

Theological Aesthetics and the Recovery of Silenced Voices

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An Invitation

In March 2004 something unexpected appeared along a stretch of land the Tucson Weekly called “an ugly wound cutting some three miles across Nogales”^[1]_[1]. In a moment of intense incongruity, several large enigmatic figures materialized on the Mexican side of the fence separating the U.S. from México.



Figure 1: *Parade of Humanity: Border Milagros* by Alfred J. Quiroz.

Mexican side of the border, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, installed 2004. Photo courtesy of the artist.

"The wall is military surplus," explained the newspaper noting its war-like nature, "made of corrugated helicopter landing pads that U.S. troops once laid out in Vietnam's jungles and in Kuwait's deserts. The color of an ugly bruise, its sickly green merges with gun-metal gray. The perfect canvas, in other words, for a giant piece of political art."^[2] ^[2] We, of course, know what these enigmatic figures are...they are *milagros*. And we know they are profoundly complicated, much beyond "political art." I begin with this work that the art world calls "public art" but we might more accurately call "popular religion as public art" to give specificity to my proposal.

A proposal advocating the recovery of silenced voices is nothing new to anyone working in the field of Latino/a theology. We are all, in some way, actively involved in this work. We know that a commitment to our *quehacer teológico* necessitates searches beyond volumes of overly verbose theology in dusty libraries. We have known this for a long time. What is new about this proposal then?

First, this is an invitation from us (and other so-called contextual theologians^[3] ^[3]) to the wider academic community to adopt a rigorous and productive methodology growing out of our experiences of doing theology. Our ways of doing theology respect the variety of ways that our communities theologize. Second, the invitation has depth and reach because it uses the language of theological aesthetics to connect a variety of discourses and disciplines. Especially between the arts and theology, aesthetics is a recognized common discourse. Beyond this, its adoption inherently challenges and effectively dismantles overly rationalistic paradigms. These very same paradigms, set as they have been as the only normative type of theological discourse, have been used to keep "the other" as "other" silent. Third, the invitation comes with a "how-to manual." While many of us have indeed been involved in doing this work for years, *how* to do the work is often a struggle. This methodological proposal seeks to minimize the difficulties posed by such radical interdisciplinarity by first articulating and then carefully systematizing a method to make the work of theological aesthetics more accessible.

The final goal is evident as we again look at the *border milagros*. We will lift voices that are generally ignored, classified as "folkloric" or "political", or demoted to the category of "affective religiosity" without regard to their very real theological thickness.



Figure 2: *Parade of Humanity: Border Milagros* by Alfred J. Quiroz and Proyecto Yunke's work (center painted images) Mexican side of the border, Nogales, Sonora, installed 2004. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Developing a Method

Gustavo Gutiérrez begins his epoch-making work *Teología de la Liberación* [4] [4] not by quoting Thomas Aquinas but a novel, *Todas las Sangres* (1964) by José María Arguedas (1911-1969). [5] [5] Similarly, in U.S. Latino/a theology starting with Virgilio Elizondo [6] [6] the task of doing theology has been intricately bound up with the community's daily experiences (*lo cotidiano*). In Elizondo's work what matters to the community has set the parameters for the task of theology. One of Latino/a theology's enduring gifts to the academy and the church, is that several generations of U.S. Latino/a theologians have been formed precisely in this way. More recently, Alex García-Rivera noted Enrique Dussel's frustration at the prospect of compiling a "History of the Church in Latin America" where all of the documents would most likely be colonial documents. Dussel was asked, "How do you make history of the nonexistent?" [7] [7] The answer from the Episcopal Commission for the Church in Latin America was obvious and yet revolutionary "an authentic Latin American Theology exists although not in texts of theology. [8] [8] An authentic Latin American theology will be found in the symbols, rites, music, images, and stories of the living, Latin American Church" [9] [9] This insight led García-Rivera to begin to develop a theology of art [10] [10], as well as inaugurate and nurture what have now become international and inter-religious conversations [11] [11] centered on theological aesthetics. [12] [12]

You might expect a definition of theological aesthetics right about now, but I invite you to work with me to *discover* the definition. This is because the very first prerequisite of this method of theological aesthetics is that the questions, and often the answers, are in the works themselves. [13] [13] The work is the privileged space and takes precedence. So as we look at the *milagros* what do we notice?

