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Revisiting the Sacrament of the Stranger: Reflections on Migration, Invisibility, and Postcolonial Imagination

Abstract

The article invites reflection on the theological, ethical, and theopolitical challenges that global migration presents to contemporary Euro-Atlantic theological inquiry in dialogue with feminist critiques as well as postcolonial and decolonial imaginaries from a diasporic perspective. Engaging the current ethical and theological exigencies of forced migration and displacement in the context of both Europe and North America, the article reflects on the erosion of human rights, racism, and intensifying invisibility of migrants and refugees as bearers of *imago dei*. This situation calls for novel postcolonial approaches to theological anthropology. The constructive reflections suggest that instead of unbridled glorification of sheer postmodern difference, the current situation rather invites a search for renewed “spiritual senses” to foster intervisibility and a new poetics of creaturehood. A postcolonial poetics of creaturehood, as inspired by ideas of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Achille Mbembe, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kelly Oliver, Shawn Copeland, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, can be envisioned in terms of a poetics and a theopolitics of similitude that manifests through paradoxical encounters with the Divine through the sacrament of the stranger.

Keywords: Global migration; postcolonial imaginary; poetics of creaturehood; *imago dei*; poetics of similitude, sacrament of stranger.

Resumen

Este artículo invita a reflexionar acerca de los retos teológicos, éticos y teopolíticos que la migración global presenta para la investigación teológica euro-atlántica en diálogo con una crítica feminista así como con imaginarios poscoloniales y decolonialistas desde una perspectiva diaspórica. Engranando las actuales exigencias éticas y teológicas de la migración forzada y del desplazamiento en el contexto tanto europeo como norteamericano, el artículo reflexiona sobre la erosión de los derechos humanos, el racismo y la creciente invisibilidad de personas migrantes y refugiadas como portadores de *imago dei*. La situación demanda nuevas aproximaciones poscoloniales en la antropología teológica. Las reflexiones constructivas sugieren que, en lugar de una

desatada glorificación de la diferencia posmoderna, la situación actual invite, por el contrario, a buscar “sentidos espirituales” renovados para fomentar la intervisibilidad y una nueva poética de la condición de ser criaturas. Una poética poscolonial de esta condición, como aquella inspirada por las ideas del rabino Jonathan Sacks, Achille Mbembe, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kelly Oliver, Shawn Copeland y Hans Urs von Balthasar pueden concebirse en términos de una poética y una teopolítica de la similitud que se manifiesta a través de encuentros paradójicos con lo Divino mediante el sacramento de la persona extranjera.

Palabras clave: migración global; imaginario poscolonial; poética de la condición de criaturas; *imago dei*; poética de la similitud; sacramento de la persona extranjera.

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel lädt zur Reflexion über theologische, ethische und theopolitische Herausforderungen ein, die die globale Migration an die euro-atlantische theologische Forschung in Dialog mit feministischer Kritik sowie postkolonialen und dekolonialen Vorstellungen aus einer Diasporaperspektive darstellt. Unter Einbeziehung der gegenwärtigen ethischen und theologischen Erfordernisse durch erzwungene Migration und Vertreibung im Kontext von Europa und Nordamerika reflektiert der Artikel über die Erosion der Menschenrechte, Rassismus und sich verschärfende Unsichtbarkeit von Migrant*innen und Flüchtlingen als Träger der *imago dei*. Die Situation ruft nach neuen postkolonialen Zugängen zur theologischen Anthropologie. Die konstruktiven Reflexionen legen nahe, dass die gegenwärtige Situation anstelle grenzenloser Glorifizierung der bloßen postmodernen Differenz vielmehr eine Suche nach erneuerten „spirituellen Sinnen“ einlädt, um Sichtkontakt und eine neue Poetik der Kreativität zu fördern. Eine postkoloniale Poetik der Kreativität, wie sie durch Ideen von Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Achille Mbembe, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kelly Oliver, Shawn Copeland und Hans Urs von Balthasar inspiriert ist, kann in Form einer Poetik und einer Theopolitik der Ähnlichkeit in den Blick kommen, die sich durch paradoxe Begegnungen mit dem Göttlichen durch das Sakrament des/der Fremden manifestiert.

Schlagwörter: globale Migration; postkoloniale Imagination; Poetik der Kreativität; *imago Dei*; Poetik der Ähnlichkeit; Sakrament des/der Fremden.

In the era of building walls, the old – and yet so new and so consequential – conundrum of how to deal with strangers acquires a new sense of urgency. The current surge of global migration is increasingly registering in our Euro-Atlantic awareness as a protracted quandary with immense political, economic, cultural, and religious implications. Some even talk about the steadily increasing numbers of people on the move as the “new normal” state of affairs in the

21st century. From a theological point of view, it is becoming much harder to avoid noticing that as Chief Rabbi emeritus of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth Jonathan Sacks put it, “hatred of foreigner is the oldest of passions” – the “dislike of the unlike is as old as [hu]mankind.”¹ Our Euro-Atlantic lifeworlds are currently at risk of becoming ever more treacherously polarized by fear, inequality, and resentment. Often the inequality is blamed on the undeserving outsider “others.” Even more often, the fear and resentment toward “strangers” is manipulated to distract from the underlying structural causes of injustice and hopelessness to sow acrimony and distrust. In the present Covid-19 pandemic crisis, it is migrants and refugees (rather than cruise ship passengers, jet-setting tourists, and ubiquitous business travelers) who are often and without factual proof accused of spreading the virus. Such scapegoating comes in handy to suspend processing asylum claims and enacting even tighter border closures in Europe and the United States. Meanwhile migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, perform hazardous responsibilities now deemed “essential” in agriculture, food processing, healthcare, and service industries. In this context, I submit, the realities and experiences of migration constitute a unique crucible for theological and ethical imagination in our moment in history.

The following reflections on the significance of migration for Euro-Atlantic theological (including feminist) imagination and practice were initially presented as a keynote address at the 2019 bi-annual conference “Gender, Race, Religion: De/Constructing Regimes of In/Visibility” of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR) in Leuven, Belgium. The overarching purpose of my reflections was – and is – to invite further conversations among theologians working from a broad spectrum of perspectives, including feminist discourses, to discern how the urgent summons through the real and often very challenging presence of contemporary racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic migrants and refugees in our midst is also a summons toward rekindled and meaningful theological anthropologies as well as theo-ontologies of creaturehood. Just to clarify: by “our midst” I mean the Euro-Atlantic theological and socio-cultural milieu where most ESWTR members live, work, pray, love, and go about their daily lives interacting with others in their communities.

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Mishpatim (5779) – Loving the Stranger* (<http://rabbisacks.org/loving-the-stranger-mishpatim-5779/>, 5 September 2019).

