, and on the repressive reaction of the Peruvian government."[14] During Jiménez Quispe's personal and artistic trajectory, his migration experience within Peru and his eventual relocation to the United States continued to shape his social and political consciousness, especially in regard to the plight of migrant communities. His change of artistic direction took place as he personally experienced racial profiling and discrimination. Damian, LaRosa, and Stein recount the first experience Jiménez Quispe had when he arrived in the United States and how it helped him solidify his voice as an artist and social activist: "Going through customs, with suitcases full of *retablos* . . . the customs officials at Miami International Airport looked at everything. Perhaps suspecting he was trying to smuggle illegal narcotics, they asked persistently, 'What is inside all those figures that fill the *retablos*?'"[15]

Personal experiences such as the one described above and the artist's keen eye to explore reality helped Jiménez Quispe to transform his art into commentary. In Miami, Jiménez Quispe would experience the beauty of suburban Coral Gables. But he also witnessed other neighborhoods in Miami, such as the historically black community of Coconut Grove, that

[14] Carol Damian, Michael J. LaRosa Michael, and Steve Stein, *Immigration in the Visual Art of Nicario Jiménez Quispe* (New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 6.

[15] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 7.

contrasted with affluent Coral Gables: "Sharp economic and social contrast, he discovered, were not confined to Peru."[16] Damian, LaRosa, and Stein write that based on such experiences, "Nicario's art is neither abstract, obtuse, nor baroque; it is authentic, personal art that is at the same time didactic, political, auto-biographical, stunning and always reflective of the political and social environment in which he lives."[17] Through the lens that provides a unified vision of beauty and ethics, we seek to examine the work of Nicario Jiménez Quispe, whose *retablos* narrate his own experience of crossing borders in Peru and ultimately into and in the United Sates. Jiménez Quispe offers compelling accounts of the struggles of those forced to migrate. His art has also migrated from the realm of commercial artifacts to the beautiful yet tragic representation of human suffering.

The "Beauty" of *Retablos*

Popular culture finds its genesis and *raison d'être* through beautiful artistic creations. This is apparent in Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities in the United States. Echoing Alejandro García Rivera, Cuban-American scholar Michelle González calls for an interpretative re-visitation of aesthetics, specifically theological aesthetics. She writes that "an emphasis on the aesthetics is based on the belief that within the realm of symbol, imagination, emotion and art, one finds a privileged expression of the encounter with the Divine."[18] González suggests the use of theological aesthetics to obtain a better understanding of the complex reality of the U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities in the United States because their worldview organically

[16] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 7.

[17] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 8.

[18] Michelle A. González, "Unearthing the Latino(a) Imagination," in *New Horizons in Hispanic/Latino(a) Theology*, ed. Benjamín Valentín (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003), 128.

grasps the correlation that exists between beauty and justice: "Theological reflection on Beauty must therefore incorporate aesthetic expressions of the human encounter with Beauty's revelation. Of special attention is the relationship between aesthetics and ethics."[19] Hence, this Peruvian *retablista*'s art beckons its audience to engage in the work of justice.

Peruvian *retablos* are artistic representations that blend Inca and Spanish artistic and religious traditions. A work of art in themselves, these creations have become vehicles for artisans to communicate personal and social narratives. As stated above, Jiménez Quispe has been one of the pioneers in transforming this artistic expression into social and political commentary: "The leading craftsman of this movement is Nicario Jimenez, descendant of generations of muleteers. He has developed the new style of testimonial retablos."[20] Although other cultures have what they call *retablos*, which are usually religious artistic representations used in churches and later on in homes for private devotions, in Peru *retablos* may have their origin from wooden boxes that were associated with magical-religious usage in the Andean region of Ayacucho. *Retablos* in Ayacucho evolved from the *cajones San Marcos*, which were used for blessing and protection of herds by farmers in south-central Peru. San Marcos, or Saint Mark, was the patron saint of bulls and oxen, and hence small objects and figures were carried in these boxes as offerings to the Inca nature deities and later on to Christian saints for protection of the herds. These colorful boxes included small sculptures made out of potatoes, which represented the animals and their protectors. "Once made in family workshops for local use, these brightly colored wooden boxes have gone beyond the herding scenes to contain a multiple

[19] Gónzalez, "Unearthing the Latino(a) Imagination," 128.

[20] "The Evolution of the Retablo," https://www.thefolkartgallery.com/retablo.htm.

of events/characters, and have become some of the most representative expressions of the popular art of Peru."[21]

Although *retablistas* are perceived as popular artists who may lack formal or academic training in their craft, the significance of what these artistic creations accomplish in Peru cannot be overstressed. According to Damian, LaRosa, and Stein, the *retablo ayacuchano* "has been the primary vehicle through which people have expressed their dreams, fears, and loved, amused, worshiped, and honored their ancestors."[22] Unfortunately, in certain circles, the term "popular" has come to be understood as pejorative. We, however, affirm Orlando Espín's contention that popular expressions can be seen as a font of intuition, wisdom, and living revelation.[23] We argue that popular culture, religion, and art profoundly express the realities that define entire communities and articulate people's identity and socio-political agency. Popular artistic creations, which include all forms of creative language, are sources of local knowledge and the generative force that inaugurate alternate worlds. As we have argued above, and echoing U.S. Latino/a/x scholars, this is palpable in the realities of minoritized communities in the United States. These communities living on the margins thus offer insights into how their idiosyncratic worldview organically grasps the correlation between beauty (aesthetics) and their sociopolitical reality that is in need of transformation (ethics). Consequently, Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* are not static pieces but creative elements that contribute a surplus of meaning. *Retablos*, and specifically the ones composed by Jiménez Quispe, inevitably transcend the borders and divides

[21] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 10.