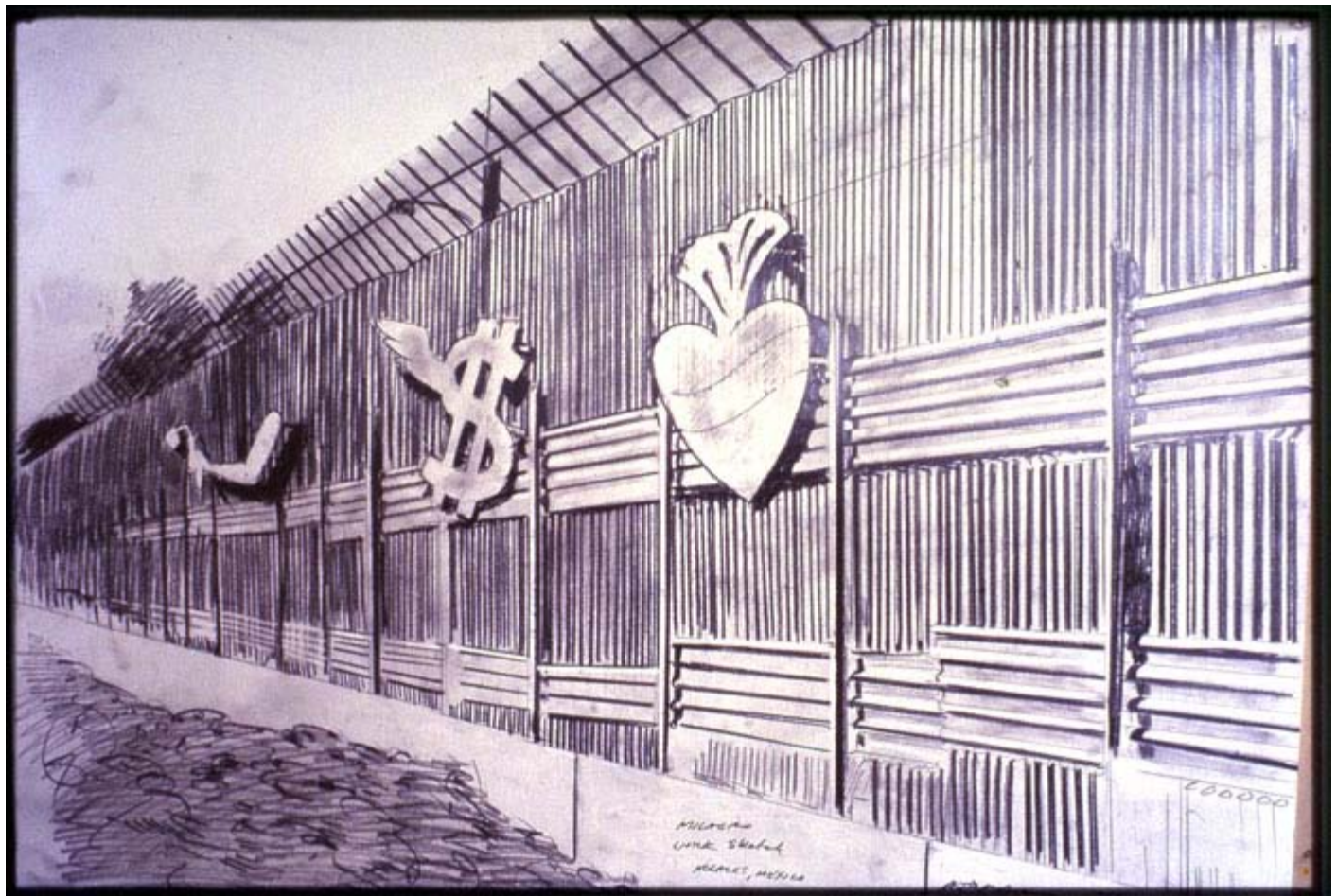


Figure 3: *Initial Drawing Proposal* by Alfred J. Quiroz. Courtesy of the artist.

If we are attentive, if we enter into the relationship, we see a powerful, painful, enigmatic, and quite beautiful work. The work will help us fill in the definition of theological aesthetics.^[14]^[14]

First, the work is powerful because it deals with human life; there is none of the aestheticism here commonly found in art that exists only to gaze narcissistically at itself. *Theological aesthetics deals with works that are “oriented to human ends.”* ^[15]^[15] Second, the images are indeed painful, if we dare be present to the depth of suffering represented by *la frontera* and the way *milagros* function in the community. *Theological aesthetics looks with reverence at that which moves the human heart and to that toward which it moves it.* ^[16]^[16] In this work, there is supplication, there is lament, and there’s a communal gaze of hope lifted to God. Third, the work is enigmatic, and *theological aesthetics acknowledges the radical polyvalence of creative expressions and experiences as well as their ambiguity.* The univocity often claimed for normative written texts is perceptibly impossible with most creative works, and this radicalizes theological aesthetics toward a constantly receding horizon of appreciated otherness.

