

**CAGED AND LIBERATED IN THE HISTORICAL
STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM ACROSS
AND BEYOND BORDERS**

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Buenos Dias! Esta mañana les ofrezco una ofrenda: fragmentos de mi pueblo, un pueblo desplazado forzosamente por todo el continente. Good morning! Today I bring you an offering: fragments of my people, a people forcibly displaced across the continent. I open with a poem by a young Honduran Jesuit, Antonio Aguilera, S.J., titled “Día 8,” the 8th day:¹

Se nos han unido más
y somos miles.

More have joined us
and we are thousands.

Dolor centroamericano,
dolor haitiano y de otros más.
Andar de hondos pisoteos
que surcan la carretera,
a pesar del calor infernal
y del frío que orada los labios.

Central American pain,
Haitian pain and of many others.
A journey of deep trampling
that furrows the road,
despite the infernal heat
and the cold that pierces the lips.

CNN muestra imágenes al mundo
de nuestros rostros desencajados,
como si fuéramos espectáculo de circo.

CNN shows images to the world
of our disjointed faces,
as if we were a circus spectacle.

Y detrás de la TV,
desde la quietud de un hogar que no huye,
surgen
una tiritante compassion
y una degradante aporofobia.

And behind the TV,
from the stillness of a home that does not flee,
arises
a trembling compassion
and a degrading aporophobia.

¹ See his collection of poetry titled, *Se Van*, winner of the Juegos Florales Hispanoamericanos de Quetzaltenango in 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16a1yVqzp57EC1anmofG4TX2E7zq5dmgk/view?fbclid=IwAR3w3v2jKgKc5pY5WconSb9bGaHbQ14qCekQ2n-teV8JaA6QbEYqrKGd0Cg>.

PART I: CAGED

Caught in a world of concentric circles of militarized and digitized borders, the displaced poor of Latin America and the Caribbean, and all who cross the continent without authorization are caged in geographies of inhumanity. The United States pays Latin American governments to keep people from leaving their own countries, essentially purchasing humans' capacity for freedom. The US border has been externalized beyond US territory, continuing a long history of incursions into Latin America and the ongoing plundering of a people's time, space, and creative attempts to live beyond what modernity has bestowed upon so many of them: poverty and social insignificance.

In my home country of El Salvador, the first border patrol was inaugurated in 2019 with US money.² There are now over 800 military and police officers stationed at over 154 "blind spots"—rural crossing points at the perimeter of the country, especially where so called "caravans" of migrants gather to journey north. Salvadorans attempting to leave the country are now criminalized for helping each other out on digital platforms. José Eusebio Asegurado, a farmer, Juan Rufino Ramírez, a security guard, and Fátima Pérez, who ran a pupusa stand out of her home, were all charged in 2021 by the Salvadoran government for promoting trafficking after their mutual aid WhatsApp group was infiltrated by an undercover police agent.³ Their goal was to make it out of El Salvador to join a caravan in Honduras, but they never made it out of the country. According to the government prosecutors, the victim of the crime was "humanity," technically, it was a crime against their own humanity for attempting to migrate.⁴ To migrate is now to traffic oneself.

Farther north in Tapachula where Mexico and Guatemala meet, we encounter Latin America's largest migrant detention center, appropriately named "the twenty-first century." This facility cages persons on the move from across the world as part of what is widely termed "*una política de desgaste*"—"a politics of wearing down."⁵ The whole city of Tapachula is referred to as "ciudad carcel," "prison city," because it

² Nelson Rauda Zablah y John Washington, "El Salvador lanza su patrulla fronteriza y se une a ola de complacencia regional a Trump," *El Faro*, September 2019, https://www.elfaro.net/es/201909/el_salvador/23649/El-Salvador-lanza-su-patrulla-fronteriza-y-se-une-a-ola-de-comp-lacencia-regional-a-Trump.htm.

³ Gabriela Cáceres y Roman Gressier, "Sting Operation against Migrant Caravan Arrests Working-Class Migrants as Human Traffickers," *El Faro*, May 14, 2021, https://elfaro.net/en/202105/el_salvador/25479/Sting-Operation-against-Migrant-Caravan-Arrests-Working-Cla-ss-Migrants-as-Human-Traffickers.html.

⁴ The UN office on Drugs and Crime defines human trafficking as a crime against humanity, see "Human Trafficking," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, <https://www.unodc.org/nigeria/en/human-trafficking.html>. See also, Cindy Wooden, "Human trafficking is 'crime against humanity,' pope says," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/francis-comic-strip/francis-chronicles/human-trafficking-crim-e-against-hu-manity-pope-says>.