The real presence of migrants and refugees in our midst is a revelatory sign of the time, indeed, a *locus theologicus*, which today compels a renewed attention to the ancient imaginary of hospitality: first, to the divine welcome of the created world into existence as well as what Richard Kearney and James Taylor have called “the sacred commitment to hosting the stranger” which is prominent in most major wisdom traditions.² They insist – rightfully so – that “interreligious hospitality is a primary task of our time.”³ Hospitality itself, they discern, is “a central and inaugural event in the world’s great wisdom traditions” since “it marks that moment when the self opens to the stranger and welcomes what is foreign and unfamiliar into its home” even as “hosting a stranger is always a risk, never a *fait accompli*.”⁴ In light of the ongoing controversies in many Euro-Atlantic societies and communities of faith, it is hard to disagree that welcoming the other is nothing less than “an act of daring and trust, of bold compassion and justice, never a matter of cheap grace or easy virtue.”⁵

My itinerary for these reflections goes as follows: 1) to explore the regimes of visibility/invisibility through the lens of migratory experience toward 2) re-envisioning some exasperating aspects of theological anthropology with 3) a brief constructive focus on the notions of creation, *imago dei*, similitude, and the stranger as a sacrament – and to do it all 4) from a post-colonial perspective.

Context, Intersectionality, and the Oldest of Passions

To explore the regimes of visibility and invisibility I will proceed as a Christian theologian who sees theological endeavor as being rooted in the revelation of the Word and Wisdom of God incarnate, crucified, and risen in history. At the same time, my reflections are always already inflected by the lived experience of migration. While I am a Lutheran theologian and pastor, I am also a diasporic Latvian-American and a migrant. Hence I am compelled to underscore that Christian theology is lifeless at the least, and perhaps even blasphemous at the worst, if it proceeds as if the routinely suppressed and devalued

² Richard Kearney and James Taylor, “Introduction,” in: Richard Kearney and James Taylor (eds.), *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (Continuum: New York and London 2011), 1-8, here 1.

³ Kearney and Taylor, “Introduction,” 1.

⁴ Kearney and Taylor, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵ Kearney and Taylor, “Introduction,” 1.

histories of those sinned-against and vanquished (still) simply do not matter in theological reflection.

From my perspective as a Latvian-American diasporic theologian working from postcolonial perspectives, I share the sense of urgency that migration presents precisely on a *theological* level. Ethnographic vignettes in terms of how to “apply” or “illustrate” methods and doctrinal insights generated in the metropolitan centres will no longer suffice for theological authenticity as ambiguous and as hybrid as such authenticity is for those of us who live betwixt and between cultures, languages, nationalities, and political allegiances. Fortunately, the current “turn to context,” or the turn to experiential histories as sources *of* and challenges *for* theological inquiry, entail a praiseworthy shift toward more attentive engagements with the ethical and existential exigencies of life precisely if we allow them to shape the methods, doctrines, and paradigms of theological creativity and not just their local “applications,” “inculturations,” “contextualizations” and “adaptations.”

Among such theological engagements, feminist theological inquiries have often served as trailblazers. Amid the exceedingly convoluted processes of postcolonial – and some would say, neocolonial – globalization, we are seeing the emergence of an uncertain and volatile multipolar world under the widening shadow of an overarching ecological degradation. In this emerging world of Anthropocene, Christianity, let alone North-Atlantic Christianity or Western Christianity or even more narrowly, the European type of Western Christianity, offers only *one* cosmovision or only *one* ontology, or only *one* epistemological imaginary – *among* others. In this context, it is no secret that the emergence of womanist, Mujerista, postcolonial, decolonial, and a whole spectrum of indigenous feminisms from the Global South has, in turn, called into question the theories, methods, and values of Euro-Atlantic feminisms and their unease around the issues of race. These emerging discourses highlight a continued scarcity of attention to the coloniality of gender.⁶ As the Arab feminist thinker from Australia, Ruby Hamad, has just reminded everyone in her new book *White Tears/Brown Scars*, “white women were not bystanders to the

⁶ For a good overview of this debate, see, for example: Raewyn Connell, “Meeting at the Edge of Fear: Theory on the World Scale,” in: Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2018), 19-38 as well as the essay collection by Margaret A. McLaren (ed.), *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization* (Rowman & Littlefield: London and New York 2017) among other publications.

global colonial project;” hence a lot more careful attention should be paid to “the legacy of both confounding and collaborating” of European colonialist women within colonial designs.⁷

The stream of postcolonial refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Euro-Atlantic societies highlights the intersections of gender and race ever more intensely. Yet these intersections remain in need of deeper theological interrogation especially in some European milieus, including feminist discourses, where the issues of race, even in relation to the undeniable problems of racism, are still often avoided since they are seen (perhaps too conveniently?) as exclusively tied to the histories of Nazism. Now, race talk is never easy or comfortable anywhere. Despite how unsettling, frustrating, and unsatisfying discussions of racism remain in North American theological and feminist conversations, they are now practically unavoidable across most disciplines in religious studies, humanities, and social sciences. The European situation is different in terms of how race and racism appear in public and academic discourses. Not that racism doesn’t exist in Europe – alas, it does. Nevertheless, it is inspiring to see as Mithu Sanyal recently pointed out from her German perspective that new paths are explored in the European context on how to address it more openly and constructively. Even though a new openness for engaging race in racism is emerging, Sanyal observes that still “we’re all walking on eggshells; the discussion about racism is on the agenda but we’re whispering ‘race’ as if it were a dirty word.”⁸

Meanwhile, hardly a day goes by without new and very troubling knowledge – such as the scientifically researched “existential risks” – emerging about the climate change and its impact on virtually all spheres of life.⁹ But what often slips to the sidelines of the climate change discussions is its impact on migration – which also means dealing with cultural, racial, and religious

⁷ Ruby Hamad, *White Tears/Brown Scars* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne 2019). The quote is from her article “White Women Were Colonisers Too: To Move Forward, We Have to Stop Letting Them Off the Hook,” *Guardian*, 30 August 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/30/white-women-were-colonisers-too-to-move-forward-we-have-to-stop-letting-them-off-the-hook>, 2 September 2019).

⁸ Mithu Sanyal, “Suddenly, it’s OK to be German and to talk about race,” in *Guardian*, 18 September 2019 (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/18/germany-race-conversation-afd-openness?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gmail, 19 September 2019).

⁹ For a global overview of risk analysis in relation to the climate change see, for example, the work of Cambridge’s *Centre for the Study of Existential Risk* (<https://www.cser.ac.uk>, 1 September 2019).

strangers! This impact will only swell to add more momentum and complexity to what such unlikely bedfellows as the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman have already described as “humanity’s crisis.”¹⁰ Migrants, especially as the current bugbear of choice for ethno-nationalist campaigns across the globe, are like a disconcerting sign of the times not only for political and cultural soul-searching but, even more consequentially, for spiritual assessment and theological analysis of Christianity’s existential risks of idolatry.¹¹ This is one more reason to foreground migration as a *locus theologicus* in Euro-Atlantic theological imagination.

Like Rabbi Sacks, I also see the real presence of strangers as globalization’s “supreme challenge” to world’s religions. Interacting and co-existing with strangers has never been an easy-going business. Sacks probes deeper with a seemingly disarming simplicity: “Can we find, in the human ‘thou’, a fragment of the Divine ‘Thou’? Can we recognize God’s image in one who is not in my image?”¹² And, “can I do so and feel not diminished but enlarged?” precisely as every generation all over again discovers that we “must now make space for those who are different and for another way of interpreting the world”¹³ in ways that are fitting for our unique historical location.