Fourth, the work is beautiful, its beauty captures us and fills us with longing; it also exposes the horror and ugliness of the fence and those who put it there. In the beauty of the work we come to know the many communities for whom and about whom it speaks and *their* beauty. Theological aesthetics fills in what just “aesthetics” cannot, because as García-Rivera underscores “theology recognizes that Beauty shines through the suffering in this world through its communal dimension.” ^[17]^[17] It is our recognition of this communal dimension that shifts us to the next set of categories of this method and to the image for the “how to.”

Until now I have been speaking of the sub-discipline of theological aesthetics, here I want to speak about the method: the “how-to.” Let us consider briefly the form of the method and then some initial categories.

First, we must problematize the language. I have not yet called the *Border Milagros* hanging on the fence “Art.” Even their very “hanging” provides clues to this problem. Traditional *milagros* in their religious function “hang,” yet their hanging has a purpose that is radically different from a piece of art “hanging” on a museum wall. *Milagros* normally “hang” as a sign and witness of faith in a sacred space, or alternatively, by “hanging” in a particular place make that space sacred. We could argue that the *milagros* on the border make this space of great suffering sacred, the border fence becomes the foot of the cross. Yet “Art,” museum “Art,” often does the opposite denuding religious objects of their sacred functions. [19] [19] Art and the issues surrounding the “art world” are beyond the scope of this discussion, but we must note that just as this method privileges the work as setting the parameters for its engagement it also explodes the category of A/art. [20] [20] Again, arising out of Latino/a and other marginalized communities, this method actively dismantles the forced division of creative making into categories such as “folk art,” or “craft,” ways of naming that generate an artificial evaluative hierarchy in the creative work of humanity. In this method of theological aesthetics art is simply all that creatively expresses the human heart, ranging from prehistoric cave drawings[21] [21], to the *Mona Lisa*[22] [22], to quilts[23] [23], and certainly to the panoply of creativity involved in popular religion.

Art and Religion, Intersection or Interlacing?

The question of “A/art” is important because it is within the sub-discipline of “Art and Religion” that theological aesthetics has found a home. Consequently, it is through the theoretical framework of art and religion that this methodology must take shape. What has the relationship between art and religion been like in modernity? The predominant image for the engagement between art and religion has been “intersection.”

