

Otherness Has a Face . . . and It Is Not a Pretty Face*

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The last decade of the twentieth century has witnessed a historical process hailed widely as the twilight of collectivist ideologies and the consequent triumph of individual freedom. We are assured that, from Moscow to Managua, the hand of history has written an epitaph for the grand socialist experiment. Yet an eerie uneasiness pervades the celebration. The columns of menacing Soviet tanks that we saw day in and day out in our news programs not long ago have been replaced by columns of the hungry, homeless, and unemployed, not only in the former socialist states, but in our own country and in countries as distant as Somalia. These are the spoils of our victory. Nevertheless, the presumptive triumph of western ideals has been accompanied in some circles by a fashionable jingoism, now justified—or so we are told—by the inexorable march of history itself. If the Soviet utopia is no longer the inevitable end of history, then the American utopia must be. After all, we have won the Cold War.

One intellectual alternative to this triumphalistic jingoism is that represented by poststructuralist postmodernism, with its emphasis on cultural and epistemological relativity. Rejecting the universalism, conceptualism, and rationalism of modernity, poststructuralist postmodernity often turns to aesthetics as an antidote to the totalitarian tendencies of modern ontologies and epistemologies. In the "postmodernist

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merger of life and art,"¹ aesthetic otherness and indeterminacy are put forth as alternatives to rational certitude and instrumentality.

While this process of aestheticization, where life itself becomes the aesthetic object, the *objet d'art* par excellence, emerges from a subversive impulse in postmodernity, the link between that intuitive, liberative impulse and concrete human suffering often remains ambiguous in or, indeed, altogether absent from the discussion. Where indeterminacy is the sole value, how does one take a stand? Some, like John Caputo, insist that one must take a stand on the side of the oppressed.² Yet, as Mark Kline Taylor has observed, "Caputo does not say *how* this 'taking a stand' is consonant with the celebration and valuation of the flux."³ This observation is echoed, in more general terms, by Terry Eagleton: "Any post-structuralist theory which desires to be in some sense political is bound to find itself caught on the hop between the normativity which such politics entail, and its own full-blooded cultural relativism."⁴ Poststructuralists are hard pressed to answer the question: What is the *relationship* between solidarity with the oppressed, on the one hand, and indeterminacy, or aesthetic experience on the other? The consequences of this lacuna, argues Andrew Bowie, will not be limited to the academic world in which the discussion is carried on:

A major problem that radical aesthetic theory needs to confront in our century is the fact that, if one has lost metaphysical, or collectively binding criteria for the judgement of the products of subjective spontaneity, there is no sure way of distinguishing in advance the aesthetically significant from the politically reactionary. In the twentieth century aesthetic issues become dangerous, they cost lives and affect politics in ways which are not always immediately apparent.⁵

1. Ferenc Fehér, "What is Beyond Art? On the Theories of Post-Modernity," *Reconstructing Aesthetics*, eds. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 67.

2. John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutical Project* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987) 264.

3. Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 39.

4. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 385.

5. Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) 256–57.

It is thus not altogether clear that, for all the talk of otherness and difference, postmodernity is truly capable of embracing cultural otherness and promoting a genuine community of "others." The suspicion remains that much postmodern thinking is but the adolescent child of modernity, rebelling wildly against its parent, yet unable and unwilling to recognize how that very rebellion masks a profound dependence.⁶ Those very lines of hungry and unemployed people unmask the illusion that modernity has been transcended; the faces of the poor, the hungry and unemployed, the victims of triumphalist jingoism, all bear the unmistakable imprint of modernity. Their histories of suffering are not forgotten. The underside of modernity per-

6. So, for instance, Eagleton compares Locke, one of the great figures of modernity, with Jean-François Lyotard: "John Locke, father of English liberalism and devout racist, held in his doctrine of anti-essentialism that no particular feature of reality could be said to be in itself more important than any other; and it follows from this that there is no more reason why an individual's colour of skin should not be regarded as an essential feature of her, than why it should. Lyotard's divorce of the descriptive and the normative is exactly in line with this tradition of thought" (Eagleton, 400). Likewise, Russell Berman accuses postmodernists of the same epistemological insularity and aversion to criticism that characterize modern culture: "it is postmodernist eclecticism, the consequence of the avant-garde attack on bourgeois normativity, that precludes systemic criticism. The system can point to the artificial negativity of its internal opposition as proof of its own viability and the impossibility of an autonomous position outside the network of present practices. The cultural theory of postmodernism provides the affirmative descriptions of that which is merely given. Although it may carefully sketch power structures and practical strategies, its rejection of emancipatory autonomy precludes any systematic critical project. Once concepts of truth are treated solely as vehicles for the establishment of an exclusionary discourse and taste becomes only a ploy to establish social distinction, the utopian potential of the autonomous artwork is lost from sight." *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 51-52. In a discussion of reader-response theory, Berman also observes that postmodernist relativism can mask an underlying elitist conservatism, resulting in an "authoritarian cynicism": "as Stanley Fish, one of the leading reader-response advocates, repeatedly insists, the result of the theory is not a dissolution of critical or textual authority but a recognition of the constant 'authority of interpretive communities,' i.e., established university critics. . . . No interpretation is permanent, but every interpretation must respond to established norms (because an autonomy outside of established norms is inconceivable). . . . Fish's antitraditionalism turns into a cynical defense of established criticism simply as established. The authority that once adhered to innovative modernism is transferred to the critical guardians of culture within the academic literary institutions" (ibid., 129-130).