I would like to add that we are no longer just asking the perennially frustrating question as Sacks does, namely, “can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger”¹⁴ but also wondering what does it even mean to “see” (to recognize, to acknowledge, to affirm, to respect) the presence of the Divine in those who are not like me/us? Indeed, how? Through what theological optics can we see difference without prematurely negating or triumphantly colonising

¹⁰ Patriarch Bartholomew, “Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Concordia Europe Summit ‘Migration Challenging European Identity,’” taking place on 7 June 2017 in Athens, Greece. (<https://www.patriarchate.org/-/address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-concordia-europe-summit-migration-challenging-european-identity-june-6-2017-athens>, 18 August 2019) See also, Brad Evans and Zygmunt Bauman, “The Refugee Crisis is Humanity’s Crisis,” *The New York Times*, 2 May 2016 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/02/opinion/the-refugee-crisis-is-humanitys-crisis.html>, 2 July 2019).

¹¹ Some of the most respected North American theologians from a wide ecumenical spectrum have recently called attention to the profound theological challenges that currently amplifying forms of nationalism present to many societies around the issues of xenophobia. See “Against the New Nationalism: An Open Letter,” *Commonweal*, 146:15, October 2019, 2-4.

¹² Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Revised edition with a new preface (Continuum: London and New York 2003), 17.

¹³ Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 8.

¹⁴ Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 5.

it in this age when dealing with difference “is the greatest religious challenge of all?”¹⁵ In our time, when millions of human beings are on the move and are increasingly portrayed as disgusting, threatening, malicious, and as not deserving any mercy or understanding from the late postmodern nation states in the global North which are still more or less (it seems) inculturated in Christian lifeworlds, how can theological imagination be deployed to profoundly recraft the Western Christian operative theologies of shared human creaturehood? How can theological optics empower the capacity to see personality, resilience, courage, creativity, hope, love, agency, and dignity in those that are being vilified to the point of becoming invisible precisely as fellow human beings?

Postmodern Differences, Borderization, and Noticing the Subaltern Eyes

And this is where postcolonial and decolonial angles can be useful in the quest for new anthropological imagination that also affects the dominant imaginaries of gendered difference. Is it not time, especially in the affluent and relatively peaceful enclaves of the “First World,” to retool our operative theological anthropologies that (should) inform the attitudes and actions toward all those human persons whose shared humanity and shared stake in being part of God’s creation is overshadowed by lingering colonial conventions as well as constructions of such radical otherness (racial, cultural, religious) that their suffering and death seems to give our societies no pause, no notice, and no grief? Is it not high time for theological feminist discourses to commit more expansively, especially in Europe, to critical engagement with racism and “go planetary” in order to break open some methodological and cultural taboos that still often result in diplomatically avoiding the issues of race? Having lived the first half of my life in Soviet and postsoviet Eastern Europe and now living in the United States, I have yet to find a place where an honest conversation about our human constructions of race, racism, ethnicity and all the myriad of hierarchies and inequities that such construction entail would be comfortable.¹⁶ Most of us want to avoid such conversations at all costs. Feminist discourses

¹⁵ Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 46.

¹⁶ The recent Jena Declaration of the Institute for Zoology and Evolutionary Research of Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, points to the difficulty in some European cultures of finding a constructive way of addressing racism. Indeed, “simply removing the word ‘race’ from our daily language will not prevent racism and intolerance. A feature of current forms of racism is precisely the tendency in far-right and xenophobic circles to avoid the term ‘race.’” (https://www.uni-jena.de/en/190910_JenaerErklaerung_EN.html, 11 September 2019).

and gatherings have not presented many exceptions so far. In other words, as an Eastern European living and working in North America, I keep wondering what kind of theological imaginaries would allow us in the (still, at least, “ambiently”¹⁷ Christian) Global North to see, sense, shape, and enact a shared grasp of humanity of those who are unlike us in quite a few ways? Regardless of how we proceed, in the Global North it would behoove us not to forget that there is a significant difference between “what is concealed and what is by nature invisible...,” in the words of decolonial philosopher Boaventura de Sousa Santos, while – and this is of supreme importance – also remembering that “subaltern eyes are different and unequal.”¹⁸

In the quest for a new shared grasp of other human persons and their humanity, it is time to seriously reassess *both* the dualistic, hierarchical, and inherently competitive modern constructs of difference as an allergic nuisance to be kept under tight control as well as postmodernity’s intoxication with flamboyantly radical(ised) difference.

On the one hand, playing the postmodern game of difference until exhaustion over the past three decades indeed did unleash a suppressed flood of visceral resentment against the hypocrisies of modern Western totalizing universalism. The darker sides of modernity were exposed as precisely having imposed Eurocentric imaginaries of being and knowing elsewhere through colonial subjugation. Additionally, postmodern discourses of difference also uncovered at least some of its dark colonial and patriarchal undersides.

On the other hand, the same postmodern sensibilities rapidly waltzed into the terrains of decadent fragmentation of lifeworlds. The momentum of fragmentation now appears only to be accelerating. More and more of us find ourselves separated in various silos of identity politics, culture wars, economic disparities, and conflicting worldviews on everything from eating meat and shaving legs to nuclear weapons and physician assisted suicide... Obviously, the decadent fragmentation is reaching its apogee in the brave “new” cyberworld. It offers seemingly unlimited potential for both extreme visibility and unprecedented authenticity despite the sense (or perhaps rather a mirage?) of intimate and instantaneous connections across social networks and flows of

¹⁷ I am referring to the notion of “ambient faith” by the anthropologist Matthew Engelke. See his “Angels in Swindon: Public Religion and Ambient Faith in England,” in: *American Ethnologist* 39/1 (2012), 155-170.

¹⁸ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2018), 172, 174.

information. Amidst the Covid-19 social distancing provisions, cyberworld surely offers a new regime of normality and connections. It also provides whole new parallel galaxies of social and discursive networking in which the cybercitizens can dwell without any awareness of those who might physically be just around the corner and yet maybe on the other, more disinherited, side of the digital divide. Moreover, alongside experiences of cozy intimacy, our fascinating cyberworld also offers possibilities for endless pretense and a very profitable invisibility (and camouflage!) for multi-pronged and cowardly hatred. Nevertheless, it is so often the material and visible bodies of those who are being “othered” that end up bearing the cruel brunt of virtual hate.

All of these vectors of friction and disparity acquire a particular poignancy within the broader horizon of the global postcolony. It this postcolony all differences – big and small, readily apparent or barely visible and audible – are coloured by the fact that we inhabit a world that remains structured in hegemony, dominance, and inequity. It plays out in countless mutations in the inescapable entanglement of not just gender, race, and class but now also increasingly of nationality, citizenship, statelessness, and immigration status. For more and more people on this planet, these are no academic categories nor abstract dimensions of identity politics. These categories of identity can be a matter of life or death. The “old” world of jagged materiality is still here. And it is becoming even more viscerally a world “of bodies and distances” but most alarmingly, as the postcolonial philosopher Achille Mbembe has argued, a world of “borderization” and “separation” that no one else knows more painfully than migrants.¹⁹ Emerging theological visions, indeed poetics, of human creaturehood including the crucially significant dimensions of gender cannot be spiritually or existentially disengaged from these enforced regimes of identity – as invisible as they may be to those who never need a visa to cross a border or can easily obtain one without a life-threatening ordeal to have fun, to connect with loved ones, or to take on yet another new job if they so desire.