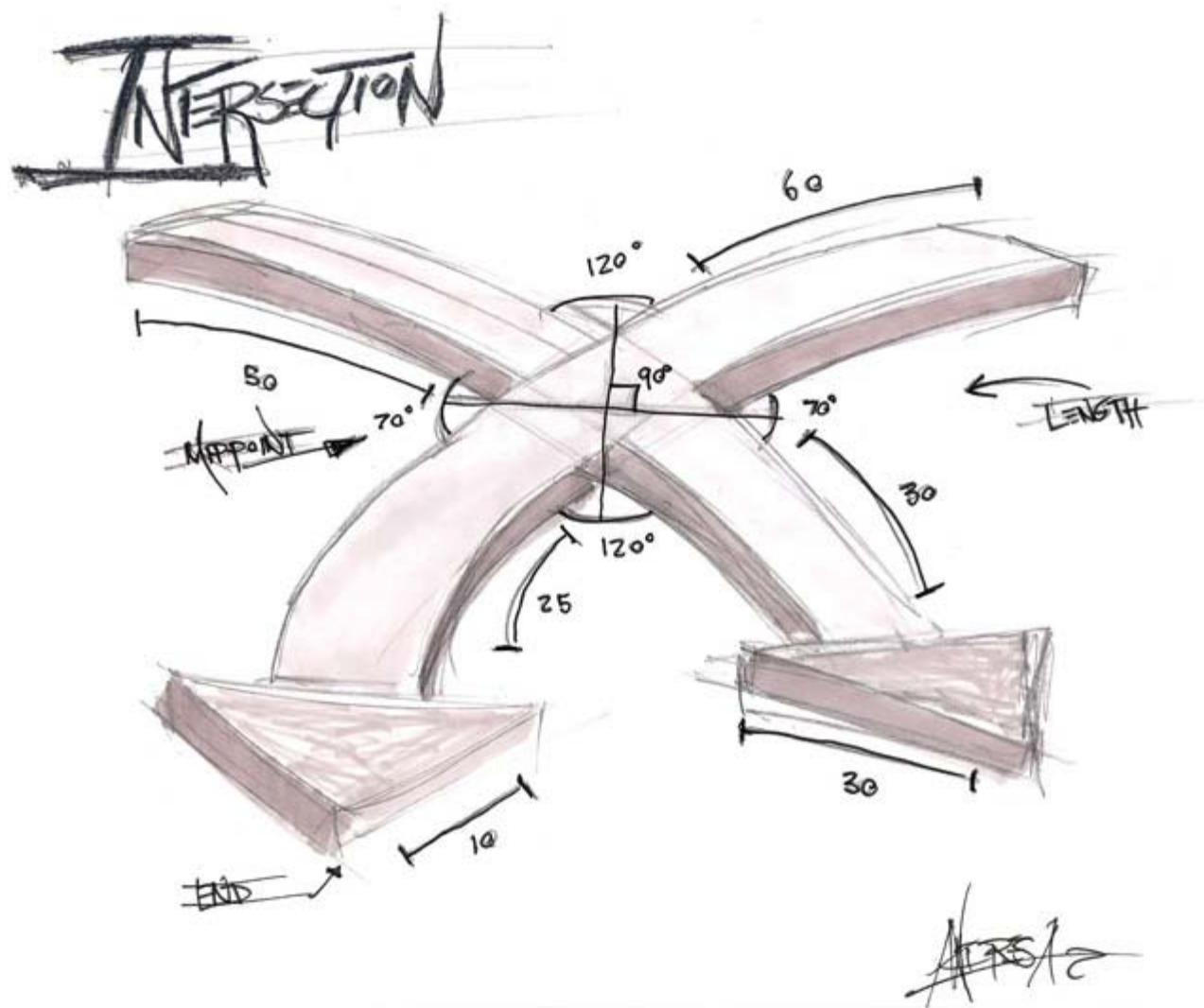


Figure 4: "Intersection," Andrés Andrieu, 2008.

"Intersection" is somewhere in the title of numerous books and articles and has been uncritically appropriated as the principal way to refer to "art and religion" scholarship.^[24]^[24] Yet, a look at the artwork we've been studying tells us this is a completely inadequate paradigm.



Figure 5: Guadalupe Serrano (Taller Yonke) installing milagro: *La Lengua del Coyote*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Looking at the *milagros*, which effectively efface the categories of art, popular religion and folklore, we also notice the inadequacy of the paradigm of intersecting lines. Where does the art end and the religion begin? Is there a neat and localized point where we can see them meet? Or is there an intricate interweaving, an interlacing, of artistic religiosity, religious art, myriad iconic traditions, political protest, Latin American popular religion, European Medieval Catholicism, and Amerindian symbology?^[25] ^[25]