[22] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 12.

[23] See Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

we erect in our societies. Jiménez Quispe's *retablos*, in fact, seem to have migrated from a place of mainstream appeal to more politically charged images of human suffering, thus becoming poignant depictions of human pain and suffering. They are commentaries, reminders of our ethical responsibility to open borders and welcome the other and further, to enter in communion with them.

The Divine Character of Art

Throughout this paper we have emphasized that Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* are not religious pieces per se. Yet we must state that our reflection leads us to consider art as having a sacramental character. In the Catholic imaginary, art, inasmuch as it represents divine and human realities and their relationship with each other, is eminently sacramental. Furthermore, art is by its nature trinitarian. While this statement indirectly alludes to the triad of the transcendentals, namely, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, it goes beyond the philosophical underpinnings of the three transcendentals. Art, as a ubiquitous human enterprise, is life-giving/creative, redemptive/incarnational, and sanctifying/inspirational. Additionally, Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* follow long-standing indigenous traditions that can be interpreted at once as magical and religious. These *retablos* possess a sense of the mystical, the spiritual, and the ethical. Those outside the Indigenous worldview, however, might tend to regard these creations purely as crafts or secular works of art. Yet we must keep in mind that Indigenous traditions mainly exist within holistic cultures in which every object or action may carry religious meaning. Art, music, religion, and social behavior within indigenous cultures may be so closely knit together that it is hard to distinguish what is distinctly religious or spiritual and what is not.

Art is sacramental in the sense that it conveys the presence of the sacred, the ethical, the Good, the True, the Beautiful, and even the political. Art, understood as sacramental, makes use

of temporal things –words, gestures, and objects –for a "higher" purpose. The sacramental character of art can be understood as performative in the sense that it accomplishes something; it may prompt us into action and indict or invite us to change. In this sense, Jiménez Quispe's art is more than sacramental, it is liturgical. Liturgy can be described as the expression of the faith manifested through concrete acts, gestures, signs, and symbols in a particular cultural setting. The liturgy also serves to connect the assembly with eschatological realities that need to be translated into moral and ethical actions. Through ritual, the assembly is afforded genuine and tangible glimpses of how God acts in their lives through authentic symbols and signs. Understood in such a manner, the liturgy is the divine-human activity that is capable of bringing together and uniting the religious and the ethical, ritual and action.

If liturgy is the work of the people, just as in art, the assembly or congregation not only has a prominent role in it but also possesses an indispensable agency. Liturgy is that human-divine exchange, intercourse, or dialogue where words and gifts are offered in ritual worship. The artist, in this case Nicario Jiménez Quispe, presides over the liturgy of the *retablos ayacuchanos* that he has created. The word "retablo" comes from the Latin terms *retro* and *tabula*, and it refers to the artistic creations that depict divine realities behind the altar in churches. Understood in this sense, Jiménez Quispe's *retablos*, through their profound ethico-religious messages, invite us into table fellowship. His work is an attempt to initiate us into the mystery of creation with all its violent and unjust reality depicted using natural elements, materials, and color that the artist offers and consecrates in his artistic handiwork. This reality is transformed by the presence of the God who accompanies God's people in their journey of crossing the borders of the divine and mundane. In the liturgical feast at which Jiménez Quispe presides, we, the assembly, hear echoes of the *Ofertorio nicaragüense*:

A los pobres de la tierra,

A los que sufriendo están

cambia su dolor en vino

como la uva en el lagar

Es tu pueblo quien te ofrece,

con los dones del altar,

la naturaleza entera

anhelando libertad.[24]

Through the sacramental and liturgical character of his art, where he utilizes different natural elements for the elaboration of the *retablos*, Jiménez Quispe offers poignant depictions of suffering faces that open up spaces that allow us to think, reflect, question, but more importantly, these works are a reminder of our social and ethical responsibility to the other.

Why Theopoesis?

In Jiménez Quispe's creation, the aesthetic crosses the ethical border by summoning those who contemplate his art to commit to the work of justice. Gregory J. Zuschlag aptly utilizes the term "orthoaesthesis" when he tries to explicate the appeal to beauty in what he perceives to be U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x theology's turn to the Beautiful in its interpretation, articulation, and enactment of the faith.[25] Ironically though, Jiménez Quispe's art does not depict

[24] "To the poor of the earth, to those who are suffering, turn their pain into wine like the grape in the winepress. It is your people who offer you, along with the gifts of the altar, all of nature yearning for liberation." Manuel Dávila, "Ofertorio nicaragüense," in *Flor y Canto*, Tercera Edición, letra y música (Portland, OR: Oregon Catholic Press, 2011), 563.