Bare Life, Migration, and Theopolitics

This crucible of borderization is where the challenge of global migration for Christian theological anthropology grows even deeper if we actually allow its methodological understructure to be postcolonized through, among other

¹⁹ Achille Mbembe, “Deglobalization,” Translated by Isabelle Chaize. *Editions Esprit* 2018/12 (2018), 2-3. (https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ESPRI_1812_0086--deglobalization.htm, 12 June 2019).

things, theological and moral imaginaries that emerge from the roots migratory experience.²⁰ With record numbers of people on the move globally, I suggest, theological anthropology will need to develop a desire for a broad methodological hospitality. Such a hospitality would dare not only to acknowledge and honor visions from the eyes that are not only different but also unequal but, furthermore, also allow itself to be reconfigured (never a painless process!) by these such visions. I can see three vectors of attention emerging from within such a methodological hospitality:

First, no theological constructs, be they patriarchal or feminist or whatever else, can go unquestioned while more and more people on this planet are considered redundant and disposable. Judging from what Pope Francis accurately diagnosed as the frightening “globalization of indifference”²¹ toward migrants worldwide, it would perhaps not be too surreal to wonder how often migrants are actually – and practically – considered not fully human? In what sense those who are drowning in the Mediterranean – or dying at the U.S./ Mexico border – are seen as human vis-à-vis those who are “natives,” “host societies,” and “citizens” with certain inalienable human rights and certain human dignity? How else can one comprehend the relative silence or even endorsement by so many Christians of the kind of rhetoric and policies that designate whole ethnic groups of asylum seekers and refugees as “swarm” as the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron described it?²² Or, worse, “rapists” who “bring crime” and “animals” that “infest” our countries as the present U.S. President Donald Trump put it?²³

²⁰ On the particularities and complexities of postcolonial diasporic imagination in relation to theological methodology I have already written elsewhere. For example, see Kristine Suna-Koro, *In Counterpoint: Diaspora, Postcoloniality, and Sacramental Theology* (Pickwick Publications: Eugene, OR 2017), see particularly 15-89.

²¹ Pope Francis, “Homily at Lampedusa, 8 July 2013.” (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html, 20 August 2019).

²² BBC News, “David Cameron: ‘Swarm’ of migrants crossing Mediterranean,” in: *BBC*, 30 July 2015. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-33714282/david-cameron-swarm-of-migrants-crossing-mediterranean>, 21 June 2019).

²³ Among numerous other reports, for a summary of some of the strongest language President Trump has used publicly and among the members of his administration about migrants up to date with links to previously reported utterances, see Eugene Scott, “Trump’s most insulting – and violent – language is often reserved for immigrants,” in: *Washington Post*, 2 October 2019. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/02/trumps-most-insulting-violent-language-is-often-reserved-immigrants/>, 10 October 2019).

As the exceedingly inequitable arc of globalized neo-liberal economy still bends onward, Robert J. C. Young accurately observes that multitudes are “condemned to the surplusage of lives full of holes, waiting for a future that may never come, forced into the desperate decision to migrate illegally across whole continents in order to survive.”²⁴ What many in Western societies ignore or conveniently overlook is the fact that, as Saskia Sassen aptly summarizes, we are already entering that stage in the age of migration when “even more people will be on the move, not because they are in search of a better life but because they are in search of bare life.”²⁵ Among theological voices that have the clearest understanding of what is at stake in these circumstances is Pope Francis.

In his homily on 8 July 2019 to commemorate the 6th anniversary of his visit to the island of Lampedusa, Pope Francis once again raised the thorny issue of migrants and refugees. What was true in 2013 became even more poignant in 2019 if we look at the United Nations latest available record high figures about forcibly displaced persons alone without even addressing the manifold desolations of millions of economic refugees: 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide. Among them, there were 25.9 million refugees, 3.5 million asylum seekers, and 41.3 million internally displaced persons.²⁶ The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees also reports that it has data on 3.9 million stateless persons “but there are thought to be millions more.”²⁷ Shortly after these figures were released on 19 June 2019 on the World Refugee Day, Pope Francis observed that “the existential peripheries of our cities are densely populated with persons who have been thrown away, marginalized, oppressed, discriminated against, abused, exploited, abandoned, poor and suffering.”²⁸ Indeed, “these are not mere social or migrant issues! ‘This is not just about migrants’, in the twofold sense that migrants are first of all human persons, and that they are the symbol of all those rejected by today’s globalized society.”²⁹

²⁴ Robert J.C. Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” in: *New Literary History* 43 (2012), 19-42, here 27.

²⁵ Saskia Sassen, “The Making of Migrations,” in: Agnes M. Brazal and Maria Teresa Davila (eds.), *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migrations of Peoples* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY 2016), 11-22, here 11.

²⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (UNHCR) “Figures at a Glance,” 19 June 2019. (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>, 21 June 2019).

²⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Figures at a Glance.”

²⁸ Pope Francis, “Homily on 8 July 2019.” (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190708_omelia-migranti.html, 1 August 2019).

²⁹ Pope Francis, “Homily on 8 July 2019.”

Second, such methodological hospitality entails a commitment to an ongoing examination of protracted and lingering colonial constructs of power, being, and knowledge. It entails a robust examination of European theological traditions and initiatives as positively, hopefully, and affirmatively “provincial.”³⁰ That is, such an examination would be eager to cross-pollinate and to engage in transformative conversations with other “provincial” modes of inquiry and fabrics of imagination to foster a creative glocal dialog. Why glocal? Simply because so much of what imperils our lives today goes beyond one “provincial” locality – ecological degradation, human trafficking, drug and weapons trade, environmental pollution, and yes, migration, too. Cultural and methodological cross-pollination will be fruitful only if it avoids mimicking the inertias of patriarchal Western modernity when it comes to conversing with the whole spectrum of indigenous and decolonial movements across many disciplines, including feminist thought. As a response to the moral exigencies of global migration, Euro-American feminist theological imagination can be most consequential if it joined hands with the whole spectrum of movements mentioned above to explore what it means to theologize from one of the many undersides of postcolonial globalization.

Theologizing from the undersides of postcolonial globalization in the Global North, especially through feminist-oriented modalities, should discern its accountability and theological vocation by connecting its analyses and visions of the Divine with the punishing realities of people on the move in general if transformative liberation still remains among the priorities of feminist commitments in theology. In particular, there should be a meaningful and constructive theological engagement with the massive gender-specific challenges that women (and to an extreme extent, queer and transgender women) migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers face as gendered subjects while being on the move or stranded in camps or locked up in detention centers. How might feminist theological inquiry challenge and aspire to transform the awareness of the suffering women in the ice-cold border detention facilities in the United States who are separated from their children and being told to drink water from toilet bowls as so many news reports from the United States revealed in 2018 and 2019? Or, how will that challenge and aspiration relate to the reality of

³⁰ I refer to the postcolonial concept of “provincializing” the mythical colonial notion of Europe as exposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his seminal *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New edition with a new preface (Princeton University Press: Princeton 2008).

migrant women drowning in the Mediterranean (if they somehow managed to survive trafficking nightmares in Libya and other North African launching points) while European powers try find legal ways to avoid responsibility for rescuing those who are already literally drowning in the water? Or, how will that challenge and aspiration relate to the reality of women and their families stuck in the Idomeni refugee camp (among others) in Greece that the Greek interior minister Panagiotis Kouroublis not too long ago described as a “modern-day Dachau”³¹ – to name just a few examples closest to home for European societies?

Feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver has recently cautioned that the plight of women refugees calls for new categories of inquiry going beyond what both Western feminist and decolonial feminist critiques have offered so far. She argues that “even intersectionality cannot begin to address the special plight of women refugees who leave their homes with nothing but what they can carry, and often that means their children, and then only for as long as their strength holds out. And in terms of transnational feminism, women refugees challenge the very notion of national sovereignty assumed by the idea of transnational.”³²

Third, such a methodological hospitality means not avoiding the fact that theological anthropology involves theopolitics. The last thing theologizing from the undersides of postcolonial globalization can afford, I submit, is a gnostic flight from politics. Or, perhaps, should we call it a retreat into the comfort zones of self-preservation and privilege, be they academic, economic, or cultural? Of course, as Johann Baptist Metz pointed out already decades ago “no theology can hold itself to be politically innocent or neutral without self-deception or self-delusion.”³³ Catherine Keller puts it even more pithily, “theology always means – whatever else it means – theopolitics.”³⁴ Under the

³¹ Will Worley and Lizzie Dearden, “Greek refugee camp is ‘as bad as a Nazi concentration camp’, says minister,” *Independent*, 18 March 2016. (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/idomeni-refugee-dachau-nazi-concentration-camp-greek-minister-a6938826.html>, 20 July 2019).

³² Kelly Oliver, “The Special Plight of Women Refugees,” in: Margaret A. McLaren (ed.), *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham 2017), 177-200, here 192.

³³ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. A New Translation by J. Matthew Ashley with Study Guide (Crossroad, Herder and Herder: New York 2013), 60.

³⁴ Catherine Keller, *God and Power* (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis 2005), 135.

aegis of global migration, the theological intersects the political ever more relentlessly. The “ground zero” of this intersection resides in theological anthropology and in the poetics of creaturehood (of which more is to be said later) at a time when more secularized social imaginaries of human dignity and rights are gradually being drowned out by pragmatic nihilism of political convenience and manipulative mobilizations of postmodern neo-tribalism precisely where they grate against the inequities of global postcolony.

Is Being Human Still – or Again – (Not) Enough?

The emerging postcolonial visions and poetics of creaturehood will need to start with basics. Is being human enough for survival, let alone leading or aspiring to flourishing life? This is a simple and yet a very troublesome question. Observing the attitudes of many Western societies amidst the migration surge, Tony Fry attributes the category of “the abject” to the displaced, the dislocated, and “instrumentally dehumanized” who are, today, “the world’s unseen, unheard, the ‘they’ who are unfeelingly ignored, [the] neoliberal capital’s human waste.”³⁵ Today, refugees and migrants are the instrumentally dehumanized *par excellence* of our convoluted globalization. They are made invisible precisely as humans with dignity and integrity while being rendered hypervisible as threats, burdens, and invaders. Some years ago (and that was before Syria, before the Rohingya ethnic cleansing and many other more recent catastrophic events!) Giorgio Agamben already re-actualized Hannah Arendt’s ominous questions about refugees as the very epitome of the post-modern precariousness of life as well as the crisis of the very concept of human rights and nation state. It is worth pondering a bit over Agamben’s observation that the marginal figure of the refugee deserves to be regarded as the “central figure of our political history.”³⁶

On the one hand, Agamben observed, there is no space in our world for the naked life of human beings or the “pure human in itself” – and yet, on the other, “growing sections of humankind are no longer representable inside the nation-state.”³⁷ Refugees constitute nothing less than a “radical crisis of the

³⁵ Tony Fry, “Design for/by ‘The Global South,’” *Design Philosophy Papers* 15/1 (2017), 3-37, here 18.

³⁶ Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” in: *Social Engineering* 15 (2008), 90-95, here 93. Agamben mostly engages with Hannah Arendt’s poignant essay dating back to 1943 “We Refugees.”

³⁷ Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” 93.

concept” of human rights although it is precisely the refugees who “should have embodied human rights more than any other.”³⁸ Again and again contemporary migration illustrates the fragility of human rights precisely because they seem to depend on citizenship. But citizenship itself is an increasingly contested and manipulated concept in today’s globalized and re-tribalizing world (think of, for example, the stateless Rohingya who are denied citizenship in their native Myanmar but now stuck in massive refugee camps in Bangladesh as well as living in the shadows of other host societies elsewhere in the region).

This is the state of affairs within which the feminist theorist Kelly Oliver, like Agamben, also dialogues with Hannah Arendt’s thought. Oliver argues that we have reached a point when it is only fair to stop pretending and admit that “being human is not enough” because “human beings are not born with rights. They are not born equal”³⁹ in the world as we know it. The present wretchedness of so many migrant lives in the present era of building walls resurrects the specters of a socio-political imaginary that is associated with Carl Schmitt’s approach from the Nazi era where it became acceptable to recognize that “not every human being with a human face is human.”⁴⁰

Let’s consider this once more, and with a feeling: being human is not enough.

Is there something that religious traditions and theological imaginaries can offer – indeed are compelled to offer with a renewed urgency – to constructively challenge the callous reality of this resigned yet pragmatically accurate *Realpolitik* of migration?

What I am about to suggest is something that many in the Global North may easily find disconcerting, obsolete, or futile. Namely, during the persistent chipping away at the social imaginary of human rights (especially exemplified in the growing precariat of refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants across all continents in justified search for survival and dignified life) theological imagination can critically and constructively draw from the depths of religious traditions to offer a new post-secular spectrum of ethical imaginaries. Such post-secular imaginaries may also need to be robustly ecumenical,

³⁸ Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” 92.

³⁹ Oliver engages Arendt’s reflections on forced displacement and predicaments on refugees in the context of human rights debates in “The Special Plight of Women Refugees,” 194.

⁴⁰ Michael J. Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights: Religion, Law, Courts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York 2006), 67.

interreligious, and even post-institutional in terms of the gradually dissolving structures of institutionalized religion in Western societies but I don't want to be too hasty in this regard – yet. The mission of such imaginaries is to modulate the momentum of polarization, of practical dehumanization and of the demonization of migrants and refugees as political bargaining chips in ethnonationalist ideologies. During the protracted collision of identity and morality which migration now constantly unleashes throughout the social fabric of the Global North and its theological visions, here nothing less will do than taking Agamben's call to use such crises "for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed"⁴¹ seriously.

Of course, quite a few may insist that theological (that is, with Metz and Keller, theopolitical) responses to the multiplying conundrums of human rights must be met with a priori skepticism or indifference in the secular Global North. Many might see them as outdated or untrustworthy. As a postcolonial theologian, I can agree that there are good reasons for deploying a robust hermeneutic of vigilance toward all religious concepts, theological constructs, and spiritual practices. Vigilance, however, ought not to automatically imply a wholesale dismissal of theological imagination as merely nostalgic or as intransigent by default. My purpose here is not to present an argument like Michael Perry's that the morality of human rights can still be effectively grounded in religious discourse.⁴² That is a conversation for another time. Here I merely suggest that migration crisis presents a fecund and deeply consequential opportunity, precisely during such messy times as ours, to prioritize re-envisioning theological imaginaries of human life through a poetics of creaturehood which is rooted in the conception of shared yet irreducibly diverse human embodiment and embeddedness within the mysterious planetary web of life which ought to be perceived as nothing less than the creation of God.