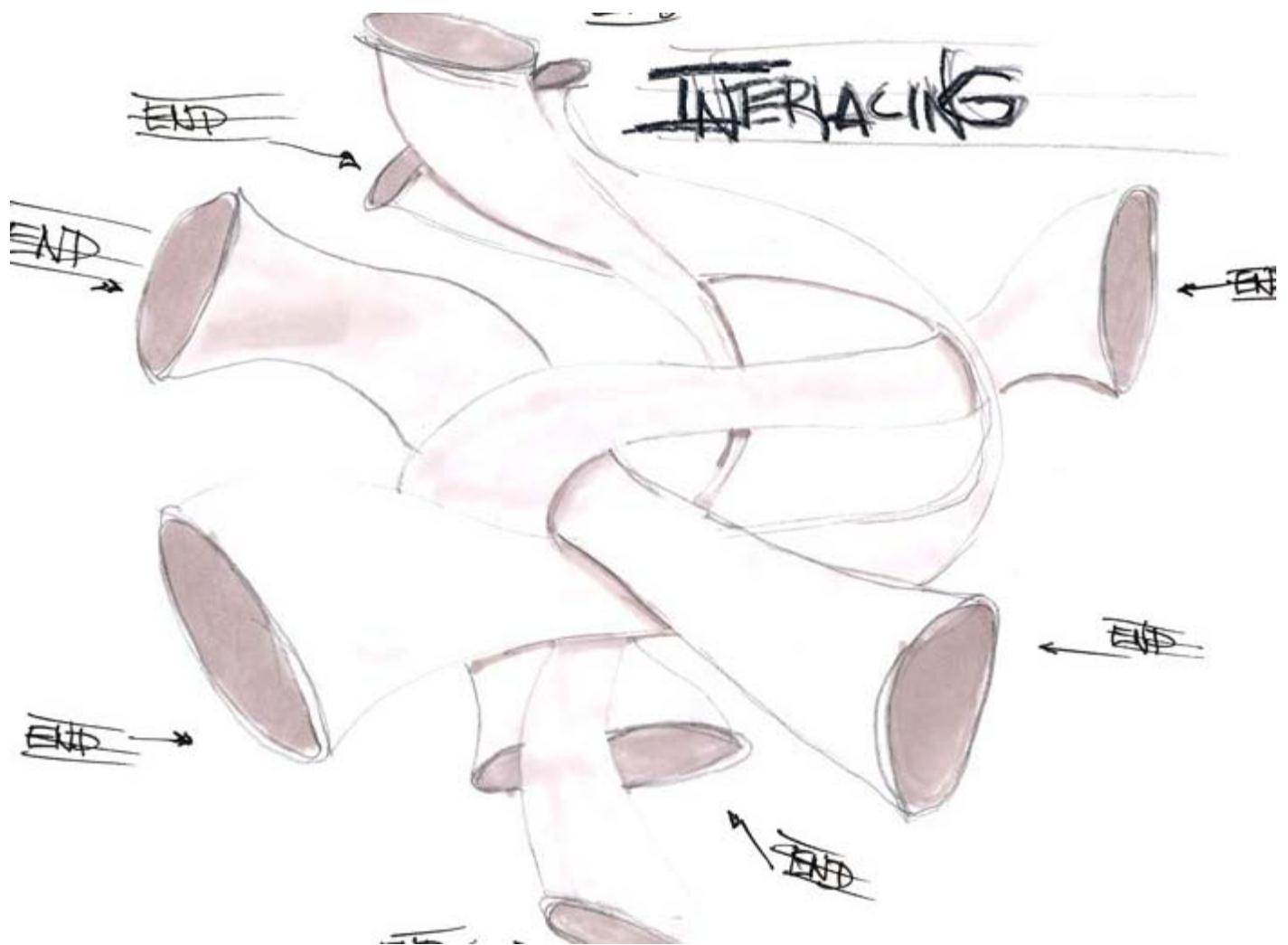


Figure 6: “Interlacing”, Andrés Andrieu, 2008

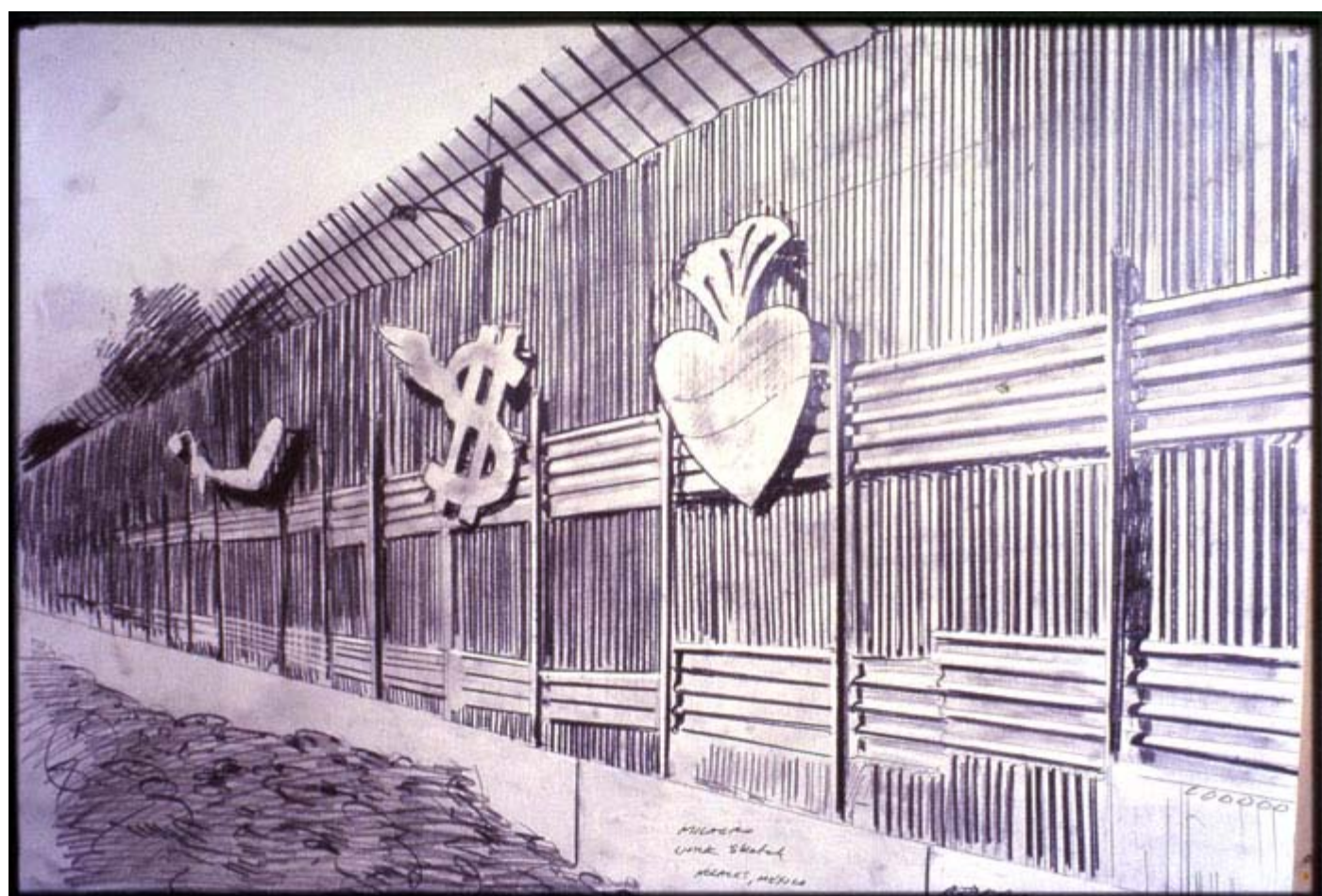
Privileging the artwork to set the parameters for its appreciation leads us to a very different methodological paradigm, and it is one of “interlacing”, the name I have given this method.^[26] ^[26] Interlacing acknowledges the multiplicity of different strands which can be brought together, and in this weaving become richer. How we envision the relationship of art and religion—as rigid intersecting lines or as fluid and interlaced curves—is not inconsequential, because they tell us much about how we view art and religion in relation to life. Referring precisely to the power of such images John Dewey explains, “Different lines and different relations of lines have become subconsciously charged with all the values that result from what they have done in our experience in our every contact with the world about us.”^[27] ^[27]