[25] Gregory J. Zuschlag, "The Turn to The "Beautiful" in U.S. Hispanic/Latino Theology: Theological Aesthetics of Roberto Goizueta and Alejandro García-Rivera," *Offerings* 7 (Oblate School of Theology); available from https://ost.edu/turn-beautiful-u-s-hispaniclatino-theology-theological-aesthetics-roberto-goizueta-alejandro-garcia-rivera/.

beautiful images. His *retablos* tell stories of persecution, violence, discrimination, and other death-dealing realities that immigrants face as they attempt to cross borders. Heather Walton, in her essay, "A Theopoetics of Practice: Reforming in Practical Theology," introduces her audience to Paul Tillich's insightful reflection of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica.* She writes:

> [For Tillich, the] work which he believed best embodied the qualities of the protesting and re-forming imagination in art was *Guernica* . . . Pablo Picasso's massive, ugly, disturbing yet sublime work represented for Tillich the great travail of the 20th century and asked the questions that he believed demanded an answer from any morally speakable theology.[26]

Beauty, art, ritual, and liturgy, then, serve not only as a genuine expression of the community's reality but also as a call to engage in the work of justice. We argue that theopoesis elucidates the relationship of beauty and justice, the mundane and the divine, and the academic and popular more eloquently. Beauty communicates and beckons, it calls forth our engagement in the work of justice. Theology seems to have abandoned its engagement with beauty and relied on academic models that dismiss the popular, the performative, and the imaginative. In "Theopoetics and Social Change," Matt Guynn suggests that there is a longing for imagination and possibility that theology may be burying in mountains of facts and conclusions. Imagination, he argues, "is rooted in transcendence, it issues forth new glimpses of the Divine Possibility."[27] The work of the artist is congruent with the work of those who engage in theopoesis. Latina theologian Ana María Pineda believes that U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x theologians need to engage in this type of

[26] Heather Walton, "A Theopoetics of Practice: Re-Forming in Practical Theology," Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology, Eastertide 2017, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/ijpt-2018-0033/html?lang=en.

[27] Matt Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change," *Cross Currents* (March 10): 107.

work. She writes that "what today is called a theo-poet—is continued in the community by those Hispanic/Latino theologians who have committed their lives to the 'articulation of the faith experience of United States Hispanics'"[28]

We make the case for theopoesis, the idea of human creation and reflection that points to the sacredness in everyday life, because it best articulates and responds to the voices that come from the margins, from the cries of those who are not in academic circles or in official ecclesiastical structures. Popular artists, theo-poets, liturgists, and *retablistas* open up for us those spaces where, through beauty, justice and truth migrate. L. Callid Keefe-Perry succinctly expresses it in the following manner: "Theopoetics encourages voices that might not otherwise be given space, 'acknowledging and lifting up voices that do not occupy seats of worldly power.'"[29] This is where Nicario's artistic creation crosses the border into the political to give voice to the voiceless.

The Somatic Register

There is an interesting correlation between politics and aesthetics. Nowadays, more than ever, aesthetics seems to be an essential component of politics. While the word "politics" enjoys greater colloquial usage, for the purpose of this essay, we will employ the term *the political*.[30] It

[28] Ana María Pineda, "The Oral Tradition of the People: Forjadora de rostro y corazón," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, ed. Isasi-Díaz and Segovia, 115.

[29] L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), xviii.

[30] In the work of Mark Lewis Taylor, "the political" designates a "mode of organizing human practices that shape and structure social interaction and the dynamics of collective action in history." It also, by extension, operates as the driving force behind our interests, beliefs, and individual ideological commitments. Instead of the word politics, which in the U.S. is usually associated with policy making, partisanship, interest groups, and culture wars, the political captures a fundamental dimension of human society that ultimately constitutes our ontological condition. Furthermore, the political bears on the emergence of the theological. Mark Lewis

is important to note, however, that the word "politics" in its strictest sense is used interchangeably with "political," especially in relationship to aesthetics. But because "the political" seems to better capture the complexity and nuance of the socially and historically mediated ontological formations, we found the term adequate for the purpose of this essay. The political is not conceptualized; it is visualized. From television advertisement to banners, posters, pins, to even the physical appearance of politicians—the political is realized in the sensible. In other words, we apprehend the political through our senses. Far from being kept apart from the political, aesthetics seems to mediate the entire landscape.

The general rule—never to talk about religion or politics—is simply articulated to avoid conflict. Many maintain that religion and politics are topics that should never enter polite, civilized conversation. People often feel so strongly about these subjects that exchanges can become heated very quickly, sometimes even ending long-standing relationships. Regardless of how reasonable or persuasive a person's position on any given issue may be, rarely do we come across anyone willing to capitulate or concede their innermost convictions. Perhaps it is because these convictions are so firmly rooted beneath the conscious register, below the cognitive level of propositional thinking, that obstinate attitudes at times prevail. Thus, the political is "not so much a matter of discussing and doing, as it is more a matter of fantasizing, representing, staging, promising, reproducing–on a deeper level it is sensed rather than discussed."[31] It would seem, therefore, that the political gets internalized and appropriated through the sensory apparatus; firmly taking hold of our most crude and elemental somatic resources.

Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 5. See also Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2005), 3.

[31] Margus Vihalem, "Everyday Aesthetics and Jacques Rancière: Reconfiguring the Common Field of Aesthetics and Politics," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 10, no. 1 (2018): 1-11.