Difference, Similitude, and a (Counter)Poetics of Creaturehood

How might a postcolonially inflected vision – indeed, a poetics – of creaturehood within the planetary web of creation unfold? All of us are, at least to some degree and at some point, strangers and others to one another. Yet despite all the differences who doesn't yearn to flourish and have abundant life on our common planet? In Christian perspectives, abundant life is what creation, incarnation, and salvation are all about as presented by the gospel of

⁴¹ Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," 94.

⁴² Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights*, 7-13.

John 10:10: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (New Revised Standard Version). Other English translations render this remarkable verse as “I came to give life that is full and good” (Easy to Read Version). Or “I have come so that they may have life, life in its fullest measure” (Complete Jewish Bible). Or, Christ has come so that they have life “in its fullest” (Contemporary English Version). However one might choose to translate the Greek adverb *περισσὸν*, the gospel is a fundamental counter-poetics to the hardened concession that “being human is not enough.”

A theological counter-poetics of resistance and transformation could manifest, I reckon, as something old and yet new: as a theological poetics of creaturehood in which our human *imago dei* can be re-envisioned in a non-hegemonic and non-competitive way. Right off the bat, I must clarify that such a poetics does not endorse the still ongoing fixations on warped anthropocentric self-glorification with its narcissistic logic of domination over the rest of the planetary community of creation. The relational entanglement is not singularly vectored toward the Uncreated at the expense of or in competition with the rest of the planetary community of life. It is simultaneously an entanglement with the rest of the creation precisely because this entanglement originates in, with, and through the Uncreated. Consequently, while this kind of poetics of creaturehood is by no means limited to intra-human differences alone, the scope of the present reflections allows me to merely flag this dimension while prioritizing here some other aspects of poetics of creaturehood in a more direct correlation with strangers, migrants, and refugees.

Moreover, I seek a poetics of creaturehood that unsettles not only the colonial and patriarchal forms of life, thought, relations, and power, but also the deeply ingrained anthropocentrism that has permeated most modern and postmodern Western theologies and critical theories. That includes certain professed feminist orientations. This is why ecofeminist, ecowomanist, postcolonial, and decolonial discourses that foreground ecojustice rightly deserve a methodological priority in our historical moment. These minoritarian imaginaries prioritize the enormity of the climate change and the accompanying extinction of species with its myriad implications (including migration and, consequently, encountering strangers in our backyards!) for all life forms on this planet. Even without providing absolute guarantees, such prioritizing offers the most accountable way to ensure that the lived wounds of racial, ethnic, and cultural violence remain visible and audible in the broader horizon of feminist theological creativity.

As far as our locus of enunciation as human persons attempting to envision a poetics of creaturehood is concerned, a fruitful place to begin is pretty traditional

and yet in need of a certain re-orchestration. Christian anthropology traditionally recognizes human persons as marked by a distinct relation to the Divine which is captured in the trope of *imago dei*. Despite exaggerations and distortions of human self-aggrandizement, the relational identity of *imago dei* does not float in a vacuum. Rather, it is contextualized within a deeply relational and interdependent web of evolving creation. On the one hand, *imago dei* is a figure of transparency and intimacy with God. On the other, it is simultaneously a figure of opacity, distance, and difference: whatever else they might be or become, humans are not God! It marks the human self-awareness of being a derivative mystery – an offshoot, so to say, of the Holy Mystery of the Divine. This relation and this awareness grounds the aspiration toward a distinctive sanctity and dignity of all human life in Jewish and Christian traditions.

So retrieving *imago dei* today is about self-critical and responsible contextualizing of human lives within the intricate circle of all sentient creatures as unique participants in a planetary *perichoresis* of the whole creation, visible and invisible, in all its exciting and bewildering beauty. The dignity of human lives matters precisely as we, humans, are participants – unique, distinct, purposeful, self-reflective, mysterious – but resolutely and only as participants⁴³ and not as unaccountable oligarchs of that more expansive and interdependent *perichoresis* of creation in which everything, visible and invisible, matters in its own distinct way.

That being said, there is another feature of *imago dei* which is particularly relevant in the present context. Some versions of the broad idea of *imago dei* were not unique to the cultural milieu of Hebrew tradition. Power and privilege have oppressively long histories of presenting itself, and only itself, as uniquely endowed by the Divine and reflecting the Divine. Yet the Hebrew scriptures de-throne these decadent versions of allegedly special relationship of the elite few with the Divine while relegating all others to the scrapheap of intelligence, beauty, and ability. Meanwhile the Genesis narratives affirm that all human creatures are inscribed into this distinct relational interface of intimacy, awareness, responsiveness, and accountability in relation to God. *Imago dei* is a unique and yet utterly democratic human entanglement with God.

⁴³ As those working in the area of animal ethics have clearly reminded us all, the second creation story in Genesis 2 should significantly modulate the triumphalist anthropocentric readings of Genesis 1:26-27 since according to the second story, *nephesh* or the breath of life, the very aliveness of being, is not an exclusive property of human persons but rather of a whole host of creatures.

Furthermore, next to the notion of *imago dei* in the creation narrative in Genesis 1:26 stands the equally enigmatic *dei* of likeness, *similitudo*. Now, similitude does not need to be exclusively vectored toward God as the goal of *theosis*, deification/divinization. Similitude can express a proleptic Janus-faced trait of being invited to yearn and to strive toward the likeness of God while also realizing that all those who yearn and strive in a myriad of unique ways nevertheless participate in the same mimetic movement toward the same ultimate fulfillment. And this is where reading the biblical trope of similitude/likeness as a dually vectored dynamic relational process interfaces with the poetics of creaturehood that is slanted not only God-wardly but also laterally, toward the fellow human creatures. I was drawn to reflect on the Genesis interplay of the image and likeness by the postcolonial philosopher Achille Mbembe's call for a postcolonial "politics of the similar."⁴⁴ He observes the need for a "politics of humanity that is fundamentally a politics of the similar, but in the context in which what we all share from the beginning is difference. It is our differences that, paradoxically, we must share."⁴⁵ Of course, all such sharing on the planetary scale ought to aspire to be post-hegemonic and actively decolonial for it to actually work. It would entail intentionally steering the course away from the historically entrenched cultural structures of dominance that continue to mutate across all terrains of life. As Mbembe is quick to underscore, such a politics of the similar is relational, reciprocal, and multi-directional: "There is no relation to oneself that does not also implicate the Other. The Other is at once difference and similarity, united."⁴⁶

While our creaturely similitude to God should always be handled with a generous helping of apophatic and eschatological reserve, the poetics of creaturely similitude allows for connections and interactions among human creatures which honor difference yet without reifying it to alienate, exclude, wound, and disinherit other human persons. Whereas the human entanglement with the Uncreated leans into an apophatic dissimilarity even amidst its yearning and striving for similitude, our entanglement with the rest of creation leans into an interface of similitude. All human persons begin with something we share in common: *imago dei* is our original similitude even while we are invited to participate in a transformative movement toward a similitude ever

⁴⁴ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2017), 178.

⁴⁵ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 178.