Rather than the forced search for discrete commonalities of the intersection paradigm which essentially colonizes the other’s discourse (such that theologians claim to find theology without appreciating artfulness and its intricacies, and art critics look only at formal art categories and disregard the theological qualities of a piece), interlacing requires a stepping back to allow the art to ask for the threads of research that need to be brought in for its appreciation. This methodology then is not so much about the production of primary research as it is about the weaving together of a great diversity of primary research, and it is in the weaving that what is new and surprising begins to manifest itself. Interlacing, rather than forcing commonality (as intersecting does), makes a value of difference.

Interlacing

Finally then, what are some of the main threads to interlace? Again, a look at the *milagros* helps. The

obsession with “artists” as geniuses is a relatively modern phenomenon which we can see in full force in Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912)[28]^[28], a seminal work which proclaimed the artist at the “apex of the top segment” of a slowly moving pyramid.[29]^[29] According to Kandinsky, this artist, this “man”, is alone, misunderstood, “solitary and insulted.”[30]^[30] As with any pyramid, the lower the segment, the larger it is. In Kandinsky’s schema this is not a good thing, because he believes it impossible that an artist’s spiritual insights could coincide with broad appeal. What’s more, the likelihood that the “lower” segments of the pyramid would have anything of value to express is quite remote. [31] This is an elitist and Darwinian notion of artistic genius where only the very top deserve to be called artists, being the fittest and having risen “alone and misunderstood” above the rest. Just one look at the *milagros* on the border fence tells us the artist as lone genius is a lie. Its very power lies in how broad its voice/appeal is. Interlacing replaces this predominance of the artist with a communal view. As we can see in this border art, there are three major authorial or meaning-making influences on the work. They are equally important and must be kept in a creative and fruitfully interlaced relationship. [31]



The Work

First, we have *the work* itself, and the understanding that a creative work has its own life; sometimes taking a very different form from what the artist intended, and often surprising even the artist. Federico García Lorca radically proposes that unless artists completely let go of their egoistical plans in favor of the work the work of art will be unsuccessful, missing the quality of depth and power a community recognizes calling it *duende*. [32]^[32] In the case of this work, we can see how the *milagros* would have shifting meanings if placed on the Mexico side of the border, or on the U.S. side. The work has its own life.



The Artist [33] ^[33]

Second, we have *the artist*. An understanding of the artist's context is important, because creative works happen in history and reflect the forces at work in that history. Yet caution must be exercised to not reduce the work to the artist, and especially not require "sainthood" from artists in order to recognize that their works have theological significance. In the *milagros* we can see the role of the artist mainly as the artful translation and invocation of an old and beloved communal religious tradition. To emphasize his authorship as an individual's accomplishment would lead us to minimize the tradition.



