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Winter 2022 issue edited by Rosemary P. Carbine

# Introduction

**By Rosemary P. Carbine**
Whittier College, Whittier, CA

This issue's articles feature Latinx, Asian/Asian American, and Black Catholic women's constructive theological views and visions about labour. Together, these articles articulate and innovate critical prophetic theologies of labour, broadly construed to address *both* intersectional injustices of racial/ethnic, gendered, and economic inequalities *and* proactive solidarity praxis to build another, more just world.

Neomi De Anda theo-politically analyzes Mexico/USA borderlands through the lens of Latina women's transborder labour and advocacy for a just economy and society amid interlocking issues of immigration, trade, the environment, and other issues. De Anda critically and constructively engages with the film *Cars 3* and with the speeches of Daisy Flores Gámez and Evelia Quintana Molina during Pope Francis' visit to Juárez in order to counteract the social and structural sins of what she terms discriminatory gaslighting from Catholic social teaching perspectives about human dignity in the *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*.

Min-Ah Cho takes the Korean auteur Bong Joon-ho's internationally acclaimed film *Parasite* as a theological starting point to critically reflect on white Western-centric Catholic othering of global transnational Catholicities, exemplified by this film's social satire of odorphobia and its salient intersections with multiple inequalities as well as xenophobia. Cho expands on this film's insight by leveraging Slavoj Žižek's philosophy of *agape* love to radically revitalize Catholic theology of neighbour love, with ecclesiological implications for affirming Asian/Asian American ways of being church amid relentless Western Catholic pressures of assimilation and cultural erasure and with socio-political implications for recognizing the humanity of Asian/Asian Americans amid the alarming rise of anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contrary to Pope Francis' view of social justice movements and leaders as "social poets," Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez recently defamed such movements as dangerous "pseudo-religions." From a Black Catholic perspective that engages with the effective history not only of racism and slavery but also of colonialism and genocide, Alessandra Harris

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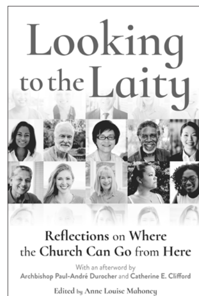
highlights Archbishop Gomez's comments to illustrate the ways in which Black Lives Matter is weaponized in Catholic public discourse to reinforce racism and white supremacy in US society and in the Church. To undo this dominant white-centric narrative, Harris engages in inclusive theological learning about Black Catholic communities and leaders and about the religious backgrounds of the three Black women who co-founded Black Lives Matter, whom Harris situates within a womanist theological reading of the biblical story of the enslaved Egyptian woman Hagar. Parallelling Hagar as a woman of African descent outside the chosen people who forged a new covenant with God, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, together with Catholics United for Black Lives and other groups in the racial justice movement, have created a new community that affirms the inherent humanity, dignity, and right to life and freedom of all Black people, including those not traditionally married, gender non-conforming, queer, or transgender folx.

The book review that concludes this issue expands on these articles and explores integral links in contemporary Carmelite mysticism between the social suffering of racial injustice, neo/colonialism, and the climate crisis; social justice praxis through theological anchors of Catholic social teaching, such as the option for the poor and Christology; and spirituality.

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Edited by Anne Louise Mahoney, with an afterword by Archbishop Paul-André Durocher and Catherine E. Clifford

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**Anne Louise Mahoney** is managing editor of Novalis. She has an ongoing interest in the role of the laity in the post–Vatican II Church.

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# Latinas, Labour, Catholic Teaching, and *Cars*

**By Neomi De Anda**
University of Dayton, Ohio

## Introduction[1]

On May 27, 2021, the US Senate Finance Committee advanced legislation for electric vehicle tax credits. These credits could range as high as $12,500 for consumers who buy cars made in the USA by union labour. As I love cars, my spirits were raised for a moment. I recently spent a couple of days trying a Ford Mustang MACH E. It isn't the 64 ½ Mustang convertible of my dreams, but it is far more impressive than I expected. What do my love of cars and tax incentives for electric cars have to do with Latinas, labour, and Catholicism? Well, the proposed tax incentive brings together a variety of issues all at once: labour, trade, the environment, an industry which is still highly dominated by men, the onus of choosing which labourers to support being placed upon the consumer, migrations, and a Catholic CEO. The new proposal means that everyone buying a new electric vehicle would receive a $7500 tax credit: $2500 would be added if the vehicle were made in the USA, and a consumer could earn $2500 for purchasing a vehicle made by Union Workers. The Ford MACH E is made in Mexico. The Ford F150 Lightning, however, will be made in the USA by union labour.[2]

Perhaps you are already thinking of the complications from Catholic teaching presented here. *Laudato Si'* calls for reformulation of the technocratic paradigm while hoping for better technological systems to address the ecological crisis.[3] Issues around labour have been raised since *Rerum Novarum*.[4] Catholic teaching promotes the right to living a good life where one is born; if that is not available, then one has the right to migrate, and richer nations should be open and welcoming to those seeking asylum from poorer nations; yet, within the same migration heuristic, it supports nations having the right to control their own borders.[5] *Fratelli Tutti* mentions women, yet never names sexism as a social sin among the other named sinful social structures.[6] Moreover, woven into all of this is racism of omission, which LatinoXa theologians have called out for years.[7] Clearly, all issues cannot be addressed within the space of this text.

Continuing with my love of cars, let me introduce Cruz Ramirez from Pixar's animated film *Cars 3*.[8] In this movie, Cruz (yes, her name in Spanish translates in English to "cross"—and further exegesis of that name within the film will probably point to "a cross to bear") serves as Lightning McQueen's personal trainer to help him work his way back to becoming the racer of his former years. According to Pixar's description, "Cruz Ramirez is a tech-savvy, unconventional trainer at the Rust-eze Racing Center. She expertly arms the team's talented rookies with cutting-edge tools to tear up the track—but she nearly stalls when Piston-Cup champion Lightning McQueen shows up. While she'd love to help him find his way back to the top, she knows the competition is faster than ever, and victory is all about speed—or is it?"[9] I add Cruz's character to this mix as a way to discuss discriminatory gaslighting; its diminishment of human dignity; and ultimately how it chisels at our understanding of *imago Christi* and *imago Dei.*

Before I proceed, please let me outline what this essay offers: 1) statistics and stories of Latinas and labour, including the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) transborder labour with an understanding that my work focuses on the Mexico/USA political border: when I say "the border," I mean that border, and when I say "America," I mean both continents and all of the islands; and 3) theologos – God-reflection and God-talk based on the first two points with a lens of discriminatory gaslighting to deepen theological reflection into conceptualizations of human dignity, *imago Christi*, and *imago Dei.*

To clarify, this essay is not 1) addressing abuses of immigrant women as the entry point. These abuses need to stop. PUNTO. Yet, I am concerned that such an entry point just leads to reflections that cast Latinas as only immigrants and victims. I apologize in advance if I engage material in such a way; 2) working in non-binary gender terms. The choice of statistics in my methodology means that my research and therefore analysis carries the flaw of gender binaries, as that is still how national and international statistics are collected through multiple research institutions. I also know that there are a number of transgender persons who are purposefully pushed into the shadows, and that I and many peoples of the Americas and the world come from peoples who think of gendering beyond the binary.[10] For the sake of this essay, I am focused on the statistics presented because of the gender

binary in understanding Latinas and labour. Similarly, this research assumes an artificial hegemony among Latinas regarding race because again, the collection of statistical research, mostly governmental, is not sufficiently sophisticated to layer ethnicity and race. In fact, the numbers for Latinas are difficult in many cases to accurately portray because of the split of this category away from race in the US government's system. Sadly, I am focused upon nebulous statics around Latinas, labour, and race.

Keeping these clarifying points in mind, I continue to use the statistics and information because much of the information coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic constrained by governmental norms is still fit within a gender binary matrix and therefore would take much more time and many more research teams to understand otherwise. I have included a number of other sources which complexify the interweaving of social issues in ways which many statistics are not yet doing.