dures as the spoils of its victory. Consequently, any epistemological paradigm—by whatever name—that is incapable of "distinguishing in advance the aesthetically significant from the politically reactionary" necessarily remains trapped within the dialectic of modernity. Such a paradigm would represent, in the words of Frank Lentricchia, "the critic's doomed attempt to retreat from a social landscape of fragmentation and alienation."⁷

Comprising a disproportionately large segment of the hungry and unemployed, the victims of North American jingoism, and the underside of modernity, U.S. Hispanics are among those groups which have the ability and, indeed, the responsibility to challenge the reigning interpretations of the present historical juncture. To do so, we seek to retrieve our historical experience, our memories of suffering, our intellectual history, and our spirituality as sacraments of a liberating God, a God whose symbol of victory is the cross. In that light, we can refuse to accept simplistic and, indeed, monstrous readings of history while contributing, from the richness of our own history, to the construction of a truly "beautiful" community, an aesthetic community of others.

One source from which U.S. Hispanics can draw both to critique the dominant ideological alternatives and to help construct new alternatives is our experience of "the mestizo community," the beautiful community, as the locus of popular religiosity and spirituality, the place where we encounter the crucified Christ, and, hence, the birthplace of our liberation. Community is the common root out of which emerge our aesthetics, our understanding of the beautiful, and our ethics, our understanding of the good and the just. For U.S. Hispanics, community is the place where our *mestizaje* (the historical mixture, or confluence, of races and cultures) is most immediately lived out. This is where we struggle every day to forge our identity, for it is where our most cherished values, the values of family, friendship, beauty, and celebration, are brought into direct confrontation with the seemingly contradictory values of the ambient culture. In order to engage effectively the challenge represented by what Virgilio Elizondo has called our "second *mestizaje*," our North American pilgrimage, U.S. Hispanic theologians seek to make explicit the epistemological foundations of

7. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 186.

our understanding of community as an ethical and aesthetic historical reality. Such an aesthetic-ethical community, thus understood, becomes in turn the locus of our spirituality and theology.⁸

Aesthetics and Community

Central to our culture is an aesthetic understanding of life and community. A strikingly common feature of the Latin American philosophies regnant in the first half of this century is their epistemological *a priori*s, or the epistemological paradigms informing these philosophies. Put simply, the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" is replaced, in these philosophies, by "We feel (or love), therefore we are." This, indeed, is one of the most consistent and fundamental differences between the post-Enlightenment European and Latin American philosophical traditions—at least prior to the emergence of theologies and philosophies of liberation. If one can hazard such a sweeping generalization, post-Enlightenment European philosophy has tended to accord epistemological priority to reason, while Latin American philosophy has accorded a similar priority to affect; the former has sought meaning, whereas the latter has sought beauty.⁹ These paradigms have themselves been challenged, however, by western postmodernists, on the one hand, and Latin American liberation theologians on the other.

8. For a discussion of "second *mestizaje*" see Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 9–16.

9. E.g., José Vasconcelos, *Estética*, in *Obras completas* (México, 1961) 3:1111–1711, *El monismo estético*, and *Filosofía estética*, in *Obras completas* 4:9–92, and 4:817–954 respectively. (It is sometimes forgotten that Vasconcelos' notions of *mestizaje* and *la raza cósmica* are, for him, not primarily socio-political categories but above all aesthetic categories); Alejandro Deústua, *Estética general* (Lima, 1923), *Estética aplicada, lo bello en el arte: la arquitectura* (Lima, 1932), *Lo bello en el arte: escultura, pintura, música* (Lima, 1935), and *La estética de José Vasconcelos* (Lima, 1939); José Pereira da Graça Aranha, *A estética da vida* (Rio de Janeiro, 1920); Antonio Caso, *La filosofía de la intuición* (México, 1914), *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* (México, 1919), and *Principios de estética* (México, 1925). This whole tradition is absent from modern and postmodern Western aesthetics. Consequently, contemporary European and North American philosophers remain blind to the fact that much of what is today considered novel and post-modern was, in fact, already being discussed at length in Latin American philosophical circles eighty years ago. For example, in his otherwise brilliant work *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* Terry Eagleton does not cite a single Latin American thinker.

While an extensive analysis of this epistemological difference is beyond the limited scope of this paper, it is possible to uncover the particular experience of community that is reflected in the aesthetic epistemological paradigm of key Latin American philosophers, while proposing how a critical retrieval of a Latino aesthetic, in the light of the more recent insights of Latin American liberation theology, might inform U.S. Hispanic spirituality and theology, as well as the larger society.

Perhaps the most significant influence of Latin American liberation theology on U.S. Hispanic theology has been the praxis-based epistemology which underpins both. It is the most important debt we owe to our Latin American colleagues, one which we are attempting to repay through the very process of developing a theological reflection grounded in the praxis of our U.S. Hispanic communities. Yet the epistemology that underlies Latin American theologies and philosophies of liberation is itself—at least implicitly—both a development beyond and a critique of the aesthetic epistemologies so prominent in Latin American philosophy in the first half of this century and themselves representing, in turn, an important critique of European rationalist epistemologies grounded in the Cartesian *ego cogito*. The increasing appreciation of the role of ideology in perpetuating social injustice has been accompanied, in the writings of liberation theologians, by a radical critique of theologies and philosophies that are not grounded in the ethical-political struggle against that injustice. Understandably, a casualty of this epistemological shift has been the rejection of both (European) rationalist and (Latin American) aesthetic foundations for theology, since, as ahistorical, both appear to prescind prematurely from that struggle. The aesthetic critique of rationalism itself did not go far enough insofar as it too seemed to presuppose an ahistorical experience of otherness that obscured concrete, sociohistorical conflict, thereby making possible the degeneration of aesthetics into but another bourgeois ideology incapable of supporting sociohistorical liberation struggles.