There is indeed an increasing interest in aesthetics that frees it from the narrow approach primarily centered on art. Studies in aesthetics have expanded to include and recognize the value of aesthetics in all observable events (phenomena), which in turn has captured the attention of people working within and across a wide array of disciplines. What was once considered "unscholarly" or "unacademic," lacking in conceptual content and epistemic value, has now picked up quite a bit of steam. By way of an aphorism, Maturana and Poerksen write:

> Once we have accepted that there is no possibility of making testable claims about observer-independent reality, the fundamental change in our epistemology has been completed. All forms of observation and explanation are now expressions of the system's operation with whose production we may now deal. A re-orientation has come about, a change from Being to Doing, a transformation of the classical philosophical questions.[32]

Coming to terms with the limits of our cognitive powers requires that we cultivate epistemic humility, a first step towards dealing with matters of knowledge and truth that is more down to earth, imaginative, and rich in anecdote. In the act of knowing, the observer and the observed, the subject and object, are inextricably enmeshed. The world we inhabit is not independent of us; we bring it forth ourselves. This, of course, does not mean that the epistemic pendulum has swung so far in the direction of the subject so as to produce a rampant relativism, but that instead we must recognize that knowledge and truth are constituted in the body.

The notion of the body as the locus of knowledge production is not new to U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x theology. There is an abundance of scholarship aimed at deconstructing the rigid boundaries between materiality and divinity that elevates the body to a level of epistemic

[32] Humberto Maturana and Bernhard Poerksen, *From Being to Doing: The Origins of Biology of Cognition* (Heidelberg: Auer International, 2004), 63.

privilege. This is notably the case in the work of Roberto Goizueta's description of popular Catholicism as recovering a primordial sense of creation infused with divine presence. "This was a faith," Goizueta writes, "firmly anchored in the body: the body of the cosmos, the body of persons, the Body of Christ."[33] The empirical world becomes a shared space for multiple bodies that agree on the causality of events and objects in that space. Each body, everybody, not just some bodies, embody a partial perspective on the knowledge in this shared space. Furthermore, bodies are distinctively historicized, racialized, sexualized, and politicized, especially when these features are woven into mediated political discourses.

Identities intersect in human bodies and mark them with particular struggles, memories, and trauma. The experiences resulting from these intersecting factors get stored in the body and constitute unique modes of embodied cognition.[34] This approach values the somatic register's capacity to apprehend the world through multiple forms of consciousness and ways of knowing. The somatic register is a bodily mode of appraisal that affects political thinking. The concept is synonymous to political theorist William Connolly's concept of *visceral register*. Connolly draws from cutting edge research in neuroscience to highlight the insufficiency of any purely intellectualist approach to ethico-political life. While the word visceral could just as well capture

[33] Roberto Goizueta, "The Symbolic Realism of U.S. Latino/s Popular Catholicism," *Theological Studies* 65, no. 2 (2004): 263.

[34] The theory of embodied cognition posits that multiple factors, both internal and external, play a vital role in the development of an agent's cognitive capacities. It stresses the role of the body in shaping the overall processes of knowledge formation, memory, judgement and evaluation, and reasoning. Francisco Varela's approach to cognition highlights two points: "First that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological and cultural context." Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 172-173.

the same meaning we wish to convey, the somatic, nevertheless, offers a better image for embodied ways of knowing. To put it another way, the somatic evokes a more holistic sense of bodily knowledge, a nonlinguistic and nonpropositional knowing in and through movements. Whereas the visceral mainly regards the bowel as the seat of emotions, the somatic suggests a corporeal entity defined as a complex system of brain waves, neural pathways, circulation, skeletal structures, and muscular fibers that work in unison to effect movement. The living, breathing, pain-receptive body as the executor of choices and decisions is experienced in kinesthetic sensations.[35] Like musicians, dancers, and performers of all types, sculptors like Jiménez Quispe use their hands, or as he would say, "*la habilidad y movimiento de mis manos*,"[36] to create (*poiesis*) what did not exist before, drawing from an indwelling knowledge and executing movement that is sedimented in the bodily schema.

Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* offer compelling insight into the social, economic, and political struggles that people around him face every day, while at the same time fashioning a deeply personal testimony that reflects his intimate life experiences.[37] Clearly his *retablos* are first-person accounts of the hardships and horrific experiences that he and those closest to him have had to endure. In fact, Jiménez Quispe was asked to sell a *retablo* that represents a political demonstration, and, to everyone's surprise, his response was quite revealing: "Why would you want to buy this one? Nobody is interested in buying retablos like this. I made this one for me."[38]

[35] Jaana Parviainen, "Bodily Knowledge: Epistemological Reflections on Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2002): 11.

[36] Nicario Jiménez Quispe, interview by the authors via Zoom, May 19, 2022.

[37] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 45.

[38] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 45.

Jiménez Quispe's attachment to this *retablo* is not only testament to the cruelty that he and others have lived in their own bodies but a genuine expression of somatic woundedness caused by physical and psychological trauma.

A case in point is Jiménez Quispe's first major piece on the theme of migration, *La Migración.* In this piece, each of the three scenes features a story of displacement, discrimination, and tense political strife. While the backdrop of these scenes displays the lovely landscape of the Andean countryside, the place of Jiménez Quispe's birth, attention is mainly drawn to the cluster of bodies leaving their homes in search of a better life. These *retablos* are striking representations of the most vulnerable of our world, the living "texts" of the destitute and displaced, or in the words of Ignacio Ellacuría, the "crucified people of today."[39] Jiménez Quispe's sense of the political achieves aesthetic representation through traditional Andean art. Like most artists who make a name for themselves, rather than offer a conventional manifesto, in his own words, Jiménez Quispe explains the process as a simple somatic endeavor.