## Statistics of Latinas and Labour, Including the COVID-19 Pandemic

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics claims that "Hispanic share of the labor force projected to be 20.9 percent by 2028."[11] The overall statistics around Latinas and labour are bleak.[12] Exceptions do exist, like famous Latina activists with side gigs such as Eva Longoria, Dolores Huerta, Cristela Alonso, and Rosie Castro, to name a few. The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States even elected five women presidents in a row who will serve in the stages of this office for a total of nine years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Latinas have made huge strides in associate and bachelor degree attainment, from 17 percent of Latinas in 2000 to 30 percent of Latinas in 2017.[13] However, in October 2020 and regardless of occupation, Latinas made on average 55 cents for every dollar earned by non-Hispanic white men, which has increased a *dramatic* 3 cents since 1989.[14] Yes: 3 pennies in 32 years! Surprisingly, the wage gap increases drastically for Latinas with college degrees. Latinas with college degrees make about 34 cents on the dollar of every dollar earned by non-Hispanic white men. At this rate, it will take 450 to 660 years to close the income gap for Latinas. I am glad we keep working on ecological issues to give us more time in this struggle.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are four Latina lecturers for every 35 white male lecturers, or about one in eight. On the other hand, there is *one* Latina full professor for every 53 white male full professors. In the 2018–2019 academic year, average salaries were $62,500 for lecturers and $124,700 for full professors.[15]

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, too many alarming statistics to share in this space have arisen around Latinas. I will, however, share that regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, 28.3 percent of Latinas hold a front-line job. Latinas are heavily represented in industries most impacted by the long-term effects of COVID-19, especially shutdown and social distancing.[16] Recently, the State of Ohio released the report *The Impact of COVID-19 on Ohio's Hispanic/Latinx Communities*[17]; while the report lacks a gender breakdown, 18,000 Ohio businesses are "Hispanic and Latinx" owned.

So, in seeking social solutions, eliminating the wage gap seems to be one solid proposal. According to the National Partnership for Women and Families,

> If [*only*] the wage gap were eliminated, on average, a Latina working full time, year-round would have enough money to afford one of the following:
>
> - More than three additional years of child care.
> - More than 18 additional months of mortgage payments.
> - More than two additional years and two months of rent.
> - Almost 20 additional months of premiums for employer-provided health insurance.
> - Pay off student loans in just over one year.
> - One and a half years of the maximum retirement contribution to her employer sponsored 401(k) retirement account.[18]

## US Emigration to Mexico

Speaking of retirement, many times when the topic arises around labour and migrations in the USA, it revolves around immigration.[19] Yet, the USA has for at least a decade, and probably since the economic crash of 2008, experienced emigration of retirees who are US citizens because people have laboured their entire life in the USA, yet the systems built here have not allowed for viable retirement incomes. Let's take a moment to imagine Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador[20] (I know it does not escape you that his last name means "labourer"). He is addressing retiring citizens of the USA: "The goal of our work is to help USA retirees find hope at home. At the same time, I want to be clear to folks in the region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States of Mexico–United States of America border: Do not come. Do not come, I believe if you come to our border, you will be turned back."[21] Clearly, Obrador would not use such words as Vice President Harris in June 2021. Instead, numerous online articles promote[22] and even recruit people from the USA to retire in Mexico; one even claims, "for about $2500 per month, one can have shelter, food, vacation, and

a daily housekeeper."[23] Do not get me wrong: Puerto Vallarta feels like home to me, and I have looked at buying property there. However, I almost always hear the stories about the foreigners coming to the USA and do not hear so many stories about the citizens of the USA living undocumented in other countries because of the labour practices of the USA.

Thinking about labour from a migratory transborder perspective means we *must* think in these ways. For example, what does it mean when I decide to get more money in a tax incentive to buy a Ford F150 Lightning over a Mustang MACH E? What does it mean for the USCCB to hold a Catholic president of the USA to certain standards regarding one social issue yet not hold a Catholic CEO of a USA-based motor company to certain standards regarding one social issue? I raise this question not to spark individual guilt or baffling conundrums which cannot be solved; instead, I raise it to point to further questions: Who are the systems really benefiting? And why? Importantly for us, what contribution does theology offer here?

## Two Specific Stories of Women and Labour Between the Mexico/USA Border

**Cruz Ramirez** I know I am using an animated character here, but Cruz Ramirez is based on Cristela Alonso's personal story. Cristela Alonso is Cruz's voice in the film. Cristela is from the Mexico–USA border in the Texas Rio Grande Valley/el valle de tejas![24] She loved stand-up comedy but did not think she was good enough to be a stand-up comedian. She worked as an office manager and later came to be regarded as the office manager, not the headliner.[25] Similarly, the creators at Pixar decided that the character of Cruz Ramirez would be a trainer for headliner Lightning McQueen to find his way back to the top. She was cast in a role of service to McQueen. The creators also decided that this little car would be a female character, based upon a Mexican-American woman's life story and with her voice. Cruz was set to break the mould of many other female animated characters. Most female animated characters are tough, kick-ass, strong, flawless, and perfect, according to the short commentary documentary on the character of Cruz Ramirez. The creators, both male and female, all of whom seem to be white or at least white presenting, decided that Cruz should have flaws. "Her confidence is her problem," according to Pixar. In the documentary, the audience sees this lack of confidence front and centre in the exchange between Cruz and Lightning:

> Cruz: "What was it like for you? How did you know you could do it?"
>
> Lightning: "I don't know, I just never knew I couldn't."

I watched the Pixar short documentary while preparing this essay. Before that, I had a very different read of the exchange between Cruz and Lightning. As Cruz points out to the audience, being told she could not do what she most desired is closely connected to her ability to dream; we might use the theological language of hope here. I read this exchange as many systems repeatedly telling Cruz that she could not reach her dream while the same systems were telling Lightning he could do anything. When I have taught this film repeatedly in an introductory religion course, I have called these systems of privileges created by those in power and biased to support that power. This film demonstrates how social sin is built.

## Theological Reflections

As I wrote to President Biden and Vice President Harris as part of the American Values and Religious Voices campaign earlier this year: "I have seen the sacred ability to dream by so many further shattered over the last four years. To quote Cruz Ramírez in the animated movie *Cars 3*: "Dream small, Cruz… or not at all." As a Latina theologian, dreams devastated by a lack of hope are not new. However, these sorrows only increased as we witnessed at least 23 lives lost and countless others injured during the August 3, 2019, El Paso massacre; the higher impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people of colour; and the 2,805 migrants who lost their lives in pursuit of refuge and safety, like Jamillah Nabunjo.

Last year, I heard a Latina lawyer working at the Mexico/USA border (probably for wages well below what her colleagues earn) respond to a group of pastors who asked what changes she would like to see in policies for refugees and migrants. She said: "I would just like to return to where we were before the Remain in Mexico Policy (MPP) was put into place." For this attorney, a practical commitment to justice meant tightening her vision to a more recent past; she was faced with the need to dream small rather than the ability to dream big.[26]

When I wrote this letter, I had not heard of the phrase "discriminatory gaslighting," although I have lived with it since at least the first day of first grade. According to Christy Pichichero, "in gaslighting, the abuser attempts to cause an individual or group to fall into self-doubt, questioning their perceptions of reality, their memory, their identity … to build their own power and diminish resistance on the part of the victim so that the abuse can continue. [D]iscriminatory gaslighting happens when dominant social groups use these psychological tricks to maintain their power and privilege by sowing self-doubt and dependence in minoritized groups."[27]

Even in the story of Cruz Ramirez, we see how discriminatory gaslighting occurs. She is told repeatedly by systems that she is not good enough. She is only the background support crew and not the headliner. Also, the years of self-doubt sowed in Cruz and Cristela Alonso are then read as lack of confidence from those in dominant power because to say that it is the systems which benefit them is that which is creating this self-doubt and lack of confidence requires exposing the social sin. It requires exposing the attack on human dignity embedded in these systems. Discriminatory gaslighting is about systems, not about how we are the image and likeness of Christ and the image and likeness of a Triune God. In other places, I have spoken about the deeply interwoven notion of familiarity in *imago Christi* and the indispensable and unbreakable ties of all of creation in *imago Dei.* When human dignity is attacked, then we are building veils and thicker walls between how we see the *imago Christi* of one another *and* the *imago Dei* of us all.

Working through the social sin of discriminatory gaslighting and rebuilding the human dignity which the broken systems of social sin have removed from our *imago Christi* and *imago Dei,* Latinas continue to dream big despite being repeatedly told to dream small. That alone provides some hope to keep working toward attending to and mending the broken systems of social sin. However, much work remains: those of us in positions of power really need to see what Lightning McQueen does in moving out of the way and cheering on Cruz with her own language, because that is what rebuilds systems based in diverse perspectives.

**Daisy Flores Gámez** Daisy Flores Gámez spoke during Pope Francis' visit to Juárez and his meeting with the world of labour. Her husband, Jesús Gurrola Varela, and their two children accompanied her on the stage during her speech. Ms. Flores Gámez, as one of two women speakers during a Pope's visit to Juárez, is significant in a number of ways. She spoke as the representative of the world of work in factories—*maquilas*—in this Mexico/USA border metroplex to 3,000 people present at this meeting. These factories have been known for maintaining low wages and long hours for workers on both sides of the Mexico/USA border both in the *maquilas* and more broadly to other parts of society. Daisy's speech shed a glimpse of hope for a better future for her own children as well as forthcoming generations as she named very specific areas which need attention toward systemic change. Although the Pope's speech at the border was heavily covered in the North American press and served as the subject of extensive commentary, these women's addresses, delivered in Spanish, were key voices that accentuated and significantly framed the Pontiff's visit. To that point, Daisy Flores Gámez and Evelia Quintana Molina were two of the few women who had given extended speeches on social issues directly to Pope Francis. Their speeches did not receive much attention and were only translated into English and published because a Tejana from El Paso called in some favours.