While the Latin American turn to ethical-political praxis and away from aesthetics has represented a crucial stage in the development of Latin American philosophy, I will suggest in this paper that the U.S. Hispanic context, U.S. Hispanics' experience of community, and the challenge represented by our "second *mestizaje*" call for the development of a third epistemological paradigm, one that is not identified

exclusively with either of the paradigms we have inherited from our Latin American intellectual forebears. In short, while the aesthetic paradigm of early twentieth-century Latin American philosophy represented an important stage in the development of a properly Latin American epistemology, and the ethical-political paradigm of the liberation theology and philosophy of the second half of this century represents an important second stage in that development, the next century will demand from U.S. Hispanics another paradigm incorporating the advances of both the aesthetic and ethical-political, which are a part of our intellectual history, while responding to the challenges of our second *mestizaje*.

This paper first traces the outlines of a Latin American aesthetics of community by examining, in a necessarily cursory fashion, the work of the great Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos. It then indicates how liberation theology represents a key critique of that aesthetics, and suggests how U.S. Hispanics might understand our own experience of community, and the popular religiosity rooted in that experience, as a reflection and further development of these two traditions. Such an analysis of aesthetics, ethics, and community—and their interrelationship as revealed in the popular religiosity of an oppressed people—might contribute, in some small way, to our common attempts to answer the question currently being posed to and by postmodernists: What is the relationship between ethical-political action, on the one hand, and aesthetic experience, on the other?

José Vasconcelos and a Latin American Aesthetics of Community

In his *Monismo estético* (1918), José Vasconcelos issues a clarion call for a new philosophical paradigm in Latin America: "I believe that we are entering the era of the aesthetic philosophies, philosophies grounded no longer in pure reason, nor in practical reason, but in the mystery of aesthetic judgment. It is in the *special pathos of beauty* that I look for the unifying principle, capable of participating in the three forms of action, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic. . . ."10 The advantage of the aesthetic over both the rational and the ethical, argues Vasconcelos, is that the "aesthetic pathos" reflects the unitive, even if amorphous character of human experience itself, whereas reason and

10. Vasconcelos, *Obras completas*, 4:16.

ethics can achieve such a unity only through the imposition of an artificial framework, whether rational or ethical. In his *Filosofía estética*, for instance, Vasconcelos writes that "every rational operation begins by decomposing its object into its most simple elements, but since it cannot join together again the pieces thus created through analysis, one is forced to leap outside the real object decomposed by reason and replace it with the concept. . . ."11 Likewise, "all ethics implies the study of a norm imposed on that which in life is loose, ungovernable, chaotic, in order to transform it in accord with a redemptive end or aspiration."¹² The aesthetic pathos sublates reason and ethics, synthesizing these in a "return" to experience, an experience that is paradoxically both amorphous and holistic; it is holistic and unitive precisely because it is amorphous and, thus, indivisible in reality. Insofar as ethics presupposes discreet acts with particular redemptive ends, it presupposes a disintegration of human experience as an end in itself. Just as the ethical moment sublates the rational, so too does the aesthetic sublate the ethical:

Just as the objects observed by the mind confirm our ideational representations and their relationships, the same objects, submitted to ethical judgment, provide intuitions of usefulness or uselessness. . . . Consistent with their experiential criteria, ethical values possess a more concrete reality, richer in substance, than that of ideas . . . yet ethical values are themselves surpassed by an aesthetic moment and a moment of conformation when these values become abstract. Thus, the ancient Platonic-Socratic trilogy, Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, as identical, corresponds to a gradation that proceeds as follows: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, in ascending order.¹³

In his *Estética*, Vasconcelos argues that this tripartite ascension from the rational to the aesthetic, via ethics, represents "the yearning for communion with the divine nature."¹⁴ It likewise represents a return to concrete experience, which is always holistic, or unitive. If European and North American postmodernists find in aesthetic experience a mediation of difference and otherness, Vasconcelos empha-

11. *Ibid.*, 4:833-34.

12. *Ibid.*, 3:766.

13. *Ibid.*, 3:776.

14. *Ibid.*, 3:1137.

sizes the unitive character of that experience. He does acknowledge and insist that this unity is always a union of others. Yet Vasconcelos gives proportionately less attention to the ambiguous character of this unity in contrast to its synthetic character. The practical result is an ahistorical unity that mirrors the poststructuralist ahistorical otherness. It is thus no coincidence that, for all his talk of a Latin American *raza cósmica* (cosmic race), Vasconcelos remained a Hispanophile who saw Latin America as basically an extension and development of Spanish civilization.

It is in the context of his aesthetic epistemology, then, that one must read Vasconcelos' seminal work on *mestizaje*, *La raza cósmica* (1925). In this book he articulates systematically his understanding of community as the realization of an aesthetic of *mestizaje*. For Vasconcelos the reality of the mestizo community is understood and appreciated most immediately not through social, political, or even cultural categories, but through aesthetic categories. Indeed, the very words that he uses in his aesthetics to describe the aesthetic transcendence of reason and ethics, *un salto de espíritu* ("a leap of the spirit," or "a spiritual leap") he now uses to describe the transcendent character of the mestizo community, which represents a leap of the spirit beyond homogeneous communities.¹⁵

The mestizo community supersedes the exclusivist, homogeneous community precisely by virtue of the former's synthetic, that is, aesthetic character. The homogeneous community imposes uniformity either through direct, coercive force or rationally-derived social, political, and economic institutions; the mestizo community represents an aesthetic synthesis, wherein unity is achieved not through domination but through love, or empathy. The mestizo community thus transcends the subject-object dichotomy that underlies exclusivist communities and leads to domination. Defined by an empathic fusion of cultures and peoples, the mestizo community rejects the possibility of setting itself up *in opposition* to other communities, as subject to object, which it can then dominate. This fusion synthesizes the cultures and peoples into a whole, which nevertheless preserves the integrity of the particulars, just as the unitive, aesthetic experience reflects a fusion of subject and object.¹⁶ To realize its very essence, the mestizo

15. *Ibid.*, 2:908.