Jiménez Quispe was once quoted as saying: "I work alone and make each figurine with just my hands and a small piece of wood to shape them. I learned this technique from my grandfather back in Peru and I carry this tradition through my work."[40] This tradition dates back for four generations of *retablo* carvers. Jiménez Quispe is acutely aware of the venerable lineage to which he belongs and the quasi-ritual[41] mechanics involved in using the most elemental

[39] See Ignacio Ellacuría, "El pueblo crucificado" in *Cruz y Resurrección. Presencia y anuncio de una Iglesia nueva* (México, DF: Editorial Soto, 1978), 49-82.

[40] Anna Timmons, "Artist Displays Work at UM, Discusses Immigration in America," *The Miami Hurricane*, November 5, 2018, https://www.themiamihurricane.com/2018/11/05/artist-displays-work-at-um-discusses-immigration-in-america/.

[41] In this sense, quasi-ritual refers not only to the ritual likeness identified in *retablo*-making but also to the methodological priority extended to the body in contemporary ritual studies.

materials to sculpt his pieces. At a deep level, Jiménez Quispe is keenly attuned to the somatic impulses that are necessary to effectively engage his craft. The somatic register is, inter alia, not just about improvement of skills or polishing technique but, more existentially, it is deeply concerned with the transformative potentials of embodied life. Ultimately, it is about how to move forward with courage, hope, and a renewed sense of humanity.

The verb "embody," often used to challenge the concept of disembodied knowledge, is useful for reminding us that even though we are our bodies, we can easily become alienated from them. "To embody something, according to Ronald Grimes, is to incarnate it, suggesting the possibility that people can also be disembodied even though they have, or are, bodies."[42] While *retablos* largely had a utilitarian purpose, for Jiménez Quispe, they took on a more embodied experience when he brought to bear the visible corporeal traits that constitute the social and political data of his life.[43] While at first glance these visual testimonials appear aesthetically pleasing, if one looks closer, then one realizes that they are not. Inside Jiménez Quispe's boxes are heart-wrenching scenes of people fleeing their homes in search of a better life. These harrowing scenes capture experiences indelibly stored in the *soma*–with its own rhythms and textures, traces of social and political histories and ongoing struggles.

The Power of Poetic Discourse

"However much rituals may inhabit ritual scripts or sacred texts, they also reside in bodies. No body, no ritual. Bodies–enspirited, colored, brained, aged, enculturated, gendered, skinny and fat–are methodologically primary." Analogous to the way that rituals inscribe meaning in bodies, one might say that *retablo*-making could potentially fulfill the same function. See Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 306-307.

[42] Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 307.

[43] Mayra Rivera, "Thinking Bodies: The Spirit of a Latina Incarnational Imagination," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 216.

In our efforts to make sense of the most egregious acts of violence and suffering in the world, theologies designed to vindicate God from the problem of evil no longer hold water. The denegation of Western thought is mostly due to the presumption that we have access to infallible knowledge. Western tradition asserts unequivocally the truth of the "first cause" (philosophy) and of the "highest being" (theology). The God of ontotheology, which Martin Heidegger refers to as the "god of the philosophers," is nothing more than a fabricated idol. Efforts to explain away the problem of suffering and evil with theodicy theories have proven futile. In the aftermath of World War II and all the atrocities that plagued the twentieth century, religion found itself scrambling to offer an adequate response.

Finding the right words to speak of suffering, let alone reasons for why a benevolent God might allow evil to occur, is no easy feat. According to Ashley Theuring, "using poetic language becomes a strategy for many theologians to work through theological difficulties around questions of suffering that reason and logic tend to exacerbate."[44] Rigid discursive accounts insufficiently communicate the traumatic effects of suffering. As a corrective, Rebecca Chopp suggests a form of discourse that takes seriously the roles of aesthetics and language in mediating experience:

> [Poetics] is an invention, for it must create language, forms, images to speak in what in some way has been ruled unspeakable or at least not valid or credible to modern reason. Compared to rhetoric, poetics does not seek so much to argue as to prefigure, to

[44] Ashley Theuring, "Holding Hope and Doubt: An Interreligious Theopoetic Response to Public Tragedies," *Cross Currents* 64, no. 4 (2014): 549-565.

> reimagine and refashion the world. Poetics is a discourse that reshapes, fashions in new ways, enlarges and calls into question the ordering of discourse.[45]

Language does not hold meaning within itself, but rather we are the ones responsible for filling it with meaning. In other words, there is no metaphysical ground that anchors language in some self-contained, self-regulated reference system. "Meaning," according to Jeffrey Hocking, "is not determined by its mirroring of physical or metaphysical reality, but it is created (and recreated) by the community of speakers."[46] This has profound, emancipatory consequences insofar that it breaks the grip of the metaphysical hierarchy that rely on analogical methods to substantiate truth claims. The *analogia entis* is "governed by the principle of the Great Chain of Being," which is "implicitly hierarchical and exclusionary in both theological and societal expressions."[47] This liberation of language generates alternatives to onto-theological constructions and raises the level of all other discourses and systems of thought.

The turn to the poetic is not an attempt to stylize theology to match an aesthetic whim, but rather "a deep recalibration in which the terms of discussion would be reconfigured to shift from a kind of scientific mechanicalism toward an organic and embodied surplus of meaning."[48] Most importantly, the turn to the poetic signals a revolutionary moment in the lives of marginal communities as they draw from their imaginative resources to tell the stories of their deepest and most painful experiences through art, song, poetry, dramatic re-enactments, and other embodied

[45] Rebecca Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony," *Criterion* 37, no. 1 (1998): 1-12.