As part of her speech, Ms. Flores Gamez states:

> We ask for your Holiness to pray for us—as Juárez intercedes for you—families who are subjected to unjust networks of the market, as well as systems which are too pragmatic and bureaucratic. We live in terrible working conditions in which we disproportionally spend effort, time, and energy. This makes it enormously difficult to attend to our children as well as to our personal and familial growth. We believe that the decadence and conflict of values in our society often happen because of the absence of parents in the home. Every home and every family should be a school of humanity where essential things are learned: solidarity, appreciation, care for one another, respect, and human dignity. Nevertheless, at least in this city, and we believe many others as well, our homes have become merely places to sleep.
>
> We do not want our children to grow not knowing God and without minimal human capacities. For these reasons we believe we need to do something about it. Because it is in our families, factories, schools, churches and corporations, together with our governing bodies that we should attempt to build a new society as well as a new form of seeing life and relating to one another. We want peace, justice, and fair wages within eight-hour workdays in order to dedicate more time to the family. In exchange, we commit ourselves to not continue neglecting our values—the love and formation of our children in all aspects, to continue to participate, as much as possible, in initiatives toward the common good, cohesion and social dialogue.[28]

The topic of Latinas and labour from transnational perspectives is extremely complicated. This essay presents a mere crumb of the work to be done. I think Ms. Flores Gamez outlines an agenda of key places where we need to think further theologically. I have attended to human dignity. Yet, she also names solidarity, respect, peace, justice, care for one another, fair wages within an eight-hour workday, and a theological category on which I have not seen much written—appreciation. Statistics now show that 70 percent of Latinx young people have stopped attending worship services through the COVID-19 pandemic. I think the often-unrecognized labour at the most local level will be the spaces where faith has been carried. Thank you to the many Latinas who have done theological

labour, day after day, especially at the most local of levels. God-talk and God-reflection continues because of you!

***Neomi De Anda*** is Associate Professor at the University of Dayton, where she teaches courses in religion, languages and cultures, Latinx studies, race and ethnic studies, and women and gender studies and is a Human Rights Center Research Associate. Dr. De Anda has over 35 scholarly publications and exhibitions as well as over 80 scholarly presentations on her research interests of LatinoXa Christology; theology and breast milk; *chisme;* the intersection of race and migrations in conjunction with the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative Immigrant Justice Team; and partnering with the Hope Border Institute on a border theology at the intersections of the environment, migrations, labour, and women. She is the recipient of the 2021 University Award for Faculty Teaching; the 2021 University of Dayton College of Arts and Sciences Outstanding Service Award for faculty; and the First Book Prize for Minority Scholars from the Louisville Institute, where she now serves on the board. She is the most recent past president and member of the board for the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS).

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# Love Thy “Stinky” Neighbour

## Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* and Asian-American Experiences in the Catholic Church

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The Korean auteur Bong Joon-ho’s internationally acclaimed film *Parasite* is a disturbing social satire that captures the deep-skinned repulsion of the wealthy against the poor—manifesting through their body odour disgust sensitivity. Just as odour in the film serves as a critical element in differentiating classes and evoking disgust, judgment, and denigration against the poor, smell has functioned as a site of cultural conflict in popular Christianity since ancient times. Though rarely discussed, the place of smell is hardly negligible in the transnational contexts of Catholicism. Scents and smells define the boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar as well as determine one’s attitude toward the other. We can neither control them because they encompass cultural characteristics, such as food preparation and hygiene, nor can we easily tolerate them, because body odour sensitivity reacts before one’s perception.

Expanding the film’s insight into a discussion of transnational Catholicities, this essay addresses the relationship between the olfactory sense and xenophobia, particularly concerning the dominant culture’s treatment toward the immigrant and the refugee. I will discuss first how the olfactory sense influences a precognitive encounter with the “other” and one’s interaction with people from different cultures; and second, how the approach to odour in Christianity has contributed to the demoralization and demonization of others. Then, I turn to the theme of neighbour raised in the film, reflecting on the relationship between smell and xenophobia in the context of today’s transnational Catholicities, particularly focusing on the Asian-American experiences of the Church. My reflection on the Christian injunction “love your neighbor as yourself” in dialogue with the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek will lead this essay to its open conclusion. I suggest that the presentation of smell in the film challenges us to inquire about the limited and selective scope of neighbour, while the radical understanding of *agape* love urges us to recognize the ostracized other and to stand together with them.

### The “Stinky” Neighbours

*Parasite* begins with the story of the poor Kims—mother Chung-sook and father Ki-taek, respectively, and their young adult offspring, son Ki-woo and daughter Ki-jung. They live in a ramshackle semi-basement in a slummy village in Seoul, barely managing their household. Then there are the rich Parks. Mr. Park, his wife Yeon-kyo, and their two young children live in an opulent house designed by a famous architect, and they have everything, including a housekeeper named Moon-gwang. The Parks are secluded from the rest of the world in their own hideout of wealth without even knowing that they cohabit with another family, the third one in the film’s plot, Moon-gwang and her husband Geun-sae, who have been holing up in the bunker located in the sub-basement of the Park home. The three families’ lives change when Ki-woo begins tutoring Park’s daughter.

The eventual mayhem among the three families in the film serves as an allegory of the harsh dynamics of South Korea’s neoliberal capitalism in which the have-nots are stripped of their dignity and self-respect to compete for fragile opportunities to survive. While the class antagonism and the marginalized characters are recurrent features of Bong’s films, he highlights them in a more subtle and multifaceted dimension in *Parasite* by zooming in on the relationships among the three families. Bong shrewdly penetrates the intimate privacies of the families as they unwittingly share space together, become unwanted neighbours, and finally reveal their hidden faces to one another.

The role of odour is significant in the film. Smell “crosses the line” between the families whose places were initially segregated by their economic status. The hospitality and nicety of these “neighbours” were sustained until the line remained impassible, and Mr. Park starts to feel disgusted when the smell of Kim’s poverty leaks through, stinking like “the subway-riders,” “old radishes,” or “boiled rags.” Smell unreservedly discloses the entirety of individuals, including their class, lifestyle, and food, and ties them with the culture and group to which they belong.

Whereas the revealing power of smell is closely associated with xenophobia as described in the film, the discussion over the social influence of olfactory sense is surprisingly scarce in both public and private realms. Jim Drobnick, a scholar of contemporary art, suspects that "elusiveness and imponderability" are some of the reasons that make smell difficult to address.[1] While sight and hearing can be recorded as well as controlled, smell is fleeting and is nearly impossible to recall, regulate, or classify.[2] Smell escapes as much as it discloses. This impenetrable and divulging quality makes olfactory sense more liable to be influenced by the experiences, expectations, and prejudices attached to it.

Best known for his original work on perception, embodiment, and ontology, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers insights into understanding how a certain odour provokes odourphobia (osmophobia) and develops into xenophobia. By challenging the mind-body dichotomy, Merleau-Ponty debunks the classical Western notion of an external world as being completely independent of a perceiving, thinking, and feeling subject. To him, the mind can never be detached from its bond with a concrete situation of the external world. Rather, it remains fundamentally conditioned by the matter and life in which it is embodied.[3] In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty pushes this idea forward and argues that perception is not the exercise of reason to interpret an external object. Perception is learned in a social milieu and then constructs the background of experience, which recognizes a given object and guides every action. In olfactory terms, one's reaction to a smell is predetermined by one's perception of the environment to which the smell belongs.[4] One cannot receive meaning from a smell or make a meaningful reaction to the smell that one has never experienced. Likes and dislikes toward a smell are all learned. Simply speaking, "nothing stinks, but thinking makes it so!"[5]

Olfaction, then, is a social medium through which individuals locate themselves and others in social contexts filled with inequalities and the variables of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. The quality of a smell is thus evaluated and assigned even before it has been encountered.[6] Not surprisingly, marginalized groups are often linked to strong and unpleasant smells, whereas dominant groups are associated with sweet smells or no smell at all. Olfaction further serves as a signal for moral status, with foul smells deemed to originate from indecent, corrupt, lazy, and non-conformist individuals or groups, while pleasant smells are ascribed to the apparently virtuous, kind, nice, and pure ones.[7] The cultural correlation with smell expands this prejudice into one's attitude toward people from different cultures. According to a 2019 study on the relationship between body odour disgust sensitivity and prejudice toward immigrants, individuals who are prone to be disgusted by body odours tend to hold negative attitudes toward some immigrants, since they consider them to be "fundamentally different in terms of food, hygiene, and sanitary customs."[8]