16. Along with others, Abraham Maslow defines the aesthetic experience as "an identification of the perceiver and the perceived, a fusion of what was two

community seeks an ever greater inclusivity while eschewing both totalitarian domination and atomistic self-sufficiency. According to Vasconcelos, only such an aesthetic experience of community safeguards genuine intersubjectivity, since only in an empathic fusion can the other be related to as an "other," that is as a subject to whom I am inescapably related, or "fused," rather than as merely the object of my knowledge or action. This empathic fusion is what Vasconcelos calls love, the very essence of community. Because this love is the fundamental, constitutive characteristic of the model, mestizo community, it is the very definition of community itself; Vasconcelos replaces the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* with *amamus, ergo sumus*.

Liberation theology: The Ethical-Political Praxis of Community

Latin American liberation theology represents not only a critique of individualist rationalism, a fact that is by now common knowledge, but also a critique of aesthetic communitarianism, a fact much less adverted to in the secondary literature.¹⁷ Though implicit in the theological method of liberation theologians, such a critique is made explicit, for instance, in Enrique Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation*:

Semiotic, poietic, or poetic beauty finds exposition in the system of the *proyecto* of liberation of the oppressed. . . . That is why its exposition is ugly according to the rules and canons of beauty currently in force; but it is an innovation of the formal coherence of signs and is therefore procreation of the beauty of a new order. The apparent ugliness of the countenance of the oppressed, the withered face of the farmer, the hardened hand of the laborer, the rough skin of the impoverished woman (who cannot buy cosmetics), is the point of departure of the esthetics of liberation. It is entreaty that reveals the popular beauty, the nondominating beauty, the liberator of future beauty. Estheticism is the dominating ideological imposition of the beauty admired by the cultures

into a new and larger whole—a super-ordinate unit." *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1962) 74; see also John H. Haddox, *Vasconcelos of Mexico: Philosopher and Prophet* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1967) 47.

17. Insofar as liberation theology diverges fundamentally from earlier Latin American philosophies of aesthetics, it also diverges from postmodern aestheticism.

of the center and of the oligarchical classes (imposed by the mass media). It is the ideology of beauty.¹⁸

While not explicitly about aesthetics, an analogous observation is made by Gustavo Gutiérrez in his book *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, where he discusses the post-Vatican II tendency among some First World Christians to replace abstract Cartesian rationalism with a "'celebration' of the human body in cultural expressions—for example, some modern dances and other bodily forms of expression that are used in eucharistic celebrations."¹⁹ Far from affirming aesthetic synthesis and otherness, the appreciation and celebration of beauty as an antidote to rationalism can function as a denial of historical conflict and suffering, thereby legitimating that very conflict and suffering: Gutiérrez suggests that the crucial question for the Christian is not "Is my body beautiful?" but rather "Is the body of the poor person beautiful?"²⁰

The 1992 riots in Los Angeles, for example, were the inevitable consequence of our society's radically different answers to these two questions. We spend billions of dollars each year on makeup, plastic surgery, health spas, health foods and clothes to assure ourselves that *our* bodies are beautiful, while we systematically ignore and desecrate the bodies of the poor. Los Angeles is the paradigm of the "beautiful" community constructed on the backs of the poor, who are in turn relegated to that paradigm of ugliness, the ghetto. South Central Los Angeles is Hollywood's alter ego. Indeed, it is no accident that the riots took place in the very shadow of Hollywood, the capital of North American aestheticism, and Beverly Hills, the home of our leading aesthetes, the beautiful people.

Liberation theologians thus contend that, by virtue of their ahistoricity, a fundamentally aesthetic epistemology and the attendant aesthetics of community overlook the concrete socio-historical, and hence ethical-political character of both beauty and community. That

18. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 124–25. The text quoted here also alludes to the importance of the ongoing feminist and womanist critiques of aestheticism, an analysis of which is, unfortunately, not possible in this short space.

19. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 102.

20. *Ibid.*, 102–03.

is, they overlook the fact that, like reason, beauty and community are always mediated by social, cultural, political, and economic structures and institutions—in short, by ethical-political praxis. Without attention to that mediation, an aesthetic philosophy remains hopelessly abstract. As Latin American liberation theologians have reminded us, beauty and community have a history.

An aesthetic epistemology that privileges either the unitive and synthetic, or the undifferentiated and indeterminate character of human experience must be grounded in the concrete historical experience of unjust suffering and the struggle against that suffering; both aesthetic synthesis and aesthetic otherness must be grounded in socio-historical otherness. In short, if it is to be liberative, aesthetics must be mediated by the preferential option for the poor. Insofar as the option for the poor mediates an aesthetics of community, the experience of unjust suffering prevents us from dehistoricizing, and hence romanticizing community as the realization of an aesthetic unity of others. An aesthetics of community divorced from ethical-political praxis thus functions as a realized eschatology, with similarly disastrous—in Bowie's words, "politically reactionary"—consequences. The real suffering of the poor, the marginalized, the women is ignored in the face of a dehistoricized community that, as such, will be either explicitly totalitarian by virtue of its homogeneity or implicitly totalitarian by virtue of its inability to take a stand and consequent silent complicity with the status quo. Genuine intersubjectivity is replaced by dysfunctional relationships—all in the name of preserving the beautiful community. And the end is not beauty but death.