[46] Jeffrey S. Hocking, "Liberating Language: Rubem Alves, Theopoetics, and the Democratization of God-Talk," *Theopoetics* 1, no. 1 (2014): 2-39.

[47] Hocking, "Liberating Language," 18.

[48] Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 28.

practices. Jiménez Quispe's work is a prime example of how visual art can embody a mode of being that is characteristically determined by the social and historically mediated ontological constitution. Through this *indigenista* medium, which also serves as narrative device, Jiménez Quispe seizes the subversive power of those who bear the weight of the world.

While the language of guild theology[49] tends to focus primarily on doctrines in support of rationally understood belief: topics of God, creation, sin, Christology, church, eschatology and so on, the form of God-talk that best captures our definition of theopoetics is found in Mark Taylor's description of *the theological*. He writes:

> The primary discursive language of the theological is the artful image, with symbolic force to convey the promise and threat of the spectral, the haunting by peoples and groups who are often rendered disposable, excluded, and oppressed. Their imagery, their art form – in song, poetry story, literature, painting, graffiti, the sewn designs of the *arpillera* quilts of culturally traumatized peoples of Chile and Peru, for example – all these and more constitute the primary discourse of the theological, insofar as they convey and constitute the haunting power of peoples bearing the weight of the world, but weighing-in spectrally with resistance and flourishing.[50]

[49] In his book *The Theological and the Political*, Mark Lewis Taylor draws a clear distinction between theology and the theological. On the one hand, he designates theology as the guild/academic discipline long established in institutions like seminaries, divinity schools, and in some Western university religion departments. The theological, on the other hand, strikes a neither/nor approach to the transcendence/immanent binary and points to another dimension. The theological emerges from a liminal space of dread, ecstasy, hope–from agonistic political experience which then comes forth in the form of creative artistic expression. See Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 9.

[50] Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 12.

The discursive power in Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* does not simply recount brutal stories of migration, displacement, and indigence. Jiménez Quispe does not merely traffic in horror. His *retablos*, to the contrary, poignantly and startlingly depict human bodies, especially faces, that call out to the observers and indict its perpetrators and indeed all humanity.

In richly describing the borderless, non-confessional, and extra-ecclesial nature of God-talk that repudiates any claims that steps outside, beyond, and above the world, Taylor's notion of *the theological* ostensibly misses the mark in advancing a more mytho-poetic discourse. Although Taylor correctly describes the theological as a discourse that resides in the interstices of agonistic thought and practices, the *logos* in theological still conjures up images of logical appeals to God-talk. The intention is not to replace theology with another methodological strategy, but in Catherine Keller's words, it [theopoetics] rhythmically destabilizes the certainties of traditional theological inquiry."[51] Above all, theopoetics is the practice of making words and creating forms of discourse that mediate bodily experiences and recognizes the body itself as the foundation of knowledge and the source of unquestionable truth. Like Jiménez Quispe's *retablos*, forms of theopoetic discourse harbor a spectral spirit, a seething presence, which rupture our built-in assumptions and distinctions that constitute our established ways of seeing the world. Instead of fabricating "religious" iconography, which by all accounts is the general motif in this style of folk art, Nicario sculpts what some might consider profane.

Despite the fact that his father and grandfather hewed to their traditional roots, Jiménez Quispe has preferred to narrate the world as he sees it. In his words, Jiménez Quispe sculpts

[51] Catherine Keller, "Definitions," *ARC*, https://artsreligionculture.org/definitions.

"what is seen. What is lived."[52] It would almost seem as if his *retablos* mirror a social phenomenological analysis. Jiménez Quispe offers a first-hand description of the violence that takes place in his social setting. That is to say, he offers a conscious perceiving, recording, reflecting on, and analysis of all that happens around him, but through artistic means. These *retablos* are in no way the result of a rigid research endeavor but a confluence of deeply arresting images that capture people's attention. these images stay with us long after we behold them.

Art and language are sustained by our bodily experiences. "Expressions," according to Mayra Rivera, "take place between the sensible world and the world of language."[53] Jiménez Quispe's work is never the result of a passive manipulation of sensible data, but rather a true somatic response to the world of his experience. Rivera draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of an artist to expand on this idea. "The painter, he says, works with whatever he receives–'body, life, landscapes, schools, mistresses, creditors, the police, and revolutions.' These things 'might suffocate painting,' to be sure, but they 'are also the bread his paintings consecrate."[54] Rivera alludes to the sacramental imagery in Merleau-Ponty's words and the transformative potential that arises out of the social and material elements received in the body.

While Jiménez Quispe may not acknowledge religious significance in his work, traces of religious themes are certainly found in it. The religious sense of life, which refuses to be boiled down to some determinate form, draws us out of ourselves and into the service of others. John

[52] Victoria Macchi, "Nicario Jimenez Calls Himself a 'Narrator' of Historical, Social Events in His Retablos," naplesnews.com, June 23, 2013, https://archive.naplesnews.com/news/nicario-jimenez-calls-himself-a-narrator-of-historical-social-events-in-his-retablos-ep-512703163-341962741.html/.

[53] Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 83.

[54] Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 83.