⁵ Stephanie Brewer, Lesly Tejada, and Maureen Meyer, "Struggling to Survive: the Situation of Asylum Seekers in Tapachula, Mexico," *WOLA Research Report*, June 2022, 25, <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FINAL-Struggling-to-Survive-Asylum-See-kers-in-Tapachula.pdf>.

serves as a containment area in Mexico's poorest state of Chiapas where migrants without work, housing, or food, are corralled. Throughout Mexico's borders there are close to 30,000 military officers who are deployed for migration enforcement, using their lethal training for war to intercept and stop the northward movement of people.⁶

Despite these containment measures, throughout 2021 and 2022 large groups of migrants have made a way out from Tapachula, using the "caravan" approach to bring exposure to their plight with the hope that by having the gaze of the world upon them, they may be spared some of the repressive violence.⁷ As the opening poem says:

*Se nos han unido más
y somos miles.*

*Dolor centroamericano,
dolor haitiano y de otros más. ...*

*CNN muestra imágenes al mundo
de nuestros rostros desencajados,
como si fuéramos espectáculo de circo.*

It is exposure that simultaneously protects and targets. It is the forced performance of life and death on the global stage.

This spectacle of the twenty-first century was again on global news on March 27 as persons who had made it past Tapachula and into northern Mexico burned alive in the cages of the state. They were there because the people of Ciudad Juárez were fed up with their presence on the city streets and at the border crossings, and because US policies would not allow them to cross the border to ask for asylum.⁸ This was not the first such fire, for in the past four years there have been at least twelve fires in the network of fifty-seven detention centers throughout Mexico. A Mexican newspaper asked: "What makes them risk their lives by setting fire in an enclosed space, between bars, chains and padlocks, without basic civil protection and emergency response measures?"⁹ Anyone who has made the harrowing journey of forced migration knows all too well the human cost, even unto death, of struggling for the freedom of a dignified life.

Steel bars, chains, and padlocks are the visible manifestation of a deeper infrastructure the United States has built across Latin America as state power merges with digital power. Digital infrastructure amplifies the impact of material borders, detention centers, and of the military officers who simply carry out orders. A family

⁶ Brewer, Tejada, and Meyer, "Struggling to Survive," 8.

⁷ José Miguel Vivanco, "Mexican Soldiers and Immigration Agents Violently Detain Asylum Seekers," *Human Rights Watch*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/08/mexican-soldiers-and-immigration-agents-violently-detain-asylum-seekers>.

⁸ The Associated Press, "Mexico investigates 8 workers and officials over the fatal fire at a migrant facility," *NPR*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/30/1166998571/migrant-center-fire-mexico-ciudad-juarez-investigation>.

⁹ Daniel Blancas Madrigal, "Al menos una docena de incendios en estaciones migratorias, de 2019 a la fecha," *Cronica*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.cronica.com.mx/nacional/docena-incendios-estaciones-migratorias.html>.

who makes the journey through South America and then through the Darien Gap in Panama will have their biometric data taken by US funded Panamanian border patrol. The scans of their faces, retinas, fingers, and other pertinent information will then become part of BITMAP, the Biometric Identification Transnational Migration Alert Program, which in conjunction with eighteen other countries lets the Department of Homeland Security track their movement as they make their way north, and when desired, DHS and its collaborators across the continent can intercept and detain them before they reach the US border.¹⁰ Homeland Security is now developing a new centralized database for all of its domestic and global biometric data with the help of Amazon and Veritas Capital,¹¹ the latter of which also owns Blackboard, the educational software that many of us use in our educational institutions.

The merging of vast amounts of biographical and biometric data across the continent gives to the United States and its corporate partners unprecedented control over human mobility. This is a new era of digital colonialism,¹² made possible in part through the surveillance capitalism that Shoshana Zuboff has aptly interrogated, and of which Paul Lakeland spoke in his 2019 CTSA presidential address.¹³ The harvesting and appropriation of biometric data is a weapon of war, refined by the United States in Afghanistan over two decades.¹⁴ Now, the displaced poor are used as a profitable target practice across the American continent.