An aesthetics of community must thus be born out of the history of suffering. "If one wants the supreme joy of beauty," writes Rubem Alves, "one must be prepared to cry. Sadness is not an intruder in beauty's domains. It is rather the air without which it dies."²¹ The pain is an everpresent reminder that the unitive, holistic character of the aesthetic experience reflects a union for which we were born, but which we do not yet possess: "Beauty is sad because beauty is longing. The soul returns to one's lost home. And the return to the "no longer" is always painful. . . . We want to return to beauty, because of the (sad) love story which it tells; because it is the place of

21. Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM, 1990) 114.

our truth: our lost home. . . .²² The Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev writes that "all the beauty in the world is either a remembrance of paradise or a prophecy of a transfigured world."²³

What is more, we are incapable of remembering paradise unless we are committed to a transfigured world. Only then can aesthetics be truly revolutionary and subversive. "Beauty has its own dialectics," continues Berdyaev, "and Dostoievski has something to say about it. He thought that beauty would save the world. But he also says: 'Beauty is not only a terrible but a mysterious thing. Here the devil struggles with God, and the battlefield is the human heart.' The devil wants to use beauty for his own end."²⁴ In his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton reminds us that the aesthetic is always ambivalent vis-a-vis history: "If it [i.e., the aesthetic] offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation between men and women at present divided from one another, it also blocks and mystifies the real political movement towards such historical community."²⁵

Any premature affirmation of the aesthetic character of community denies human suffering and, in so doing, denies the possibility of authentic, concrete otherness, or intersubjectivity, as constitutive of community. Latin American liberation theologians remind us that the preferential option for the poor makes possible and safeguards the very mestizo community which Vasconcelos wants to affirm. The option for the poor is what makes it possible for a community to obey John Caputo's imperative to "keep the conversation moving."²⁶

Liberation theologians remind us that, as Alves writes with such poignance, "beauty has its place in the human heart, which is the centre of the body. The body [especially that of the poor person] is the instrument which sings it."²⁷ When we countenance the destruction of human beings in their concrete, physical, socio-historical existence, we make authentic intersubjectivity impossible . . . thereby

22. Ibid.

23. Quoted in *ibid.*, 128.

24. Quoted in *ibid.*, 132.

25. Eagleton, 9; "It is unwise," warns Eagleton, "to assume that ambiguity, indeterminacy, undecidability are always subversive strikes against an arrogantly monological certitude; on the contrary, they are the stock-in-trade of many a juridical enquiry and official investigation" (*ibid.*, 379-80).

26. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 261.

27. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*, 132.

preventing the emergence of that aesthetic community which is always mediated by the body, especially, as Gutiérrez insists, by the body of the poor person. In short, any aesthetics that prescind from a solidarity with the concrete, physical, socio-historical poor can only be a demonic aesthetics. The memory of paradise embodied in the organic unity of the aesthetic community must be mediated by the memories of suffering embodied in the broken lives of the poor and outcast.

The Mestizo Community: Toward a Liberating Aesthetics

In their insistence on the methodological centrality of ethical-political praxis, liberation theologians counter the ahistorical tendencies not only of post-Enlightenment western rationalism but also of aestheticism. If Vasconcelos holds before us the mestizo community as the ideal and model of empathic fusion, liberation theologians insist that any such fusion has a concrete history, a history of violence and conquest. The mestizo community as an ideal remains rooted in the history of the mestizo community as a vanquished community. Otherness has a face . . . and it is not a pretty face. Dare we gaze upon it? Dare we kiss the parched skin? Orlando Espín has written of the ambiguous history of our mestizaje, which emerges out of centuries of political, cultural, racial, and economic exploitation:

Some Latino groups are the result of the rape of their ancestors by the conquering Spaniards, while others are the outcome of willing *mestizaje*. There are Hispanic communities that trace their roots to the violence of the *encomienda* and others to the violence of the African slave trade. Many were here when the United States either militarily conquered and illegally expropriated their land last century, or bought it without the people's consent to sell. Still others came to the country because they had become the losing victims of political and economic struggles in other lands. But in all cases, the Latino cultural communities are here as the result of vanquishment, of having become the losing victims of someone else's victory.²⁸

Furthermore, this experience of vanquishment divides our own Hispanic communities, which are hardly immune to the evils of sex-

28. Orlando Espín, "The God of the Vanquished: Foundations for a Latino Spirituality," *Listening* 27 (Winter 1992) 74.

ism, racism, and classism. Our ability to heal these internal divisions is undermined by an aesthetics of community that, neglecting the history of *mestizaje*, idealizes the experience of *mestizaje*: for example, we cannot ignore the fact that the experience of *mestizaje* has been very different for Hispanic women than it has for Hispanic men. Likewise, the history of *mestizaje*, as a history of vanquishment, prevents us from neglecting the close links between cultural and ethnic violence on the one hand and political and economic violence on the other.