⁴⁶ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 178.

greater and ever more Godward. So while its Godward vector is eschatological, its interhuman vector of shared aspiration can legitimately call for not only a more laterally slanted theo-poetics of creaturehood but even more consequentially, for a theo-politics of creaturehood. The lateral slant of similitude embodies the transformative postcolonial counter-thrust in the theo-poetics of creaturehood to unsettle the cosmologies of demeaning dominance by highlighting the analogous, the similar, the resonant, and the shared dimensions of creaturehood while the pertinent differences are suitably recognized as “united” according to Mbembe’s idiom. From this perspective, differences that often seem so profoundly alienating among all those who are supposedly created in the image of God (race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, ethnicity, language, culture, religion and so forth) are nevertheless counterpointed by a theo-poetics and theo-politics of similitude which is so often practically invisible in the sinful antagonisms of life. This balancing theo-poetics and theo-politics of creaturehood, I hasten to add, absolutely need not degenerate into a sneaky totalitarianism of “the same.”

To discern similitude amidst difference is to resist both the decadent amplification of difference into alienation and dehumanisation as well as the temptation to camouflage it by totalitarian coercion into artificial and equally dehumanising uniformity and compliance. To discern similitude, thus, requires a kind of postcolonial/decolonial restart of what the medieval folks called “spiritual senses” to (re)activate the capacity for a reciprocity of vision or spiritual intervisibility. Spiritual intervisibility depends on the capacity to see the diverse refractions and modulations of *imago dei* in the like and the unlike precisely as real, as fascinating, as evolving, as mysterious and as sometimes very frustrating, very discouraging, and even frightening. Nevertheless, through the lens of poetics of creaturely similitude, these differences live and move under the apophatic proviso of not being the ultimate word about the shape and destiny of our as well as all other human lives. In this sense, even the strangest stranger who comes from a far country and who is not in my image is still someone bearing God’s image across which no other human creatures can impose any ultimate borders of separation except by engaging in idolatry. Ultimately, what begins with spiritual senses only becomes visible as sensibilities, practices, and politics of hospitality – or not. The poetics of creaturehood as a *theo-poetics* of similitude becomes visible, recognizable, and real as an embodied and performed *theo-politics* of similitude for the life of the world in which all can have a lane on the path toward flourishing and abundant life.

Similitude, Borderlands, and Choices

What does theopoetics and theopolitics of similitude have to do with strangers, migrants, and refugees? To answer that question, a short detour into borderlands and border thinking may be helpful. As a diasporic theologian, I find the Chicana feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldúa's border-thinking approach particularly interesting as it resonates with Mbembe's "Other" being united, at once, in difference and similarity. Anzaldúa's imaginary of thinking of differences and similarities from the in-betweenness of *nepantla* – the geographical, cultural, religious, and political borderzones – is useful as it foregrounds the webs of existence and webs of connections.

What is needed, according to Anzaldúa, is the "web-making faculty" of border-thinkers to entertain "less rigid categorizations and thinner boundaries that allow us to picture ... similarities instead of divisions."⁴⁷ Such a capacity can enable us to "weave a kinship entre todas las gentes y cosas."⁴⁸ We are talking about kinship and not some type of homogenizing sameness. Perhaps this is how we can seek more fruitfully for ways to conceive of *imago dei* with thinner boundaries and with thicker edges of solidarity?

Yet another way to re-imagine the theopoetics and theopolitics of similitude without falling back into the traps of both sameness and radicalised difference is to consider the decolonial imaginary of pluriverse. According to Walter D. Mignolo, decolonial pluriverse refers to the imaginary of a world in which many worlds can coexist in a convivial way without an absolutist force of domination.⁴⁹ Meanwhile Arturo Escobar proposes pluriverse as a political ontology of "really existing" and "partially connected worlds" which can be part of each other and radically different at the same time.⁵⁰ Escobar's

⁴⁷ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Analouse Keating (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2015), 83.

⁴⁸ Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, 83. Anzaldúa habitually performs linguistic code-switching in her texts. The quote reflects her original writing in which Spanish parts of sentences are not always italicized in texts that are written predominantly in English.

⁴⁹ Among several texts in which Mignolo explores a notion from the Zapatista movement, see his recent "Foreword: On Pluriversality and Multipolarity" and "On Pluriversality and Multipolar World Order: Decoloniality after Decolonization; Dewesternization after the Cold War," in: Bernd Reiter (ed.), *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2018), ix-xvi and 90-116 respectively. Also see Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2018).

⁵⁰ Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Independence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Duke University Press: Durham and London 2018), 216.

pluriverse resonates with Mbembe's move toward "the similar" amid difference as Escobar describes pluriverse to be "fractal, or endowed with self-similarity; anywhere you look at it, and at any scale, you find similar (yet not the same) configurations, meshes, assemblages ... that is, the pluriverse."⁵¹

If both *imago dei* and *similitudo* can be perceived as pluriversal or fractal, perhaps they can undergird a theo-ontology of similitude that connects even as it differentiates but without intractable racial, sexual, economic, and other hierarchies? Perhaps there might emerge a theo-ontology which could render visible the shared creaturely desire for flourishing and the yearnings for abundant life lived to the fullest measure in, with, under whatever manifestations of creaturely diversity? Perhaps it is worth risking, as Anzaldua poignantly put it, to take on a comportment in which, she says, "I have chosen to struggle against unnatural boundaries."⁵² She is convinced that "we revise reality by altering our consensual agreements about what is real, what is just and fair. We can trans-shape reality by changing our perspectives and perceptions. By choosing a different future, we bring it into being."⁵³

Perhaps this sort of discernment and action can engender a poetics pushing back against the intentional disruptions of human flourishing of our time – which are, as Shawn Copeland forcefully argues in her recent *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience*, matters of social suffering precisely as a theo-social problem.⁵⁴

Imago, Similitude, and the Sacrament of the Stranger

Finally, how might the vision of creaturehood which is rooted in the theo-poetics and theopolitics of similitude relate to strangers? The growing indifference and even hostility toward migrants and refugees as the paradigmatic "abject" of our time convey quite clearly that our Euro-Atlantic societies continue to "despoil and degrade, violate and desecrate the very meaning of human being, of being human."⁵⁵ Despoiling, violating, and desecrating is not limited, of course, to displaced and uprooted people but also afflicts those multitudes who are trapped in systemic poverty and discrimination in the crevices of metropolitan affluence.

⁵¹ Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, 257, note 15.

⁵² Anzaldua, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, 23.

⁵³ Anzaldua, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, 21.

⁵⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY 2018), 132.

⁵⁵ Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 174.

For far too many persons in far too many places, the recognition of *imago dei*, in oneself and in others, remains a strenuous effort. As Copeland asserts based on the aspirations of BlackLivesMatter movement, to strive toward an understanding of “what authentic human being means – to love self, to stand up for ourselves and with and for others, to throw off stifling and negating images, to take joyful possession of our subjectivity, to love, to work, to hope”⁵⁶ – demands a hard and courageous labour of transformative healing.