The degrading *aporophobia*, the contempt for the poor mentioned by the opening poem, is a global war on the poor, and their deaths, disappearances, and incarceration is legalized warfare. But the life of the poor is fundamentally against war,¹⁵ because in their struggle to *sobre-vivir*, to over-live the death trap of dominant modernity's geopolitics, we glimpse the mystery of a humanity liberated from the chains that the fear of death imposes. Their story of struggle is also a story of joy, and in their *lucha* we glimpse a way of dwelling in this world oriented toward a freedom that violence and

¹⁰ Mizue Aizeki, Laura Bingham, Santiago Narváez, "The Everywhere Border: Digital Migration Control Infrastructure in the Americas," *Transnational Institute*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-everywhere-border>. See also BITMAP Authorization Act, H.R. 2045, 117th Congress (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2045>.

¹¹ PR Newswire, "Anthology Completes Merger with Blackboard, Launches Next Chapter in EdTech," Veritas Capital, October 25, 2021, <https://www.veritascapital.com/news-info/anthology-completes-merger-with-blackboard-launches-next-chapter-in-edtech>.

¹² Michael Kwet, "Digital colonialism: US empire and the new imperialism in the Global South," *Race & Class* 60, no. 4 (2019): 2-26. Kwet describes digital colonialism as "the use of digital technology for political, economic and social domination of another nation or territory."

¹³ Michael Kwet, "Digital Colonialism: The evolution of US Empire," *Transnational Institute*, March 4, 2021, <https://longreads.tni.org/digital-colonialism-the-evolution-of-us-empire>. For Lakeland's text, see Paul Lakeland, "Crisis and Engagement: The Role of the Servant Theologian," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 74 (2019): 71-81.

¹⁴ Ken Klippenstein and Sara Sirota, "The Taliban have seized U.S. Military biometrics devices," *The Intercept*, August 17, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/08/17/afghanistan-taliban-military-biometrics/>.

¹⁵ Nelson Maldonado Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

death cannot conquer. To that incarnate orientation toward the joy of freedom, and the sacramental horizon that grounds it, I now turn.

PART II: LIBERATED

Roseli, as she has asked to be called, was incarcerated in the Coastal Bend Detention Center in Robstown, Texas from late November of 2019 until late February of 2020 and was then expelled back to Mexico.¹⁶ “Nos daban solo una o dos horas afuera en la semana,”—“we were given one to two hours outside a week,” she tells me, during which time she would walk to the edge of the private for-profit prison to visit wild greenery with small flowers that were growing at the periphery of her detained world. “Yo las recogía y las ofrecía, poniéndolas en la tela de alambre, pidiéndole a Dios que cruzara”—“I would gather and offer them, placing them on the chain-link fence, asking God to cross.” “Y cuando regresaba la semana siguiente, y veía que todavía estaban verdes, sabía que iba a salir y cruzar”—“And when I would return the following week, and they were still green, I knew that I would get out and cross.” Hildegard of Bingen’s theological notion of *viriditas*—greenness—which the late theologian William Harmless described as “an inner life force” that is in all creation and is manifest particularly through plants,¹⁷ is an apt analogue for Roseli’s sacramental encounter with the inner life force—the Spirit and spirits—pulsating in the untamed weeds of a detention center. Greenery that revealed and made *presente* the God of her people who along with the spirits of her ancestors journeyed north with her.

Roseli is a woman in her late 40s from an indigenous Mixteco speaking community in the mountains of Guerrero, Mexico and is a third-generation healer, a holy gift passed down by her father and before that by her grandfather. In a region where poverty and tradition forces families to sell girls into marriage “como si fueran animales” “as though they were animals,” she exclaims, she was married at fifteen to a man who whenever she left the house would say, “you’re not a man, why do you leave the house?” and who would then proceed to physically enforce the violent borders of *machismo* that structured their world.¹⁸ Desperate, she turned to the saints, the spirits of her *antepasados*—her ancestors—and said to them, “Ayúdame a donde yo voy”—“Help me where I am going.” With their strength, one day she told her husband, “Yo no quiero sufrir mas contigo,”—“I don’t want to suffer any more with you,”—and left north with a coyote who initially laughed at her for wanting to leave, and live, otherwise.

One by one she had already sent her sons north to New York, because “a veces solo tenemos tortilla con sal”—“sometimes we only had tortilla with salt.” With

¹⁶ I have carried out research with Roseli for two years under Fordham University IRB Protocol #1798. The research focuses on the ways that migrant communities in New York City find a sense of health and healing amidst the various layers of personal, communal, ecclesial, and structural violence that harms their daily life. Most of the conversation used for this presentation was carried out in person on April 23, 2023 in my apartment in New York City.

¹⁷ William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74.