If an aesthetics of community can lead to a premature, and therefore ahistorical resolution of sociohistorical divisions, such an aesthetics remains, nevertheless, a necessary component of a U.S. Hispanic spirituality and theology. Emphasizing the synthetic and indeterminate character of human experience, an aesthetic epistemology prevents the instrumentalization of ethical-political praxis. That is, the aesthetic appreciation and celebration of the mestizo community as an end in itself—as, for example, celebration or “play”—prevents us from viewing community as primarily or exclusively an instrument of social change; aesthetics prevents ethical-political praxis from being judged exclusively by what Vasconcelos calls its “usefulness or uselessness.”²⁹ In turn, to judge praxis exclusively in terms of usefulness or uselessness would be to reify the “distinction between actor and act, agent and ‘effect’ ” thereby instrumentalizing human praxis and community.³⁰

The end of liberating praxis is the creation of a society in which all human persons will be treated as ends in themselves, i.e., a society in which human persons are no longer treated as means to some external end, whether that be economic productivity or social change. Vasconcelos reminds us that community is never an object to be

29. See n. 9. As I have explained elsewhere, an aesthetics of community would not “deny the productive and transformative dimension of the arts, e.g., poetry, drama, dance, worship, music, but would ground that dimension in the intrinsic end of artistic performance.” “Theology as Intellectually Vital Inquiry,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 46 (1991) 64.

30. Dana R. Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action,” *Political Theory* 20 (May 1992) 276. In this article, Villa argues that the performance model of praxis developed by Nietzsche and Arendt in their critiques of the Platonic instrumentalization of action “enables them to conceive action as self-contained, as immanently valuable in its greatness or beauty” (ibid.).

molded, fashioned, and transformed, however desirable the end product; rather, community is fundamentally an aesthetic *performance*, an intersubjectivity to be lived and celebrated.³¹ In other words, community is a byproduct of genuine love, where empathic fusion does not erase but preserves concrete human otherness. This is the ideal of the mestizo community, a new community that emerges out of the confluence of races and cultures but where the historical particularity of those races and cultures is respected and affirmed.

Though U.S. Hispanics are rediscovering the power of that ideal as a liberating force in the lives of our communities, we also remember that the aesthetic, mestizo community which Vasconcelos described does not yet exist. The victims of history, including those within our own communities, bear witness to this disquieting fact. Indeed, it is in the interest of the dominant culture to idealize the United States and, more specifically, U.S. Hispanics as a model, mestizo community, for such idealization effectively severs the causal link between the history of conquest and the history of *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje* can become a cultural ideal to be pursued without socioeconomic consequences.

As evidence of our desire to create a “mestizo community,” we might then be tempted to extol the virtues of Mexican-American fiestas, African-American music, and Native American rituals without exhibiting the slightest concern about life in the barrios, ghettos, and reservations throughout this country. Those beautiful cultural expressions become unhinged from the histories of suffering and conquest in which they were born. Uprooted from their integral and historical link to the oppressed communities’ struggle for liberation, i.e., ethical-political praxis, those aesthetic expressions become mere commodities to be consumed in the search for multiculturalism—i.e., the postmodern self-as-montage.³² Our solidarity with the poor would then no longer de-

31. Hannah Arendt defines freedom precisely in terms of such an aesthetic performance (as opposed to the “making” of an aesthetic object, in the process of which human action is instrumentalized). She contends that the meaning of freedom “as inherent in action . . . is best rendered by ‘virtuosity,’ that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in the end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it” (quoted in *ibid.*, 279).

32. Walter Benjamin has argued that the instrumentalization of art in moder-

mand a commitment to economic justice but merely an "openness to multicultural perspectives." We can throw on our *serapes* and rest content in our "option for the poor." In a world where poverty seems more intractable than ever, multiculturalism offers a seductive and all-too-easy alternative to the option for the poor.³³

Likewise, in the midst of a "second *mestizaje*," we U.S. Hispanics are appropriately concerned about affirming and preserving our community and family values in the face of an individualistic society. Yet these efforts will be fruitless unless we can examine how, in the North American context, so-called family values, or the values of "community," have legitimated the privatization of religion and morality, thereby serving to rationalize the very individualistic economic system which we find so alienating.³⁴ Just as aesthetics and community mean different things to conqueror and victim, so too does the notion of family values. The family values of Rigoberta Menchú, who witnessed the cold-blooded murder of so many of her relatives, are not the family values of Dan Quayle. Our family values are not their family values; our unity is not their unity, nor is our otherness their otherness. And what separates them is precisely history itself.

The struggle by Latinos and Latinas to create a mestizo community thus demands that we integrate these two important currents of our intellectual history: aesthetics and liberating ethical-political praxis. Yet that integration must not be understood as a "balancing" or "tension" between the two; the process of "balancing" is always a con-

nity, through techniques of mechanical reproduction, results precisely in this severing of the intrinsic relationship between a work of art and its socio-historical context, in which the now-objectified "work" of art had initially been a performance, or ritual; "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1955) 217-51.

33. On the dangers of a dehistoricized multiculturalism that remains blind to the political and economic dimensions of culture, see Daniel Lazare, "The Cult of Multiculturalism," *The Village Voice*, May 7, 1991, 29-31.

34. As Russell Berman argues, "family values" play an important role in the alliance between apolitical, postmodern aestheticism and late capitalist consumerism: "The atomistic individual [of modernity], denied any inherited mechanism of self-identification, finds a helping hand in the world of commerce which proceeds to organize private lives in aesthetic terms: the life-style as the new colonial dumping ground for industrial overproduction. The atomized life that has been denied an authentic social context (family, community) becomes the object of commodified aestheticization." Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory*, 88.

ceptual process, since what are balanced are always two concepts or ideas. Rather, aesthetics must be grounded in the ethical-political praxis of liberation, or the preferential option for the poor. From the perspective of the victims of history, aesthetics is forced to shed its political innocence, and otherness takes on flesh and blood. Yet, as the mediator of an aesthetics of community, the struggle for liberation remains open to transcendence, to indeterminacy, and attentive to the intrinsic value of human praxis as an end in itself, irreducible to any single historical project.