Caputo explains that "religion kicks in, not necessarily when we sign on the dotted line of some confessional faith or other, but when we confess our love for something besides ourselves, when (on one etymology) we 'bind ourselves over' (*re-ligare*) to something other, which means something other than ourselves, or (on another etymology) when we gather ourselves together (*re-legere*) and center ourselves on a transforming focus of our love."[55] Rather than appease the market forces and remain within the safe confines of factory artisanry, Jiménez Quispe has been compelled to create controversial subject matter. In what reads like an admonishing question, Jiménez Quispe's grandfather asked, "Who is going to BUY the *cajones sanmarcos*? The gringos are going to buy these?"[56] Knowing what we now know, we can assume that Jiménez Quispe paid no heed to his grandfather's concerns.

In spite of the earful he must have received from his elders, Jiménez Quispe appears to have listened to a different voice, so to speak, to something that laid claim to him, unconditionally. Something with an inbreaking quality that broke into his life, interrupted his affairs, and got his attention. A non-coercive voice that placed him on the accusative to which he could have either responded with affirmation or simply ignored. It would seem, therefore, that something of a deeper nature, perhaps underlying a mystical element, and inhabited by something of unconditional worth, seized him. For Jiménez Quispe, like other true artists who heed the call (*vocare*) and draw from the depths of human existence, "the grip of dissipated everydayness is broken."[57] Jiménez Quispe's decision to aestheticize human suffering rather than conform to market expectations sounds a lot, for all intent and purposes, like religion.

[55] John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 32-33.

[56] Damian et al., *Immigration in the Visual Art*, 19.

[57] Caputo, *On Religion*, 96.

Retablos of Hyperbolic Welcome

Welcoming others is a practice as ancient as civilization itself. Today more than ever, the stranger has never been in more need of hosts to provide shelter, sustenance, and the most basic human needs. "Hosting the stranger," according to Richard Kearney, "is not just some abstract virtue but a living existential struggle with crucial contemporary implications."[58] As more and more human bodies attempt to cross borders in search of jobs, security, and better livelihood, the question of whether to welcome or expel strangers produces mixed reactions among people of all walks of life. Attitudes towards immigrants, migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees, or any label with which the law chooses to define humans, have recently been central to the seismic shifts in policy and political discourse around the globe. This becomes especially evident in the sudden rise of right-wing populism and nationalist movements. In the West, two major streams of thought shape contemporary approaches to hospitality. One emphasizes the unconditional nature, namely, beyond borders, open-access, no questions asked; the other approach recognizes the limits[59] of hospitality - the conditional requirements that determine human encounters. Both, however, are deeply influenced by the Abrahamic traditions. The first approach, which we adopt in this essay, views hospitality as a "total yes to the stranger that goes beyond the limits of legal conventions which demand checks and measures regarding who to include and exclude."[60] On the face of it, this proposition sounds rather risky and dangerous. Is the incoming stranger friend or adversary? Do they extend their hand in good will or do they intend to harm us?

[58] Richard Kearney, "Hospitality: Possible or Impossible?" *Hospitality & Society* 5, no. 2 (January 2015): 173-184.

[59] For a rich theological reflection and in-depth analysis on the limits of hospitality, see Jessica Wrobleski, *The Limits of Hospitality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012).

[60] Kearney, "Hospitality," 173-184.

"Unconditional hospitality," according to Kearney, "is divine, not human."[61] It is marked by a transgression of laws, rules, boundaries, social and political norms–echoing Søren Kierkegaard, it requires the teleological suspension of the ethical. In other words, it involves a radical split–indeed a contradiction of paradoxical proportions–between the domain of ethics and faith.

This form of radical hospitality is marked by a kind of excess, a deferral from all economies of exchange in favor of an unconditional gratuity. In sum, "pure hospitality is not about a contract or conversation; it's about radical receptivity and exposure to the other, a welcome without why."[62] Thus this kind of absolute approach seems wildly unachievable and impossible. In fact, it comes across as utterly absurd. This approach arises out of the theory of deconstruction, of which Jacques Derrida is the originator.

Derrida suggests "that between an unconditional law or an absolute desire for hospitality on the one hand and, on the other, a law, a politics, a conditional ethics, there is distinction, radical heterogeneity, but also indissociability. One calls forth, involves, or prescribes the other."[63] Derrida describes what seems to be a regulatory ideal in the Kantian sense, marked by an incalculable and inexhaustible potentiality. It keeps everything open, exposed, always subject to reform and reinvention by preventing things from becoming a "freeze frame, like a frozen waterfall or a 'still' in a motion picture."[64] Hospitality, in a nutshell, is the radical act of

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[61] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 48.

[62] Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 6.

[63] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 147.

[64] John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2016), 25.

welcoming the other. How do we go about welcoming the other? Every act of hospitality is, in practice, conditional and subject to the demands of the law and the rights and duties that are conditional. However, if hospitality is only by invitation, then one is in control of who one welcomes. That is to say, it is hospitality that proceeds by invitation. Consequently, this form of hospitality is being extended under certain conditions. Ultimately one is not welcoming the other but the same. The notion of alterity implies complete obligation to the other. Terry Veling inspired by Emmanuel Levinas offers a beautiful condensation of alterity. He writes:

> Every face we encounter is the face of otherness. Every face says, "I am other to you." Every face says, "I am not you." Every face says, "Don't kill me, don't absorb me into your world; don't assimilate me by making me the same as you. I am other. I am different. I am not you."[65]

U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x theology embodies a form of God-talk that is inseparable from the encounter with the human other. According to Mayra Rivera, "Hispanic theologies understand themselves as speaking from the place of the other."[66] At its core, U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a/x theology is attentive to how experiences of otherness arise out of systems of power, while also stressing the importance of the heterogeneity and irreducible nature of those who bare the mark of otherness.