## Smell and the Experiences of Asian-American Catholics

Religion has intensified the demoralization, demonization, and othering of certain smells, and Christianity is no exception. According to Susan Harvey in her book *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, the sense of smell in Christianity helped Christians in late antiquity create "a distinctive religious epistemology." Due to its uniquely elusive and revealing quality, smell is particularly effective in demonstrating one's morality and identity when sights, sounds, and tastes could not do so. Through olfactory experiences, Harvey says, Christians "posited knowledge of the divine and, consequently, knowledge about the human."[9] God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels, saints, and virtuous believers smell good, whereas Satan, demons, hell, pagans, heretics, and sinful people stink.[10]

This position eventually built a tradition of interpreting smells as indicators of distinguishing good identity, nature, culture, and moral state from bad ones.[11] Those who smell sweet and familiar are considered holy and virtuous, and those who smell strange and strong are sinful, wanton, unintelligent, untrustful, and dangerous. Typical examples of such biased positions relate to the alleged stinkiness of those who are labelled as "others" by dominant society, including adherents of other religions, racial others, and immigrants. Medieval Europe accused Jews of emitting a particular repulsive smell.[12] Mainstream Western culture still stigmatizes Asians and Africans as "innately malodorous" and turns them into scapegoats at many occasions of social crisis. Olfaction sets up an unwritten and unsaid instruction to sorting out one's neighbour in transnational Catholicity: they (the others) stink, but we (neighbours) don't stink.

If we extend the film's political satire to today's transnational reality of American Catholicism, particularly the case of Asian-American experiences in the Catholic Church, it's not a far stretch to parallel the invidious cohabitation of the three families in the film with the cohabitation of different cultures in the Church. Asian immigrants still face barriers not only in larger society, but also within the Catholic Church, unlike white European immigrants who arrived in the US prior to them. Asian immigrants remain marginalized from the power centres occupied by European members and often experience a lack of full acceptance, regardless of their level of committed participation or religious

and cultural contributions to the Catholic Church.[13] Just like Park's house where the families from different classes and cultures coexist perilously, the house of American Catholicism, too, seems precarious, embedding a deep sense of hierarchy among the groups and upholding tensions between them.

While the American Catholic Church helped immigrant and refugee communities settle in the US through charity work, sponsorship, and employment, the Catholic Church is hardly free from the larger society's racist attitudes and actions against Asians. In the 2020 election, former President Trump polled higher among white Catholics than among Catholics from other ethnic groups. While contentious policies like abortion remain the prime determinant in the Catholic vote, a 2020 Pew Research Center study shows that Catholic views of former President Trump are clearly divided by race and ethnicity, which indicates that it is not simply about devout Catholics voting for him because they remain aligned with the official teaching of the Catholic Church on abortion.[14] Such attitudes of the American Catholic Church set an unfair expectation for Asian-American Catholics to assimilate into the dominant European culture of the Church. As such, the cultural difference of Asians must be erased or selectively adapted by white Christianity, or their cultures become labelled as part of the stinky other.[15] Asian Americans should be very careful when reeking the odour of their culture in American parishes if they want to be recognized as decent neighbours.

This tension permeates not only between white Catholics and Asian-American Catholics at large, but also within diverse Asian-American Catholic communities, just like the friction between the two poor families in the film. As a response to institutionalized exclusion, many Asian immigrants and refugees have established their own ethnic parishes. Whereas these parishes appreciate and maintain the cultural heritage of their home community, they often intensify ethnic separatism among Asian-American churches, because they usually insist on being monoracial and monoethnic and hardly interact with one another. As theologian Linh Hoang says, these ethnic parishes indeed present a paradox: "They strengthen intra-ethnic bonds and a sense of belonging on the one hand and create a sense of separation from other groups and the larger society on the other."[16] These ethnic parishes often exist like an island in a diocese devoid of communication with white parishes or other ethnic parishes. Given the complex history of Asia, there are a number of reasons behind this ethnic separatism. Yet, one thing is clear. They tend to avoid the odours of even their next-door neighbours when they "cross the line."

## "Smell" and the Inhumane in *Parasite*

What insights does the film *Parasite* offer us as we recognize the struggles of Asian-American Catholics? I observe that both the disturbing relationship among the three families in the film and the ongoing struggles of Asian-American Catholics are reminiscent of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's challenge of the Christian dictum to "love your neighbor as yourself." Žižek defies any conventional interpretation of this Christian injunction as a proclamation of universal love, equality, and tolerance. He argues that such an idealistic approach to love rather precludes the possibility of loving one's neighbour as "real"—the frail, obscene, and unacceptable other.[17]

Žižek's challenge to the Christian injunction ratifies his critique to the impossibility of neighbourly love in Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the *real* refers to the state of nature from which we have been forever cut off by our entrance into language, or the symbolic order. It is impossible to describe an actual experience that is real or of the *real*, because the very entrance into the symbolic marks our irrevocable separation from reality. The human face as real, therefore, is already consumed by the symbolic order, and we do not see it as it is. Žižek, on the contrary, argues that access to the Lacanian real—the state of raw nature—is not impossible, because it is found through a concrete neighbour. Yet the encounter with the real through the neighbour is traumatic and threatening and, in turn, propels one's aversion to one's own raw and vulnerable nature.

At this juncture, Žižek's critique of the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas is worthy of note. Žižek challenges Levinas' concept of the "face-to-face relation," which enables one to be responsible to the "other" because, through the face of the neighbour, one encounters the "other" who addresses the self with "the unconditional call and thus constitutes [the self] as an ethical subject."[18] Žižek argues that the Levinasian experience of the other's face is limited by its selective conceptualization of what it is to be human. The other is welcomed, Žižek argues, "insofar as its presence is not intrusive, insofar as it is not really the other." Thus, when we love our neighbour, we only engage the neighbour as that which "gentrifies the terrifying thing that is the ultimate reality of our neighbor."[19] The generalization of humanity as the object of love is thus inevitably to choose a neighbour who is acceptable and lovable by singling out those who do not suit the category of neighbour. It is easy to love the idealized neighbour, Žižek says, "as long as there is a proper distance separating us."[20]

For Žižek, the neighbour is not always the harmless ones like "the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the

orphans," whom Levinas suggests.[21] The neighbour is just like us: smelly, greedy, selfish, and aggressive. They, too, are drawn to the *real* that drives them to violence in their own way. Žižek continues to criticize the humanitarian logic in human rights endeavours, which promotes one's duty to be generous toward the "other" only under the condition that the "other" should not intrude on their space or demonstrate the inherent "over-proximity" that would threaten them.[22] Insofar as we exclude the monstrosity of the neighbour, the Levinasian approach is nothing more than an effort to neutralize or tame others by confining them in our selective scope and thus to maintain our superiority over them in a charitable manner.

Obviously, the collision among the three families caused by smell in *Parasite* attests to Žižek's critique of the limited scope of the Levinasian "neighbours." The Kims were not able to hide the smell of their poverty, despite the cunning plot they comprised. Likewise, the Parks were not able to conceal their deep-seated disgust of the smell of the poor, even at the verge of losing their lives. Moon-gwang and Geun-sae, who had lived like dead people in the bunker to hide their smell, were not able to manage it anymore. Their relationship, which seemed to have held up well, took a destructive turn when each of them smells each other and gentrified one another to survive within the order of the Parks' world. When they finally encounter one another, the face-to-face relations among them disclosed the very inhumanity within them, instead of "displaying a quality of God's image carried with it," as Levinas hoped.[23] The horrifying and stupefying event hurled them to the bloody climax of the film.

While the film seems to affirm Žižek's critique of Levinas, I doubt whether his criticism is as fatal as it looks once we acknowledge that Levinas, too, was well aware of the inhumanity of others and was concerned with the subject of who can be transformed by their encounter with others, instead of selecting a suitable neighbour.[24] However, the resonance between the two authors is not the topic of interest in this essay. Rather, I pay attention to the film's depiction of the reality of the capitalistic order in which we consider our neighbour as nothing more than an object of competition for our own survival. We cannot say that the Catholic Church is immune from this order, as Pope Francis also aptly points out in *Fratelli Tutti*:

> A direct encounter even with the fringes of reality can thus prove intolerable. A mechanism of selection then comes into play, whereby I can immediately separate likes from dislikes, what I consider attractive from what I deem distasteful. In the same way, we can choose the people with whom we wish to share our world. Persons or situations we find unpleasant or disagreeable are simply deleted in today's virtual networks.[25]

The capitalistic order is also deeply ingrained in the mentality of Christians. Those "stinky neighbours" are not seen as entitled like others and are often prohibited from participating in the life of a parish. While no one will openly deny that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person, in practice, the Pope says, we treat them as "less worthy, less important, less human."[26] I question whether we can find a glimpse of inspiration in the film to at least confront this pathological order together. The crux of this matter becomes clear when we examine the significance of "love" in the film through Žižek's discussion of love.