The Communities [34] ^[34]

Finally, and just as importantly, we must focus on *the communities involved in the work, behind the art and in front of it*. Rather than one discrete group, the category of communities seeks to recover all of those whose traditions may lie behind the work, and whose interpretations, appropriations and critiques lie in front of it. It is an extensive category which offers much richness, and which beautifully embodies the Latino/a model of doing theology as *teología en conjunto* and of its pastoral implications as *pastoral en conjunto*. [35] ^[35]

To conclude, the *Border Milagros* artwork hanging in both desperation and hope on the U.S./Mexican Border has helped us to articulate some of the initial parameters of theological aesthetics as practiced through a methodology of interlacing. A methodology that effaces and decenters traditional categories of engagement between art and religion, and which, owing to its debt to Latino/a ways of doing theology, expresses itself in a joint, fluid and dynamic approach to a work of art, the artist and the many communities involved in its beautiful life.

Postscript: About the Artwork

Parade of Humanity: Border Milagros was created by Alfred J. Quiroz, artist and professor at the University of Arizona's School of Art, in collaboration with Taller Yonke (Nogales Sonora, Mexico). Quiroz explains, "I created 16 milagro images, some of which are actual milagro images, but altered for the purpose of making individuals aware of the dangers of crossing the desert here in Arizona." [36] ^[36] Quiroz received a grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts to produce this collaborative work. The milagros have traveled and also hung at Agua Prieta on the Mexican side of the border. Part of the work's intention is that it "hang" on as many spots of the border fence as possible. As of the date of publication the art cooperative has not been allowed to set up the works on the U.S. side of the border. [37] ^[37] The work may

be seen on the Mexico side of the border in Nogales where it was re-installed in 2006.

Notes

[1] [38] Margaret Regan, "Artistic Warning," *The Tucson Weekly*, May 13 2004. Although the newspaper story did not appear until May in the U.S., the date of a March installation was given to me by the artist in a personal communication. Nogales is literally split, as the story notes, "wounded" by the "border" and connected to Tucson, AZ by Highway 19. In my effort to decenter the discourse and interlace radical otherness I invited my colleague, art and religion scholar Naoko Frances Hioki, to comment on this paper. Hioki was particularly struck by the image of woundedness evoked by the *Tucson Weekly* and commented from Japan "Isn't the border fence really an ugly wound across the body of the Americas, which could be literally fatal to many people who are affected? ...[there is the] beauty of the artists' work who stare at that wound without looking away from it... the hangings are, on both sides of the border, watching over all people who cross over it in various ways, legally or illegally." Naoko Frances Hioki, e-mail, June 22, 2008.

[2] Margaret Regan, "Artistic Warning," *The Tucson Weekly*, May 13 2004.

[3] [39] I appreciate that Latino/a theology is "contextual" and always should be, however I take issue with the naming of only some theologies as "contextual" as a way to effectively marginalize them while other "mainstream" theologies claim universality. All theology, when it is well-achieved, is indeed contextual. A very helpful guide through these questions is Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Faith and Cultures Series; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

[4] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología De La Liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1972).

[5] See Stephen B. Wall-Smith, "Jose Maria Arguedas: Godfather of Liberationism," *The Christian Century*, November 18 1987, 1034.

[6] Elizondo's works are vast. For a comprehensive list, see the Latino/a Bibliography of Theology and Religious Studies sponsored by the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the U.S. available at <http://www.latinobibliography.org> [40]

[7] [41] Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence : Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003) vii.

[8] "The theologian attempts to conceptualize or 'bring to speech' his or her experience of God, as experienced in a particular spatio-temporal or cultural milieu" (Bevans, 101).

[9] García-Rivera, vii.

[10] See, Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful : A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence : Sketches for a Theology of Art*, Alejandro García-Rivera and Thomas J. Scirghi, *Living Beauty: The Art of Liturgy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

[11] [42] The third annual international conference of theological aesthetics, *Beauty, the Color of Truth* was

held at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, May 29—June 2, 2008. The conference featured papers representing a diversity of faith traditions as well as an art exhibition and performances.

[12] In his transcendental model of contextual theology Stephen Bevans imagines accurately that “If we widen the notion of theology to include music, literary expression, and the plastic arts, the number of practitioners of this model [of theology] would be enormous” (Bevans, 103).

[13] One of the strategies of the new articulation of aesthetics, based largely on the work of John Dewey, Josiah Royce and C.S. Peirce is to deal with specifics and not just abstract theory. “In seeking to bring theory closer to the experience of art so as to deepen and enhance them both, a pragmatist aesthetics should not restrict itself to the abstract arguments and generalizing style of traditional philosophical discourse. It needs to work from and through concrete works of art” (Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics : Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* [Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992], ix).

[14] ^[43] “The object is present as what is gazed upon, attended to, intended. But the presence of the subject resides in the gazing, the attending, the intending. For this reason the subject can be conscious, as attending, and yet give his [sic] whole attention to the object as attended to.” (Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated for Lonergan Research Institute, 1999]) 8.