U.S. Hispanic Spirituality

The popular religiosity of U.S. Hispanics reveals a spirituality that unites ethical-political praxis and aesthetics insofar as it celebrates life—specifically the communal life—but does so in the very midst of the daily confrontation with the purveyors of death. That spirituality, centered largely though certainly not exclusively on the symbols of the cross and Mary, has functioned as a source of self-empowerment precisely inasmuch as it has presumed an intrinsic and necessary connection between the aesthetic celebration of life and the struggle for liberation. One might even go so far as to say that in that connection lies our very identity, an identity expressed in our popular religiosity.³⁵ Given the urgency of the liberation struggle, and given the seeming incapacity of aesthetic models to address social problems, the aesthetic dimension of popular religious expressions and devotions has not always been given adequate attention by liberation theologians in Latin America, with the result that, at times, popular religiosity has been either instrumentalized in the service of political liberation or simply ignored outright. This lacuna has been corrected in recent years.³⁶

35. As Robert Schreier observes, "celebrations frequently serve to reaffirm identity both in terms of who belongs to the group and in terms of how the world is to be perceived." *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 62. In the specific case of U.S. Hispanic popular religiosity, Orlando Espín and Sixto García argue that "it [i.e., popular religiosity] is probably the least 'Angloed' area of any of the Hispanic-American cultures, the least 'invaded' and thus the more deeply 'ours'." "Hispanic-American Theology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 42 (1987) 114-15.

36. It must be noted that a number of Latin American liberation theologians have recognized the importance of popular religiosity, e.g., Segundo Galilea and

In dialogue with our Latin American colleagues, U.S. Hispanic theologians have contributed to this process of correction. Our experience of community as a celebrative "aesthetic praxis" rooted in a liberating ethical-political praxis is, for U.S. Hispanics, a principal locus for a spirituality centered on the symbols of the cross and Mary.

As the central symbol of our history of suffering, through which we are identified with the crucified Jesus, the cross is neither a way station nor a counterbalance to the resurrection, the central symbol of that empathic fusion which overcomes all division and alienation. Rather, the cross is the place where we experience the resurrection . . . in the midst of our refusal to accept the cross as God's final word. In the midst of vanquishment, conquest, and abandonment, we too continue to struggle for liberation, hoping against hope and crying out "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" "The language of the cross," observes Gutiérrez, ". . . is a synthesis of the prophetic [i.e., ethical-political praxis] and the contemplative [i.e., the aesthetic unity of others and Other] and the only appropriate way of talking about the God of Jesus Christ."³⁷

The two great symbols "that appear to be central and organizing symbols in Hispanic popular Catholicism," are the crucified Christ and Mary—and these are inextricably related in our spirituality.³⁸ As Espín and García point out:

It would be difficult to find a Catholic Church in Latin America, or even in a U.S. Hispanic barrio, without an image of the suffering Christ. The craftsmen and artificers spare no sensibilities in

Juan Carlos Scannone. Others, such as Raúl Vidales and Hugo Assmann, however, have seen it as intrinsically ahistorical. Arthur McGovern notes that "in recent years, . . . many liberation theologians have come to value popular religion more highly and to recognize its positive features. . . . Consequently many recent studies have looked for the positive, potentially liberating aspects of popular religion." *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) 90-91. Robert Schreiter makes a similar observation: "In a second period of its [i.e., liberation theology's] development, it became evident that the exclusion of folk religion (religiosidad popular) from consideration in the building up of liberation theology was a mistake." *Constructing Local Theologies*, 43.

37. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 100.

38. Orlando Espín, "Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the *Sensus Fidelium*," *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992) 70.

conveying, in wood and paint, the agony and suffering of their blood-covered Christs. . . . Hispanic popular participation in the Paschal triduum traditionally emphasizes the celebration of Good Friday. . . . The Paschal Vigil and Easter celebration, in some instances, are quite anticlimatic to the celebration of Good Friday.³⁹

The authors explain that the symbols and popular religious devotions surrounding Jesus' passion "represent the co-suffering of Jesus the Christ with the poor, the hungry and the oppressed of the celebrating Hispanic communities."⁴⁰ When read through the lenses of modernity, these practices may be dismissed as morbid and "unhealthy" glorifications of suffering. When read through the lenses of postmodernity, they may be idealized as aesthetic representations of otherness. Both interpretations, however, would be *misinterpretations* precisely because both would abstract the U.S. Hispanic spirituality of the cross from its historical context, wherein the people's persistent cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" echoes Jesus' cry on the cross and, in so doing, represents the oppressed community's refusal to accept death as the final word. As surely as Jesus' cry, with its implicit refusal to stop believing in "my God, my God," revealed the utter powerlessness of the principalities and powers in their attempt to crush him, so too does our people's cry on the cross reveal the impotence of the dominant society in its attempt to effect an "aesthetic" unity through coercion and co-optation—or to relativize our suffering by turning it into a disembodied example of "otherness" that can make no ethical-political claims vis-à-vis concrete others. "I AM A PERSON"—no statement is more revolutionary or liberating than this. It was implicit in Jesus' cry on the cross, and is at the very heart of our community's identification with the crucified Jesus.