The aesthetic standard in the West is primarily dominated by perceptual beauty. Modern aesthetics describes "formal beauty" by characterizations of harmony, proportion, and balance. Shi-Ying Zhang explains that visual or perceptual beauty certainly contains some elements of

[65] Terry A. Veling, *For You Alone: Emmanuel Levinas and the Answerable Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 35.

[66] Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 78.

freedom, but they are not definite or clear enough.[67] Beauty, truth, and goodness, are understood in the classical sense to be values of a cosmic nature–namely, of a timeless and universal order or, to put it more succinctly, an objective feature of everything that exists. This point of view situates beauty above and beyond the limits of culture, religion, and ideology – seemingly beyond borders. However, conceptualizing beauty in this manner is highly problematic, especially since beauty has been a crucial element in various forms of oppression. Standards of beauty, for example, are culturally conditioned and relentlessly reinforced to align with dominant and authoritative representations.

Beauty does not cross borders because it has been counted among the ultimate values that transcends the limits of time and space but because irrational elements such as sensations, desires, instincts, and the like are the source of our life and creativity. Jiménez Quispe's work, for example, is a form of art that is free from the expectations of "visual beauty" and embodies a lofty and far-reaching realm of life. It is a form of art that crosses from a visually and perceptively aesthetic form of consciousness to the ethical-political. What viewers see in Jiménez Quispe's work is not ordinary visual beauty, pleasing to the eyes only, but thought-provoking, gut-wrenching, and excruciating scenes of human faces "completely exposed, completely vulnerable, infinitely other, absolutely singular."[68] The beauty of the human face crosses borders, language, religion, political factions, gender and racial identities, social and economic levels–in brief, otherness/difference/singularity become the measure for the universal.

[67] See Shi-Ying Zhang, "Philosophy and Aesthetic: To Begin with the Case of Western Postmodern Art," *Open Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2012): 136-142.

[68] Veling, *For You Alone*, 35.

The singular face of the other offers an exemplary way to speak of transcendence, to employ the only measure through which we can assert universality. As John Caputo notes:

> We cannot transcend it, because it is transcendence itself. We are the ones transcended, overcome, lifted up or put down, overtaken, thrown. Obligation is the sphere of what I did not constitute. . . Obligations come over us from the other whose transcendence shocks our freedom and autonomy.[69]

The *retablos* of Jimenez Quispe shock our freedom and autonomy by exposing a moral imperative, bringing us face to face with the irreducible, singular other who cries out to us: Here I am! We are human beings! These *retablos* possess a hyperbolic quality in the sense that unconditional welcome sounds far-fetched, absurd, contrary to the logic and wisdom of the world. As poignant depictions of suffering faces, these works are a reminder of our ethical responsibility to open borders—physically and mentally—to the incoming other.

Conclusion

Some might consider the aestheticizing of human suffering an attempt to reduce the experience to a state of banality, which renders moral outrage and social guilt into its opposite, namely, indifferent spectatorship and apathy. However, Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* prove otherwise. These testimonial pieces de-center the imagination and summon us to reflect on a human crisis of deep ethical significance. Through their aesthetic appeal, *retablos* effectuate an understanding of the complex reality of the Hispanic/Latino/a/x communities in the United States. A work of art in themselves, *retablos* are vehicles that communicate personal and social narratives. This form of art is powerful: It can spark the imagination and tell stories that connect

[69] John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 27.

all cultures, capturing universal emotions and truths. These stories, however, are not overarching narratives that seek to homogenize human experience, but rather anecdotal and illuminating counter-narratives that subvert the stories of the powerful and define their own realities. Amid the chaotic and harrowing scenes in these visual narratives, to enhance the experience of the viewer, the artist gives careful attention to creating beautiful surrounding environments, contrasting natural and urban landscapes, which represent very different worlds for Jiménez Quispe—but worlds nonetheless infused with a sense of mysticism, magic, and an ethical imperative. As the creation of an Indigenous artist with strong cultural ties to a world that, unlike ours, does not demarcate lines between the realm of the religious and the secular, Jiménez Quispe's work harbors a rich sacramental character in that it mediates the divine through the material.

As we endeavored to describe the somatic roots of Nicario Jiménez Quispe's *retablo*-making process, it became evident to us that his craft is not guided merely by the mastery of skills acquired through some form of apprenticeship, but rather guided by moods, affects, and intuitions of considerable intensity. These impulses of somatic origin arise out of agonistic political struggles of being exposed to plays of power and enmeshed in systems of power. Hence Jiménez Quispe is committed through his work to unlock visions of the real, often hidden vitality of resilience, dignity, transformation, and defiance which are at the heart of ordinary people's struggle. Rather than assign aesthetic value to his works, which at times presuppose a subjective pleasure, we view them as poetic explications or renderings of human suffering. The poet has deep insight into the nature of reality, insight that cannot be gathered by logic or science. The power of the poet lies in making meaningful connections with our elemental surroundings and harness the power of discourse to throw open new vistas for our imagination. The experience of

the artist or poet is not to relate an eye-witness account of the world but to empower alternate forms of consciousness that create new worlds. Jiménez Quispe's *retablos* capture a world charged with a call, a demand, an obligation to respond, to answer, and ultimately, to welcome.