## Love and the "Undead" in *Parasite*

Along with smell, love is another indicator that blurs the line between the families. Love's way of crossing the line is even more disturbing and violent than that of smell. In the film, Mr. Kim repeatedly annoys Mr. Park with a rhetorical question: "But don't you love your wife?" In this exchange about love, the power dynamic between the two men reverses. For Park, love ought to be manageable, controllable, and taboo if not fetishized, so that the animality of love will not take over his neatly organized and odourless world. In other words, love should not "cross the line," as he keeps stating. The murderous party, which is the climax of the film, immediately follows the scene when Mr. Park warns Mr. Kim not to cross the line with his question. Its consequence is violent and brutal and turns the hierarchy of the three families upside down. Geun-sae, who has been living "undead" in the sub-basement of the house, surges up from below the home, starts murdering others, and is killed. Mr. Kim, who has been in limbo between life and death after the previous night's trauma, sees Mr. Park's disgusted reaction to Geun-sae's smell and kills Mr. Park, which is the first instance that makes Mr. Kim identify himself with Geun-sae. The film ends with Mr. Kim hiding in the bunker where Geun-sae has been living. Neither dead nor alive may he remain there, just as Geun-sae has been for so long, while trying to connect with the living and longing for the day when he can rise up from the sub-basement.

Žižek's project to radicalize the Christian legacy of love denigrates the kind of love manifested in the Parks' world, wherein one can love only from a distance without getting hampered or disrupted by it. For Žižek, love must be understood in profoundly anti-humanist terms. As he says in an interview, "Love feels like a great misfortune, a monstrous parasite, a permanent state of emergency that ruins all small pleasures."[27] Furthermore, *agape*, or Christian love, often defies the interest or the well-being of the subject, and rather occurs for love's own sake, breaks with the superego,

and “reverts (and organizes itself) into a new order.” He says:

> *Agape* as political love means that unconditional, egalitarian love for one’s neighbor can serve as the foundation for a new order. The form of appearance of this love is … the urge to realize an egalitarian social order of solidarity.[28]

Agape requires one to “unplug” from one’s place in the symbolic order and to pursue the (im)possibility of direct access to the universal, where one encounters the hidden faces of humanity. The process of unplugging is a violent emptying of the foundation of the old order to create the world anew. Love has power to abolish the complacent self-righteousness and moralistic superiority which lies underneath idealistic humanitarian love. It connects people directly to one another by disrupting their particular positions in a given social hierarchy. As the Apostle Paul says, “there are neither men, nor women, neither Jews, nor Greeks” (Galatians 3:28).[29] In love, one rejects easy dichotomies of us and them, of good and evil, and of likes and dislikes and engages with a more astute understanding of human nature that acknowledges one’s own inhumanity—the smelly, greedy, selfish, and aggressive one—in the proximate inhumanity of others. For this reason, Žižek says, love is utterly “unwise” and unintelligent, just as the Apostle Paul affirms: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (1 Corinthians 1:19; Isaiah 29:14).[30]

The violent insurrection in the film leaves us questioning whether we can be convinced by the goals and objectives of Bong’s (and Žižek’s) project despite the cost. However, what inspires me to imagine beyond whether or not the project was viable is the film’s ending, where Mr. Kim hides in the sub-basement, becoming one of the “undead” at the deepest level of our social hierarchy. The “undead” is Žižek’s appropriation of the Lacanian notions of repetition automatism, excess negativity, and symbolic mortification. In Žižek’s words, it is “the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain.”[31] Those who cannot even die properly become “undead” and remain beyond individual consciousness or control. Then they keep returning as “the obscene figure of the undead,” continuing to haunt the living.[32] By giving up his “face” and removing himself from the category of the neighbour, Mr. Kim became undead—a faceless other, a non-neighbour, one who constantly disturbs our face-to-face relations with selective neighbours.

The presence of the undead like Mr. Kim and Geun-sae can be extended to the global capitalist reality, where numerous “stinky neighbours” exist as the faceless undead after being violently removed from their indigenous cultures through war, climate disaster, and extreme poverty. Žižek compels us to pay attention to the impulse of the undead within us and the faceless neighbours like Mr. Kim and Geun-sae, those whom we are not granted access to as long as we remain in the symbolic order of capitalism. If we fail to love these faceless neighbours, the Christian dictum of “love of neighbor” remains hypocritical. It is against Christian love, according Žižek, to choose a neighbour who has a face in front of us and, at the same time, push all third parties into a faceless background. For Žižek, love of neighbour can ultimately be achieved in a way that destroys the symbolic order that makes one neglect these faceless ones.

## Love Your Stinky Neighbour

As I conclude my essay, let us reconsider the encounter of the unwanted neighbours in the film, which I suggest parallels Asian-American experiences in the American Catholic Church. What does the film’s provocative plot and Žižek’s challenge tell us as we Christians face the raw and vulnerable nature of being recognized as “neighbours” by others during the pandemic’s surge of anti-Asian hate? Don’t we, though we keep talking about love, turn away and draw a line from the smell of “neighbours” when it finds its way into our nostrils?

For the sake of love, we should not only recognize the precarious reality of Asian Americans who try hard to assimilate into American parishes at the cost of erasing their culture, but also dare to encounter the stinky neighbours who stray outside the Church. By becoming willingly disturbed by the smell of strangers, we may have a chance to realize the monstrous nature within us and them and discover the potential to shatter the capitalistic order that divides all of us. It is only by accepting and standing with our stinky neighbours that we can challenge that order and embody *agape*, the unconditional love that Christ commands us to put into practice. Moreover, we must act collectively from beyond humanitarian logic and confront the liberal delusions that may lead us to complacency.

Even now, Mr. Kim’s frantic Morse code from the bunker obsessively reminds us of the inhumane and the undead within us and continues to disturb us with urgent questions: By what and by whose criteria do we gentrify “our neighbour”? How can we open ourselves to recognize the stinky otherness both external *and* internal to us? How can we not be daunted by the terrifying abyss that smell induces within us in order to acknowledge and act with *agape* love on behalf of our neighbours?

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# In Defense of the Racial Justice Movement

## A Black Catholic Response

**By Alessandra Harris**
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I will first discuss Archbishop Gomez's address to the Congress of Catholics and Public Life that was held in Madrid, Spain. Then, I will reflect on the racism and white supremacy that still exist in the Catholic Church. I will also offer my thoughts on the way critical race theory and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) organization are being misrepresented and weaponized in both public discourse and the Catholic Church to influence white Catholics.

Archbishop Gomez described the social justice movements as "pseudo-religions, and replacements and rivals to traditional Christian beliefs …They provide people with an explanation for events and conditions in the world. They offer a sense of meaning, a purpose for living, and the feeling of belonging to a community."[1] Gomez details what he calls the Christian story, which should supersede the social justice movements: "Jesus reconciles us to God and our neighbors, gives us the grace to be transformed in his image, and calls us to follow him in faith, loving God and our neighbor, working to build his Kingdom on earth, all in confident hope that we will have eternal life with him in the world to come."[2]

However, for the majority of people of colour, Indigenous people in the Americas, African-American people, and people throughout the global South, that has not been the true Christian story, has it? The Gospel message and the great commission are beautiful and guide my life. But in practice, horrible events like colonization, genocide, and chattel slavery have been the reality as men have misused the Christian faith. For African-Americans brought in chains to this country and forced to work in labour camps—what we call plantations—where they were beaten, raped, diminished, would we say the white Christian slaveholders loved God and their Black neighbour? The years of Jim Crow segregation, lynching, discrimination—are these examples of white Christians loving their Black neighbour?

In his 2011 pastoral letter on racism, the late Cardinal Francis George, OMI, then archbishop of Chicago, reflected on his lived knowledge of white Catholics' participation in the racism the civil rights movement tried to end:

> Many have heard the stories of priests, nuns and lay people unwilling to welcome even Catholic African Americans into parishes and schools. There are stories of Catholic politicians working to sustain racial segregation in neighborhoods and in the workplace and tales of fear that a school would be "ruined" because Father or Sister allowed African American Catholics to enroll their children. When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marched in Chicago during the summer of 1966, he described the racism and hatred he encountered as more "hostile" and "hateful" than anything he had witnessed in the South. Some of the neighborhoods he entered were home to Catholic parishioners.[3]

That's the reality of the Christian story in the United States.