¹⁸ Mexico News Daily Staff, “In Metlatónoc, Guerrero, girls sold into marriage for as little as 40,000 pesos,” *Mexico Daily News*, May 11, 2021, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/girls-sold-into-marriage-for-as-little-as-40000-pesos/>.

sorrow she shares that when they would run out of firewood and had nothing else to burn, she would take pages from her children's books to burn for the *comal*, the griddle. She looks at me, perhaps aware of the books that surround us in my apartment, and in tears says, "I'm sorry, because that's not good." "Me duele"—"It pains me." Through her tears in the telling of this detail, I finally come to understand why she loves to hold books with wonder-filled reverence, in awe of the knowledge they contain, even if she cannot read them. Two years earlier she had already told me, "Yo sé de las montañas, tú de libro, yo quiero saber como tú sabes, y yo te enseño"—"I have knowledge from the mountains, you of books, I want to know as you know, and I will teach you." Unbeknownst to me, we were already partaking of a tender and sacramental ritual of healing our mutual woundedness across the inner landscape of memory, and the geographies of social suffering that mark our displaced communities.¹⁹

New York City and Los Angeles comprise the two primary communities of Mixtec people outside of Mexico, and Roseli's knowledge of the "anthropology of experience," to use Arthur Kleinman's fitting phrase,²⁰ is widely sought out by the Mixtec community. When she's not selling bouquets of roses, carnations, or *tamales de raja* in our neighborhood, she is "sacando el mal"—"drawing out evil"—that lodges itself in the bodies of her people, an evil that as the late Paul Farmer would say, is also legible as a chronic somatization of socio-political pressures in wider ecologies and anthropologies of suffering.²¹

What began a few years ago as my research into healing practices among immigrant communities in New York City has become an apprenticeship unto my own liberation through Roseli's ways of knowing freedom before God. When I find myself in an apartment in Queens discerning with her who could have sent evil to a child who has developed spine curvature, or in an apartment in the Bronx with a man whom doctors have diagnosed with a mental disorder, but who also knows that his illness is bound up with other persons, and that without addressing the communal conflict that is its source the illness will only get worse, I become aware of my own theological captivity in monolingual grammars of the divine. The invitation to come to know the freedom of God beyond and across the borders of the profoundly Euro-American Catholicism I have professionally learned comes to me through communities whose knowledge *de las montañas*—of the mountains—does not have a home in the dominant churches or academies of the United States. Instead, we gather in forests, in cemeteries, in overcrowded apartments, where the faithful presence of God is received and rituals for giving thanks are offered.

As Roseli invokes the communion of saints in Mixteco, a litany of tattered references to early church figures, remnants of an imposed colonial Christianity that has been mystically subverted with God's blessing, together we light the *copal* incense and arrange the flowers, we pour libations of *aguardiente* and light cigarettes, we crack

¹⁹ See Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997).

²⁰ Arthur Kleinman, "Everything That Really Matters": Social Suffering, Subjectivity, and the Remaking of Human Experience in a Disordering World," *Harvard Theological Review* 90, no. 3 (1997): 315-35.

²¹ Paul Farmer, *Partner to the Poor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 52.

eggs, and we give thanks for the presence of our ancestors who descend upon the personal, communal, intergenerational, and transnational wounds of our displaced peoples in need of healing. Also, I am taken back to my mother's story of how as a baby in our mountain village in Chalatenango, El Salvador, my life too was saved through the healing knowledge of my poor community, who with wild greenery had for generations learned to liberate themselves from the grasp of death that tries to take one before one's time.

Like millions who have defied the containment measures I described at the beginning and who have entered into the United States without authorization, Roseli lives without legal protections and is a target of the state. Daily she must struggle against these and other forces that attempt to shackle her mind and spirit. However, the *practice* of her knowledge, the *exercise* of her right to not have to suffer under Man,²² the *bearing* of ancestral gifts of healing for self and others, all defy facile notions of what actually constitutes the historical struggle for living oriented towards the radical freedom of the God of the living and of the dead who wills the fullness of life across and beyond borders.

I have shared in a narrative key the holy threads of one particular journey, and analyzed the macro geopolitical caging and experimentation taking place upon the displaced poor of the continent. I now conclude with Roseli's exclamation at the end of one of our conversations this spring, which like the celebratory response at the end of a people's liturgy of life, provides a glimpse into the expansive mystical freedom that grounds, nourishes, and vivifies the unauthorized community of we—*nosotros*:

"Gracias a Dios ya estoy libre, ya no estoy en el corral, ya no estoy encerrada, gracias a Dios." "Thanks be to God I am now free, I am no longer corralled in, I am not contained, thanks be to God."

²² Joseph Drexler-Dreis and Kristien Justaert, eds., *Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Decolonial Visions of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).