[15] García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, 28-30. Here García-Rivera develops a theoretical framework to effectively critique aestheticizing tendencies he calls “aesthetic nominalism.” This is also a central argument in Dewey who sees the aesthetic as part of “the constant rhythm that marks the interaction of the live creature with his surroundings.” John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree Books, 1980) 15.

[16] García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics*, 9.

[17] García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, 5.

[18] I use “Art” with a capital “A” to signify the reifying and commodifying tendencies of the “Art world,” and alternatively propose “art” with a lowercase “a” as a way to decenter and question hierarchical designations. A/art refers to the false separation between what is perceived as high art and what is not.

[19] A way to graphically see this difference is captured in some of the color plates in Doris Francis, ed., *Faith and Transformation: Votive Offerings and Amulets from the Alexander Girard Collection* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, Published in Association with the Museum of International Folk Art, 2007). Authentic *milagros* removed from their traditional context and aestheticized for a museum exhibition are sundered from the power and depth of those left *in situ* in churches and shrines.

[20] Many of the problems stem from the Kantian notion that “aesthetic judgments are made in terms of seeing in the object a ‘purposiveness without purpose’ (*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*)...[anticipating] the notion of ‘*l’art pour l’art*’, i.e. a concept of art...to be enjoyed aesthetically for its own sake, beauty being in the eye of the beholder, in the imagination of the individual.” (Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005] 157).

[21] García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, 1-3.

[22] It is important to make a distinction here between evaluating something as “great” art through art-historical criticism and criteria, and appreciating art as profoundly disclosive of the human condition and its longings. These are neither equal nor can they be collapsed into one another. Theological aesthetics must

attend to an entirely different set of markers from those normally employed by art history, while having art history and criticism as one of the discourses in the conversation, yet not the *only* one.

[23] Jenny Patten Gargiulo, "Hawaiian *Kapa*: Sewing Spirituality," unpublished paper presented at the Asian North American Religion, Culture and Society Group, American Academy of Religion, Washington, D.C. November, 2006.

[24] Examples of this are too numerous to mention, but research of recent usage shows the term "intersection of art and religion" in use at Duke, Baylor, and Macalaster universities, and also at the Getty Museums, and the Museum of Biblical Art.

[25] ^[44] These are just a few of the possible threads of scholarship that become apparent in looking at this work. A central consideration of the interlacing method is that multiple discourses, fields, disciplines and theological questions can be woven together. There is no finitude posited by the inclusion of some as no exclusion of others is implied.

[26] Alex García-Rivera first used the language of interlacing while commenting on the cave paintings at Lascaux as he noted the interlacing of the religious and the artistic in these very first works of human imagination. See García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, 2-3.

[27] Dewey, 101.

[28] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977). Originally published in 1912 as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*.

[29] The reason for his aloneness is his vision, his talent. Thus, Kandinsky imagines the triangle horizontally sectioned into segments so that, "The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards. Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow; what today can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle is an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second segment" (Ibid., 6).

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 7.

[32] See "*Teoría y Juego del Duende*" in Federico García Lorca, *Obras Completas*, 13 ed. (Madrid: Aguilar, S.A. de Ediciones, 1967), 110.

[33] Alfred J. Quiroz using plasma cutter as he works on milagro pieces. Photo courtesy of Alfred J. Quiroz.

[34] The community of artists of Alberto Morackis, Alfred J. Quiroz and Guadalupe Serrano. Photo courtesy of Alfred J. Quiroz.

[35] "...*pastoral de conjunto*...invites the people of God to commit themselves actively to continue the work of Jesus by entering into the cultural, religious, and social reality of the people, becoming incarnate in and with the people" (Ana Maria Pineda, "Pastoral De Conjunto," in *Mestizo Christianity : Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995] 128).

[36] Alfred J. Quiroz, e-mail, June 18, 2008.

[37] "'The U.S. put the wall up without discussion,' says muralist Alberto Morackis, one of three artists who

created ‘Paseo de Humanidad (Parade of Humanity),’ the work featuring 19 human figures and 16 giant milagros that has sprawled along the wall since March. ‘Our government said, here you don’t need a permit to hang art on the wall. In the United States, you have to ask the Border Patrol. Here, there are no rules.’ ” (Regan).

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- [41] http://www.latintheology.org/2008/theological_aesthetics#_ednref7
- [42] http://www.latintheology.org/2008/theological_aesthetics#_ednref11
- [43] http://www.latintheology.org/2008/theological_aesthetics#_ednref14
- [44] http://www.latintheology.org/2008/theological_aesthetics#_ednref25