Gomez continued, "Our Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI warned that the eclipse of God leads to the eclipse of the human person. Again and again he told us: when we forget God, we no longer see the image of God in our neighbor."[4] However, European and American white people who claim to know God have refused for centuries to see the image of God in people who have a darker skin colour than they do. The history of colonization and enslavement is precisely white people asserting their dominance over people who they claim are less than. White supremacy is the belief that white people are superior to people of colour, and especially Black people. If you need a more contemporary example, look at what happened at the Catholic University of America. A painting created by Kelly Latimore titled *Mama* was hung in the CUA campus ministry office and outside the chapel of the Columbus School of Law. It depicts the Virgin Mary supporting the body of the dead Christ; the artist has indicated that his painting depicts both George Floyd and Jesus. Latimore said he has received death threats and spiritual denunciations over the painting about once or twice a week.

The publication *The Daily Signal* ran a story about the icon at the university and quoted a junior at CUA saying, "The icon has no place at The Catholic University of America; it is blasphemous and an offense to the

Catholic faith, but it is not surprising at all that it was put there. It is just another symptom of the liberalization and secularization of our campus."[5] Other students decried the image as well, greatly offended that Jesus was depicted as looking like George Floyd. Less than 24 hours after the image ignited international furor online among conservatives, the icon was stolen from the campus. A Change.org petition titled "Remove Painting of George Floyd as Jesus from CUA Campus" has been signed by over 5,000 people.

Recently, I reflected on Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose feast day we celebrated on December 12. Our Lady appeared to an Indigenous man in Mexico and spoke his native tongue. She presented herself as mestizo with brown skin. However, though we consider Our Lady of Guadalupe to be the patroness of the Americas, almost all depictions of the Blessed Mother in the American Catholic Church depict her as a fair-skinned European.

These examples inform my opinion that Gomez is absolutely incorrect when he says that when one believes in God, one sees the image of God in their neighbour. The majority of Americans refuse to see Jesus as anything other than white or European, and God as anything other than an old white man with a beard. Almost all the sacred images in stained glass windows in churches, in our prayer books, media, and Christian literature depict white-looking people. Even the North African church fathers like St. Augustine are usually depicted as white. Jesus clearly stated that when you see the least of these, you see me. So, why is it so blasphemous and sacrilegious to imagine seeing Jesus when you see George Floyd?

Gomez stated, "I believe that it is important for the Church to understand and engage these new movements – not on social or political terms, but as dangerous substitutes for true religion."[6] Fortunately, Pope Francis disagrees with the archbishop's view. In his video message on the occasion of the Fourth World Meeting of Popular Movements, Francis eloquently called those engaged in the social justice movements "social poets" and the "Collective Samaritan" "who did not pass on the other side of the road when it saw the injury to human dignity caused by an abuse of power."[7]

Finally, Gomez claimed the following in his speech: "The Church has been 'antiracist' from the beginning. All are included in her message of salvation. Of course, in the Church we have not always lived up to our beautiful principles, or carried out the mission entrusted to us by Christ. But the world does not need a new secular religion to replace Christianity. It needs you and me to be better witnesses. Better Christians. Let us begin by forgiving, loving, sacrificing for others, putting away spiritual poisons like resentment and envy."[8] Archbishop Gomez's statement encapsulates the racism and white supremacy that is still alive in the American church and our country. It refuses to acknowledge the severity of its racist history and the price people of colour have paid when the Church did not live up to its principles.

A recent analysis by Reflective Democracy examined the often not discussed white male minority rule that dominates the United States. White men hold 62 percent of all elected offices despite being just 30 percent of the population, exercising minority rule over 42 state legislatures, the House, the Senate and statewide offices in this country.[9] I couldn't find a statistic for the total percentage of priests, bishops, and cardinals that are white men in the US, but I would estimate over 65 percent, because the current ordinands who are white are 65 percent.[10] Moreover, in fiction, the assumption is that characters in a book are white by default. If you're writing non-white characters, like I do, you have to make sure to mention the fact that they're not white by describing their skin colour or features or hair texture. Also, the fact that I could not readily find information about how many white priests serve in our Church leads me to believe that the default is white priests. This isn't just by chance. We cannot just say that historically, Catholics in the United States have been white. We have to ask why.

The truth is that the Catholic Church has a long history of excluding Black people from the clergy and religious orders, segregating them in churches, and treating them as second-class parishioners. Recently, more recognition has been paid to Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton, who is the first openly Black priest ordained from the United States in 1886. He was born into slavery and studied for the priesthood in Rome, where he was ordained due to racism in the United States. Fr. Tolton was rejected by every American seminary to which he applied. Daniel Rudd, who organized the initial Colored Catholic Congress with Fr. Tolton, said this about the matter:

> For a long time the idea prevailed that the negro was not wanted beyond the altar rail, and for that reason, no doubt, hundreds of young colored men who would otherwise be officiating at the altar rail today have entered other walks. Now that this mistaken idea has been dispelled by the advent of one full-blooded negro priest, the Rev. Augustus Tolton, many more have entered the seminaries in this country and Europe.[11]

Even going further back than Fr. Tolton's experience, I think about Kongolese Catholics who were brought to the Americas and enslaved. In various interviews with Jude 3 Project, Dr. David D. Daniels III, professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, discusses how

the Kingdom of Kongo converted to Catholicism in 1491. From 1619 until 1740, the majority of Africans who were brought to the Americas were from Central Africa, which included the Kingdom of Kongo. So many Africans who were captured and sold into slavery from that part of Africa were practising Catholics.[12] In a letter written prior to 1710 by an Anglican priest, he stated that Angolans (a term that was interchangeable with Kongolese) enslaved on the plantation in South Carolina were asking for the Eucharist. In the letter, the Anglican priest stated that he needed to make sure the Africans renounced the Pope and converted to Protestantism.[13]

This is heartbreaking as a Catholic, and so much history like this is not taught. The Catholic faith in particular has been stifled among African-American people, and the Christian faith in general was also distorted to keep the enslaved subservient. During certain antebellum periods, it was illegal for Christians who were enslaved to read the Bible or congregate to worship together. There are examples of slave bibles being used by Christian slaveholders which had all the biblical passages about liberation from slavery and freedom taken out.

So, if the Church hierarchy in this country is overwhelmingly white and male, then that is the lens that Gomez and the dominant culture use to view sacredness. In addition to the majority of priests, bishops, and cardinals being white, mainstream Catholic media and most Catholic speakers are also white. So, no wonder about the gut reaction of horror and disdain for Black Lives Matter, which was founded by three Black women, two of whom are queer.

According to Olga Segura's book *Birth of a Movement: Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church*, Patrisse Cullors grew up in a Christian home. Her mother was a Jehovah's Witness. However, she was forced out of her home after revealing she was queer. Opal Tometi was also raised in a Christian home and was influenced by liberation theology. She has always considered faith an integral part of her life.[14] A Jewish Women's Archive profile states that the third Black Lives Matter co-founder, Alicia Garza, was raised by her African-American mother and Jewish stepfather. She grew up as Alicia Schwartz and identifies as Jewish. She also identifies as queer and was married to a trans male.[15] So, when a Church dominated and run by white males views Black Lives Matter and the three women founders who are unapologetically Black, feminist, womanist, and devoted to defending the lives of all Black people, including those who are lesbian, gay, and trans, their reaction is not only to see them as a threat but also to denounce them as profane and dangerous.

I do not believe God sees them that way. Instead, I relate the founders of BLM to the biblical character Hagar. In the seminal womanist book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores S. Williams explores the story of Hagar through the lived experiences of African-American women from the earliest days in this country through when it was written in 1993. Williams discusses how "the African-American community has taken Hagar's story unto itself. Hagar has 'spoken' to generations after generations of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people."[16]

Hagar's story is found in Genesis 16 and 21. Hagar is an enslaved Egyptian in the house of Abraham and Sarah. After Sarah is unable to conceive, she gives Hagar to Abraham in order for an heir to be born to their family so Abraham's lineage is continued. After Hagar conceives Abraham's child, the biblical text explains that she looks with contempt upon the barren Sarah. In retaliation, Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar ran away. An angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness and called her by her name, asking where she was going. He told her she was pregnant with a son, whom she shall name Ish'mael because the Lord has given heed to her affliction. The angel also makes Hagar a promise: that her son's descendants would be so greatly multiplied that they could not be numbered. Hagar called the Lord *El-roi*, saying, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" Hagar obeyed the angel, who told her to return to Sarah and submit to her mistress (Genesis 16:1-16 [NRSV]). As Williams describes, the fact that Hagar returned to the household of her slave-owner after her self-initiated liberation demonstrates her faith and her radical obedience to God.[17] Later, after returning to slavery, Hagar gives birth to Ish'mael.