Love: seeing *imago dei* through rekindled spiritual senses and choosing to risk a poetics of creaturehood that plays out in the world as an anthropology and theopolitics of similitude is as relational a matter as is love. As is compassion. As is solidarity. As is hospitality. As is righteous action for and with those who are not in my/our image. Hans Urs von Balthasar once insisted that “love alone is credible.”⁵⁷ Love divine that is credible can be no otherwise than radically relational and radically incarnate. Which means, as I interpret von Balthasar here, that love that has anything to do with God is radically practical, embodied, and enacted in the world of God’s creation by those summoned by God. Love, in this sense, is not something just felt or thought about, or even believed into. As von Balthasar puts it, “love exists only between persons...God who is for us the Wholly-Other, appears only in the place of the other, in the ‘sacrament of our brother’ [and sister].”⁵⁸ Although God is the “Wholly-Other (in relation to the world),” God is also “at the same time the Non-Other (Cusanus: *De Non-aliud*), the one who, in his otherness, transcends even the inner-worldly opposition between this and that being.”⁵⁹ While keeping in mind the apophatic proviso of transontological dissimilarity between the Divine and the created world, wouldn’t the creatures who bear the image of and aspire to the likeness of *this* God also be inscribed in the theo-ontology of non-otherness vis-à-vis all fellow creatures of *this* God at least to some degree? Here is, I suggest, yet another way of articulating the poetics and theopolitics of similitude that leans laterally while remaining faithful to the apophatic reserve to refrain from overplaying the analogical interval between the created and the Uncreated.

⁵⁶ Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 174.

⁵⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*. Translated by D.C. Schindler (Ignatius Press: San Francisco 2004).

⁵⁸ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 150. It seems that, at least theoretically, von Balthasar would include all genders in his notion of revelatory encounter with God.

⁵⁹ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 150.

But interestingly, the sacrament of our brothers and sisters is not where the analogies are consummated when it comes to the embodying the revelations of divine love. Von Balthasar urges an extension of the sacramental analogy even further, even closer to the spirit of Matthew 25:35: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (New Revised Standard Version). The most sacramental encounter with divine love does not just happen, Balthasar ponders, with those whom we effortlessly see as “brothers/sisters” or “neighbors.” So I read von Balthasar’s idea, perhaps stretching it otherwise than he would have done while still insisting on such a reading as a legitimate elaboration of his insights, that such a revelatory encounter with God takes place through righteous and compassionate action for and with those who appear to us as “strangers.”

In resonance with the enigmatic trope of *imago dei*, the face of a stranger is simultaneously the most transparent and yet the most opaque sacrament of divine love. This is, as I call it in conversation with von Balthasar’s reflections, the sacrament of the stranger. It reveals the unfathomably borderless love divine, all human loves and filial and tribal relations excelling, to paraphrase Charles Wesley’s verses,⁶⁰ to culminate precisely in encounters with those on the farthest edges of our comfort and cultural kinship.

Even though it may not have been the primary goal of his argument in *The God Question and Modern Man* – after all, my reasoning here proceeds as a *constructive* conversation with von Balthasar – his reflections on love intimate a sacramental revelation. Sacramental revelations are nothing other than a making-real, a making-credible (a sort of *Wirklichwerdung*) of love precisely where the borders of ordinary relationships of kin, and of religious and cultural familiarity become, as Anzaldua put it, “thinner.” Where that happens, no one else but Christ himself, as von Balthasar argues

...is not even a little more present in the Christian than in the stranger who does not know him at all, and who precisely for this reason is all the poorer and more needy, hence all the more the Sacrament of Jesus Christ. This stranger is always the primary ‘object’ of love, while the love within the Church is rather the sacred sign of the love that passes over into world. Of itself it does not stop short at the frontier of the Church, indeed, being love, it does not know this frontier at all. It is its essence to transcend it...⁶¹

⁶⁰ I’m referring to Charles Wesley’s hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (1747).

⁶¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*, Translated by Hilda Graef (Seabury Press: New York 1967), 146.

Love divine is *sans frontiers*. Isn't it a crazy idea screaming against all the instincts of individual, societal, and ecclesial self-preservation and self-perpetuation? It is certainly not much crazier than Jesus Christ breaking the taboos of tribes, silos, and pious conventions about what it is that puts human creatures in the right relationship with the God of life and love by identifying himself with the social outcasts including strangers ξένος, (yes, the same term that appears in “xenophobia”) in Matthew 25:35.

Today, for European and North American theologians alike, texts like Genesis 1:26-27 and Matthew 25 – among others – need to be read, reflected about, preached about, and researched while keeping an eye on the news from the Mediterranean, the Sonoran Desert, the Rio Grande Valley, and the Greek islands. These borderzones where the boundaries between life and death, humanity and dehumanization are so thin are the indispensable *loci theologici* of our time. Poetics and theopolitics of creaturehood, of *imago dei*, of similitude will become real – or not – as we exercise our decolonised spiritual senses by choosing to see and to hear what it means and feels to be visible, invisible, or camouflaged precisely *in those places* as racialised, gendered, displaced, marginalised, victimised, and often criminalised subjects. As dehumanised subjects.

And yet the disinherited nevertheless persist in their courage to struggle for a flourishing life in these borderzones which are now purposefully rendered more and more inhospitable to life and dignity. They do it against unbelievable odds and stubbornly stand up for themselves in circumstances that most people in our Euro-Atlantic societies have only seen in nightmares, war documentaries, or horror movies. It is their sacramental claim on our theological imagination and practice to see *imago dei* and discern similitude in those who are not in “our” image but who take joyful possession of their subjectivity as much as they can muster to love, to work, and to hope.

Keeping an eye on “the migrant multitude as the planetary outcasts of the globalizing world”⁶² is becoming a theological vocation and a practice of discipleship today. It also compels us, Western Europeans and Eastern Europeans alike, to remember the inconvenient postcolonial fact for all our theological endeavors that we live in a historical time when the colonial empire not only “writes back” but sometimes “arrives back” and becomes visible in

⁶² Hyo-Dong Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude* (Fordham University Press: New York 2013), 41.

a whole new way precisely here – here, in Europe, where the colonial matrix of power, knowledge, and being set sail from in the first place.⁶³

Shawn Copeland insists that people whom our collective “corrupt consciences and crooked systems” have effectively “crucified” are nevertheless “the only sure sign of God’s presence in our world.”⁶⁴ This is a very strong claim – the *only sure* sign of God’s presence! It seems to me that what we have here is a broad invitation to consider what kind of power, what kind of agency, what kind of identity, what kind of theopoetics-*cum*-theopolitics of creaturehood and similitude can and should become visible and real when strangers are seen as surprisingly and actually... human. Imagine this: strangers as sacramental signs of creating, redeeming, and sanctifying God. No doubt, these are risky and opaque sacramental signs for, indeed, “hosting a stranger is always a risk, never a fait accompli.”⁶⁵ Engaging in a sacramental encounter is always a risk, too. Whatever else these sacramental encounters and entanglements unveil, the business of inviting in and coming together with strangers is about love, actually: ours to some extent, but above all, God’s love.

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⁶³ A fellow immigrant and professor of journalism from New York, USA, Suketu Mehta, provides a fabulous and pithy reminder about what the current migration discussions often obscure (or actively obfuscate) – namely, the destructive legacies of colonialism. So when today’s migrants from the former colonies are asked “Why are you here?” they can justly respond, “We are here because you were there” – just as Mehta’s grandfather did in a park in London. Suketu Mehta, *This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant’s Manifesto* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York 2019), 3.

⁶⁴ Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 145.

⁶⁵ Kearney and Taylor, “Introduction,” 1.