The crucified Christ of Latino popular religiosity is a symbol whose aesthetic, evocative power is derived not only from its value as a work of art but from its semiotic history within that community and its religious performances. It is this history that lends the symbol its transformative power: "Though many of these images or paintings [of the crucified Christ] may have true artistic value in themselves, the

39. Espín and García, "Hispanic-American Theology," 85.

40. Espín and García, "Sources of Hispanic Theology" (unpublished paper delivered at the Catholic Theological Society of America convention, Toronto, 1988) 10.

religious value is usually conveyed not by beauty itself but by the work's ability to elicit feelings of solidarity and compassion."⁴¹ This solidarity and compassion becomes, in turn, the basis of the community's identity and, thus, of its ability to withstand and resist the imposition of identity from without—the very concern of postmodernists. What makes such solidarity and compassion possible is the community's own experience of crucifixion: "His [i.e., the crucified Christ's] passion and death express his solidarity with all men and women throughout history who have also innocently suffered at the hands of evildoers."⁴² Only when viewed within the context of his own history does the cross of Jesus attain ethical-political significance as a symbol of empowerment and liberation; only when viewed within the context of our history as a community does the crucified Jesus attain ethical-political significance as a symbol of hope.

It is not the vivid depiction of Jesus' suffering that induces passivity and resignation. Precisely the opposite is the case: what induces passivity and resignation is the premature dehistoricization of the cross, whereby it is divorced from its own history. I would suggest that the sense of hope and empowerment is much more palpable, for example, in most barrio churches, with their bleeding, contorted images of the Crucified, than in most Anglo, suburban churches with their ostensibly more "hopeful," more "liberating," and more "aesthetically pleasing" images of the resurrected Christ, with arms gloriously outstretched, superimposed on an all-but-invisible cross.

And thus, the second major symbol in U.S. Hispanic popular religiosity is a symbol of hope in the midst of death, the symbol of Mary: "People celebrate the passion events with processions, where parish or community leaders bear the bleeding image of the suffering Christ, followed by the icon or statue of *la Madre Dolorosa* (The Sorrowful Mother)."⁴³ In the community's religious rituals these images are mutually implicit, for Mary is the mother of the crucified Jesus—and, therefore, the mother of her crucified children.

This is nowhere more evident than in the symbol of and devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. In Mary's identification with the poor

indigenous man, Juan Diego, and in the historical coincidence of the apparition with the emergence of the Mexican people, Guadalupe is the Mexican people, the mestizo community that is literally resurrected in the midst of the conquest. Virgilio Elizondo notes this historical relationship:

I do not know of any other event in the history of Christianity that stands at the very source of the birth of a people like the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe. . . . Guadalupe is not just an apparition, but a major intervention of God's liberating power in history. It is an Exodus and Resurrection event of an enslaved and dying people. . . . Guadalupe is truly an epiphany of God's love at the precise moment when abandonment by God had been experienced by the people at large. . . . It is in this climate of the stench and the cries of death that the new and unsuspected beginning would take place. Like the resurrection itself, it came at the moment when everything appeared to be finished. . . . The natives who previously had wanted only to die now wanted to live; dances, songs, pilgrimages, and festivities resumed!⁴⁴

Guadalupe represents the birth of the aesthetic, the beautiful, out of and within the history of suffering, out of and within the concrete history of otherness. In the midst of our crucifixion, Guadalupe has affirmed our identity as a people: "Her presence is not a pacifier but an energizer which gives meaning, dignity and hope to the margined and suffering of today's society. Her presence is the new power of the powerless to triumph over the violence of the powerful."⁴⁵ Thus, she affirms the liberating power of the cross as the place where the mestizo community is given birth: "Races and nations had been opposed to each other, but as the mother of all the inhabitants of these lands, she would provide the basis for a new unity."⁴⁶

The ethical-political, liberative power of popular religiosity thus derives from the very fact that, when arising within a history of oppression, the popular religious affirmation of the life of the suffering community as valuable *in and of itself*, i.e., as beautiful, is implicitly

41. Espín, "Tradition and Popular Religion," 70.

42. *Ibid.*, 71.

43. Espín and García, "Hispanic-American Theology," 85; see also Espín, "Tradition and Popular Religion," 70-71.

44. Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone, 1988) 59-64.

45. Virgilio Elizondo, *La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas* (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1980) 120.

46. *Ibid.*, 64.

and necessarily already an ethical-political act. In the context of conquest and vanquishment, the victim's affirmation of his or her own personhood (i.e., the beauty of the poor person's body) and, therefore, of his or her own life as *intrinsically* valuable is the most basic and most radical of political acts—the single political act without which all political strategies for change are doomed to fail.

In U.S. Hispanic popular spirituality, the mestizo community, aesthetic unity, and the resurrection of a new, mestizo people (Vasconcelos' *la raza cósmica*), are mediated by a history of conquest, the crucifixion of a people, and the struggle for survival in the face of crucifixion. For us the only genuine beauty, the authentic mestizo community, is that born from suffering; more precisely, that born from the faith, hope, and love which endure in the midst of suffering. The epistemological privilege of the victims pertains not only to ethics, politics, and theology but also to aesthetics, not only to our definition of the good and the true but also to our definition of the beautiful. If our philosophical and theological anthropologies can no longer remain deaf to the voices of the non-persons, our aesthetics can no longer remain blind to the countenances of the non-"beautiful." Only they, the "ugly," have the right to define beauty. Only the victims have the right to define the ideal, aesthetic, or mestizo community. Only they can tell us when and where authentic community, the mestizo community, exists. Thus, the aesthetic, mestizo community will be born on the cross, in the ethical-political praxis of liberation, or it will not be born at all.