Genesis 21:1-21 relates that after Sarah conceived her own son in her advanced age and gave birth to Isaac, she no longer wanted Hagar or Abraham's eldest son and heir, Ish'mael, in the household. Though Abraham was not pleased with his wife's wishes, he listened to God and provided Hagar with bread and water before forcing her and Ish'mael to leave for good. Wandering in the wilderness with nowhere to go, Hagar ran out of water and gave up, believing she and her son would perish in the desert. However, when Ish'mael cried out, God heard him. The angel of the Lord spoke to Hagar again and told her not to fear. Then God opened her eyes, and she found a spring of water, from which she and Ish'mael drank to save their lives. Ish'mael grew up in the wilderness and lived long enough to marry an Egyptian woman and have children of his own.

I spend time on the story of Hagar because similar to the founders of BLM, she was a person of African descent who was not counted among God's "chosen

people," but God still saw her, heard her, saved her, and promised her a future. It didn't matter that she was an outsider; God still had a plan for her and her son.

We see Hagar mentioned again in the Bible in the New Testament, in Galatians 4:21-31. When Paul discusses Hagar and Sarah, he concludes, "So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman" (Galatians 4:31). St. Paul furthers the example of Hagar as a woman who is outside the covenant. He doesn't want Christians to identify with the Egyptian slave woman. However, what fascinates me is that Muslims have adopted Hagar and trace their lineage to Ish'mael. As a matter of fact, the people on the Hajj pilgrimage re-enact Hagar's search for water in the desert. The woman that Christians want us to despise is honoured and revered in Islam.

Similarly, the founders of BLM, like Hagar, have rooted their existence outside of the bounds of white Christian doctrine. BLM affirms the lives of people who are queer, trans, or gender non-conforming, those who are not traditionally married, and those who are too often stigmatized in faith communities. The BLM movement centres the lived experiences of those that the Catholic Church would rather ignore, those that if Jesus were walking the earth today, he would encounter with his radical love.

My analogy to Hagar does not end there. St. Paul separates Christians from Hagar. However, the white Christian males who founded and governed the United States did not see Black people who were overwhelmingly Christian as co-heirs to God's kingdom. They did not believe that the salvation and freedom bought by Christ's blood on Calvary extended to Black Americans both during and after slavery.

In Nikole Hannah-Jones' Pulitzer Prize–winning *New York Times* essay for the 1619 Project, which I'll discuss more in depth later, Jones discusses the shameful paradox of Americans continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom. To justify their position, they promulgated the ideology that Black people were subhuman and that slavery and subjugation were the natural station for people who had African blood in them. Jones writes that the Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, ruling that Black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race.

> Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "no rights which a white man was bound to respect." This belief, that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the "we" in "We the People" was not a lie.[18]

This same thinking, which is really a lie from the pit of hell, is what causes bishops like Robert Barron and Archbishop Gomez and Catholic theologians to condemn Black Lives Matter founders and the organization as pseudo-religious and dangerous. They refuse to acknowledge that the racial justice movement is rooted in the biblical truth that all people—including Black people—are made in the image and likeness of God, that all people of African descent have inherent dignity that cannot be taken away and deserve a right to life.

Catholic critics especially say BLM wants to destroy traditional marriage and the family. The issue isn't one's personal feelings or beliefs about homosexuality, gender identity, or traditional marriage. The issue is that every single person has inherent dignity as a child of God, that every person has the right to live a life full of opportunity that is free from discrimination and violence regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital status.

Black Lives Matter differs from the Civil Rights Movement in its embrace of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people. Audre Lorde made the following observation about the 1960s political climate: "The existence of Black lesbian and gay people were not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black America."[19] So BLM and many people in the social and racial justice movements reject the version of Christianity that excludes people whose lives and choices do not fit the dominant white Christian narrative.

History shows that Black people have fought the white Christian narrative since slavery began. Black people have rebelled against the narrative that Black people are inferior to white people and are unworthy of freedom. David D. Daniels III discussed that after the Kingdom of Kongo converted to Catholicism, schools were set up, priests and eventually bishops were ordained, and the new Catholics learned how to read and teach the catechism. Besides schools and libraries, by 1590 the capital established an Episcopal See and built a cathedral. Africans in this part of Africa, along with the Kingdom of Benin and Kingdom of Wari, which are in modern-day Nigeria, were Christian for centuries before they were forcefully brought to the Americas. So, they learned and taught each other the Catholic faith, and when they were enslaved in the Americas, they understood Christianity differently

than what the white slaveholders believed. As we saw with the Stono Rebellion in 1739 in South Carolina, the African Catholics were ready to fight and rebel for their freedom.[20]

This is true with other people who were enslaved, like Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Toussaint Louverture (who was a leader in the Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolt in the Americas). These men who went on to lead slave rebellions were strengthened and motivated by their encounter with God to fight for their liberation. The story of God leading the Israelites out of slavery, and the freedom promised by Christ, led them to try and throw off their shackles. People like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and of course Civil Rights activists like Martin Luther King Jr. believed that their faith led them to seek liberation for Black people. King spoke the following words:

> Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something in the center of our faith which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph and beat the drums of Easter … There is something in the universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again."[21]

The truth of the sacredness, beauty, and importance of Black people has been crushed over and over again in this country. Yet, these truths continue to rise again, as we saw in 2020. The racial reckoning that happened was the largest social movement in the history of the United States. People from all different backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, and ages came together to proclaim the truth: that Black lives matter.

Nonetheless, we're now seeing what Martin Luther King called a "white backlash" against BLM, critical race theory, being "woke," and anti-racism efforts. To understand the debate around critical race theory and wokeness, we have to go back before the 2020 protests to August 2019. The 1619 Project was an initiative created by Nikole Hannah-Jones and published in *The New York Times Magazine* that marked the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. On the website, it states the aim was to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very centre of the American national narrative.

Along with Nikole Hannah-Jones' essay, there were 10 other works of nonfiction. Jones' essay demonstrates just how exceptional and groundbreaking the 1619 Project was:

> The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves – black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.[22]

The 1619 Project, which was subsequently developed into a book, shook the very foundation of our country. There was no way that something as powerful as the 1619 Project would be published, widely read, circulated, and taught in school curricula in all 50 states without a white backlash, which was swift. Moreover, people in 2020 kept books like *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi atop bestseller lists. The 2016 documentary *13th* by Ava Duvernay, which exposed the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration, saw a 4,665 percent increase in 2020 following the death of George Floyd.[23] People in America learned the truth about US history and were ready to do something about it. The white backlash we're seeing today responded to this learning and unlearning of US history during the racial reckoning.

Among all this education, activism, and corporate attempts to address systemic racism, critical race theory (CRT) entered the conversation. It emerged in the legal field as a practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society. As the American Bar Association explains:

> It critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers. CRT also recognizes that race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past. Instead, it acknowledges that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continue to permeate the social fabric of this nation.[24]

Yet, misinterpretations of CRT have become a weapon wielded by the right to demonize the anti-racism movement.

In a March 8, 2021, *Black Catholic Messenger* podcast, Nate Tinner-Williams and I had Dede Miller, one of the co-founders of Catholics United for Black Lives (CUBL), join us to discuss Bishop Barron's critique of wokeism and his claims that racial justice movements have their roots in postmodern French philosophers, and that since Christians have not stepped up to the plate in the racial justice fight, BLM has filled in.[25] We discussed how there are many religious people, including Black Catholics and non-Black Catholics, in the racial justice movement, and even within BLM. Dede and other Black Catholics created CUBL exactly for the purpose of having a racial justice organization rooted in Catholic teaching.

Barron and other critics of the racial justice movement claim that wokeism and critical race theory see racism in everything and want to throw out American history and replace it with a history of oppression. Many white Americans want to cling to the *idea* of what America is and what it *claims* to be, instead of stepping into the shoes of Black people and people of colour and understanding the reality. Similarly, people are now asserting the false claim that anti-racist books and education are harmful to white children. Legislatures are inciting bans of books and lessons that teach the truth of American history and are justifying these actions by claiming that telling the truth about American history will lead white children to feel guilt. As Ibram X. Kendi explains, white supremacist ideology claims that anti-racism means anti-whiteness. White supremacists are the ones who teach that when people say they oppose racism, they really mean they are against white people. Heather McGhee calls what's happening the "zero-sum myth." It's the idea that progress for people of colour comes at the expense of white people.[26]

As Nikole Hannah-Jones told the *Los Angeles Times*, "To see attacks on 'The 1619 Project' and this idea that racial reckoning has gone too far and now white people are the ones suffering is the most predictable thing in the world if you understand American history."[27] Likewise, in Catholic circles today, critics claim that opposing racism really means you stand against Christian values and more specifically against the Catholic Church. If history has proven anything, it has proven that Black people just want freedom in this country—freedom from discrimination, freedom from racist policing, freedom from mass criminalization, and freedom to tell our history.

In spite of the backlash, people are recognizing there is a problem. Racism is not only a socio-political issue, but also a religious and spiritual issue. Dede Miller said that as the one true Church founded by Jesus Christ, we should be the most just Church; we should lead the justice movements. The Catholic Church needs to stand up and do something to break the demonic stronghold of racism in the country. It starts with each of us but should expand to every corner of the Church. To conclude, Pope Francis spoke about the role of clergy in movements among the people in the interview "A Big Heart Open to God":

> The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.[28]

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Book Review

# Mysticism, Solidarity, and Social Change

*Desire, Darkness, and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse. Engaging the Thought of Constance FitzGerald, OCD.* Edited by Laurie Cassidy and M. Shawn Copeland. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2021. Pp. xii + 463.

Constance FitzGerald OCD entered the Carmelite community in Baltimore in 1951. The study and exposition of Carmelite mysticism has been centralized in her life there. Her expositions are distinguished by the way they situate the spiritual quest for God in relation to contemporary social crises. This important book aims to introduce her thought to a wider audience. It gathers seven of her essays and intersperses among them some essays by others in dialogue with her ideas. This book brings her interpretation of Carmelite spirituality powerfully to bear upon some current crises in the United States.

A foreword by Brian McDermott and an introduction by Shawn Copeland introduce FitzGerald and her notion of "impasse," which influences and inspires this book. FitzGerald describes impasse as the social equivalent to an individual's experience of the dark night of the soul. It involves a sense of one's worldview disintegrating, of a loss of one's own and one's culture's worth. Impasse entails the experience of being imprisoned in a situation of suffering and despair from which there appears to be no escape and in which there is no supportive sense of meaning and purpose. FitzGerald argues that mystics like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross provide spiritual wisdom for encountering such times as experiences in which one's mind and spirit can be purified, leading to a deeper relationship with God and with others and to greater self-fulfillment as well as social change.

FitzGerald's first essay develops two themes which appear throughout this book. First, faith, hope, and love in Christ lead us eventually to a time of despair, the dark night of the soul, when the self-enclosed aspects of our worldview must painfully give way for us to grow in relationship to God. By persisting in faith, hope, and love through such difficult times, we may be opened to a new understanding of God's presence, love, and call to us. Second, an experience of dark night is always related to our social ethos and socio-historical context and location. In the dark night of the soul, in experiences of impasse, God calls us to something new and to reimagine our worlds of meaning and action.

Colette Ackermann, current prioress of the Baltimore Carmel community, gives an overview of FitzGerald's life in her chapter, which sets the stage for FitzGerald's essay "Impasse and Dark Night." This essay develops two assumptions foundational to her life and thought. First, one's spirituality must emerge from one's socio-historical context, then return with resources to constructively re-engage it. The spiritual life aims at individual as well as social transformation. As love for God and love for others are intertwined, we find Christ in the neighbour, particularly in the suffering, the poor, the marginalized. Second, in its current crises of racial injustice, the United States is undergoing an experience of impasse, a collective dark night of the soul. A related disturbing insight emerges: a sinful side to all human desire surfaces, even the desire for God. This desire also pertains to the collective aspirations of communities and nations, which are distorted into all sorts of dualisms which divide and demonize. Experiences of impasse reveal the shadow sides of collective values and social structures as well as challenge communities to transcend them. In such experiences, human desire can be purified and liberated from such distortions. A new vision and hope can be born that could not have been imagined previously. Dark night and impasse bring a new sense of human vulnerability that can move the privileged from seeing the poor as objects to standing in solidarity with them, to breathing with them in the context of seemingly relentless racial injustices.

Laurie Cassidy applies these insights to the struggle against white supremacy in the United States. This impasse confronts white people like herself with the racism of white privileged ways of acting and white-centric frameworks of understanding. Marie Teresa Morgan applies FitzGerald's insights to the COVID-19 pandemic. The powerlessness experienced since 2020 has led to a resurging interest in prayer and meditation. These practices can provide an impulse to service and solidarity.

In the next chapter, "Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation," FitzGerald explores how the spiritual life involves divine desire for communion with people, igniting within them a corresponding desire for God. This illuminating desire leads inevitably to a dark night. The mystical tradition offers guidance about how such painful experiences

can produce spiritual and simultaneous social growth, as outlined above. Susie Paulik Babka also applies this dynamic to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has intensified economic disparities. In this experience of impasse, the privileged are being called to the dismantling of both ego and sinful social structures. Roberto Goizueta analyzes how FitzGerald's notion of impasse provides a contemplative grounding for the preferential option for the poor, by showing the intrinsic relationship between impasse and the gratuitous, universal nature of God's love. Margaret Pfeil engages with FitzGerald's ideas to describe the climate crisis as an impasse that calls for transcending anthropocentric worldviews.

FitzGerald's chapter "Transformation in Wisdom" further explores how dark night and impasse can lead to purification and transformation of desire and consciousness. In such experiences, the image of Jesus-Sophia becomes focused in his suffering, isolation, and death on the cross at the same time that one's image of self, God, and world are subverted and transformed. Images of the poor, suffering, and oppressed become extensions of the image of the crucified Christ, both unveiling the violence of society and calling people to radical conversion. Alex Mikulich insightfully applies this Christological transformation of self and world to the persistent settler and neo-colonialism in New England in relation to the Mohicans. Bryan Massingale applies this Christological dynamic to the cultural ethos of white supremacy in the United States. Contending with racism will require interior conversion and spiritual evolution as well as social ethics and action on the part of predominantly white institutions and many white people.

FitzGerald's essay on Edith Stein follows. Stein embraced the impasse of her time as a call to a deeper solidarity and commitment to her society's victims. Andrew Prevot's chapter offers an important clarification. The call of God to transformation can come in dark night and impasse, but it must not be identified with violence and suffering. Theological and formational work are required for this call to be distinguished from the oppression and violence amid which it occurs, in a way that condemns the latter while recognizing the former. God's call to transformation is to be embraced, while the violence and injustices of impasse are to be resisted. Mary Catherine Hilkert's chapter, "Preaching the Dark Wisdom of the Cross," continues this line of discernment. When personal and social suffering befall us, we rely on the promise that God's Spirit accompanies us and will lead us to a future we may not yet see. The call to conversion to those in positions of power during times of impasse is a call to repentance, relinquishment, and divestment. As the Church follows Christ in a world plagued by multiple interlocking and intersectional injustices, it will inevitably experience this form of participation in Christ's passion.

FitzGerald's chapter "Dark Night and the Transformative Influence of Wisdom in John of the Cross" explores further how clinging to faith, hope, and love in times of dark night or impasse enables and encourages these purifying and transformative experiences. Her concluding chapter, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory," analyzes the transformation that can come from clinging to God in Christ crucified by faith, hope, and love in times of dark night and impasse, enabling one to evolve into a prophetic figure or join a prophetic community. Among other aims, contemplation roots a person more deeply in God's love and passion for justice than in the current or prevalent social establishment. In times of social crises, contemplation can enable one to look beyond established social practices, norms, and structures to a different future, to another possible self and world, so that one can become a source of hope and inspiration to others.

FitzGerald does not deny the necessity of people, especially oppressed and marginalized people, developing a healthy autonomy. She recognizes the danger of selflessness that is unable to exercise strong agency. The experience she describes—of dying to self in order to be transformed and purified and enter into a deeper community with others—does not destroy one's autonomy. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross emerged as stronger persons from their experiences of dark night. The saving possibility in dark night and impasse can lead to one's autonomy becoming situated in a more profound relationship to God that then enables one to see and act beyond the religious, social, political, and multiple other limitations of the present.

This timely book shows how insights of Carmelite mysticism can aid personal and social transformation in a time of social disarray, finding a way within the crises of the present and helping communities to forge a constructive path toward a longed-for, more just future. The United States is currently afflicted by a number of crises, rooted in or exacerbated by a profoundly self-centred and individualistic ethos that has infected its culture, corrupting many of its guiding ideals. FitzGerald shows how these crises can signal a time of transformation, of spiritual and social growth. Contemplation and prayer, properly guided, can foster repentance, deeper solidarity, and greater commitment to social justice in such times. Her insights could also support white settler Canadians in engaging the colonial legacies dividing us from our Indigenous neighbours.

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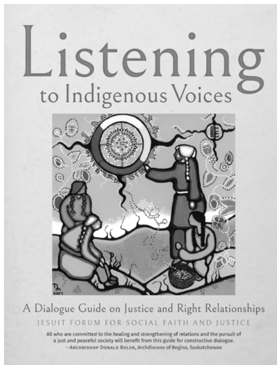


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*As Arthur Manuel states, "change cannot be done in a day but the process can start today"; reading this collection is one way to start.—Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Anishinaabe (St. Peter's/Little Peguis) and Assistant Professor at the University of Manitoba*

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