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## **Harrowing of Hell A Decolonial Interreligious Pedagogy in Response to Gang Violence**

### **Abstract**

When shots ring out in the darkness is the sacred present? If interreligious educators are going to respond gang violence in a transformative way, the conversation needs to be reframed about how community members, theologians and most importantly the individuals themselves, speak/listen about the tragic events that occur in our neighborhoods. The paper examines gang violence with special attention to the practices of a particular local community and provides a decolonial interreligious pedagogy as a model for working alongside gang affiliated youth who have experienced overwhelming traumas.

### **Introduction**

When shots ring out in the darkness is the sacred present? Violence is the lived reality for gang affiliated youth who live and die by the power and fear of physical violence.<sup>1</sup> If religious educators are going to respond to these young people in a transformative way, the conversation needs to be reframed around how community members, theologians and most importantly the individuals themselves, speak/listen about the tragic events that occur in our neighborhoods, looking specifically to the lost, subjugated and colonized practices of the community. Much ink has been spilled in texts on the topic of gang and youth violence, while more blood continues to be spilled on the streets of our neighborhoods. In an attempt to bring more light than heat to this conversation, this paper moves from the traditional way of speaking to and about this community – intervening/preventing violent acts through examining the people and reasons behind these acts – to one that attempts to understand the trauma experienced by these young people as the disruption of the narratives, lives, identities, communities and theologies of those who experience the realities of violence. The paper offers a first hand account and contextual understanding from which to view this ongoing conversation of violence, trauma and religious education. The paper examines how trauma theory can inform theologians and religious educators to account for those who have survived extreme violence. The paper addresses their experience of fragmentation and disruption of the problem-answer, life-death, and redemptive narratives that are so prevalent in responding to trauma. Further, the paper gestures towards decolonizing religious education, suggesting that exploring the lost, subjugated and oppressed religious practices can be acts of healing.

### **Gang Affiliation in a Community: An Overview**

*One afternoon, I geared up to go to the mall with a set of friends. I put on my JJ Stokes, 49er football jersey, pulled my extra-wide corduroy pants just high enough on my legs to be considered pants and not knee pads, passed the belt through the belt buckle with my last initial in old English on it, draped the remainder of the belt down over my leg and set out to join my homies. After a few hours of cruising the mall on foot, we stepped out to go home. BWAP!*

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper I will use the term “gang affiliated youth” to describe these young people. I use this term instead of gang member, violent youth, assault victims/perpetrators, etc., precisely because affiliation, as I see it, allows for a more expansive view of the group that witnesses or experiences gang violence and trauma.

*BWAP! One of my friends, Jesse, was shot twice in the chest. Our clothing matched from head to toe, same jersey, same pants, same belt ... save the stains of blood on his jersey.*

Practical theologian Evelyn Parker notes that movies like *American History X*, *American Me* and *Boyz in da Hood* are good examples of how the American public views and stereotypes African American and Latin@ gangs.<sup>2</sup> For many people, pop-culture provides the definitions and images of a gang members and violent youth. Parker troubles these understandings by first examining the definition of the term *gang*. She claims that the definition most often quoted from Malcolm Klein's *Street Gangs and Street Workers* as "any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who: (a) are generally perceived as distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood; (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies."<sup>3</sup> The National Youth Gang Survey adds a gang has "three or more members, generally aged 12–24; members share an identity, typically linked to a name, and often other symbols; members view themselves as a gang, and they are recognized by others as a gang; the group has some permanence and a degree of organization; the group is involved in an elevated level of criminal activity."<sup>4</sup> This definition, according to Parker, does not take serious issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender and religious beliefs regarding youth gangs. Looking at Salinas, these factors cannot be ignored.

In Salinas the Latin@ community constitutes nearly 75% of the total population and gang violence is a way of life for more than 3,000 of our city's 150,000 citizens.<sup>5</sup> What the US Census Bureau does not indicate is the territorial boundaries of the sixteen youth gangs and the two prison gangs located in Salinas. A special crime report released by the Salinas Police Department in 2010 asserted that 91% of all homicides are gang related. Of these crimes, the report noted, "68% of the suspects of violent crime were 24 years and younger, 92% of these suspects were Hispanic."<sup>6</sup> These largely Latin@ gangs either identify with Norteño (Northerners who identify with the color red and the number XIV, 14, symbolizing the 14<sup>th</sup> letter in the alphabet, N) or Sureño (Southerners who identify with the color blue, the number XIII, 13 symbolizing the 13<sup>th</sup> letter in the alphabet, M, signifying the Mexican Mafia, also known as *La Eme*).<sup>7</sup> While Salinas's gang population largely identifies as Norteño, the rise of Sureño members and subsequent territorial changes have increased the amount of violence. The introductions of MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha – mostly Salvadoran-Americans, but also other national and first generation Central American undocumented peoples) into communities in and around Salinas are not only shifting these territorial boundaries, but are also troubling power

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<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Parker, "Hungry for Honor: Children in Violent Youth Gangs," *Interpretation* (April 2001): 150.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Klein, *Street Gangs and Street Workers* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), quoted in I. A. Spergel, *Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>4</sup> National Youth Gang Survey Analysis, "Defining Gangs and Designating Gang Membership," *National Gang Center*, Accessed October 23, 2011: <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Defining-Gangs>.

<sup>5</sup> US Census Bureau Data, Accessed August 27, 2014, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0664224.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Police Chief Louis Fetherolf, "Report to the Community July 2010," Accessed October 10, 2011, <http://www.salinaspd.com/pdf/ReportCommunity2010.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> FBI Report on *2011 National Gang Threat Assessment*, Accessed September 1, 2014. [http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2011/october/gangs\\_102011](http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2011/october/gangs_102011).

dynamics in the region.<sup>8</sup> Race, ethnicity, nationality, class are all key indicators of how borders are being defined. Regardless of identification however, the trauma experienced by the community challenges religious educators to take serious the insights of trauma research.

### **Trauma Theory-ology**

*Trembling and bewildered, I ran away from the mall. I said nothing for I was afraid. I still can see the stains on Jesse's jersey from where the bullets entered his chest. Every time I put my running shoes on, I am preparing to run from the violence.*<sup>9</sup>

It is from this experience and these violent images that I investigate the insights by theologians engaged in trauma theory.<sup>10</sup> Theologians such as Serene Jones, Wendy Farley, Phillis Sheppard and Shelly Rambo are at the forefront of this expanding field. These theologians reflect on how theological texts, practices and traditions may inform or transform the lives of victims of trauma. Trauma theory, as these theologians articulate it, provides a timely reworking of the current models and modes of approaching gang-affiliated youth. Trauma theory for those responding to gang and youth violence reorients us to the disruption that moments of extreme violence or the threat of violence causes to one's personal, communal and theological narratives.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV defines traumatic events as the real or imagined threat of "...actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" and a typical response to such events as an "intense fear helplessness or horror."<sup>11</sup> As a result, trauma most often focuses on the specific wound(s) remaining after the event or events have past. Therefore, under this threat and fear, trauma is often "expressed in terms of what exceeds categories of comprehension of what exceeds the human capacity to take in and process the external world."<sup>12</sup> For communities where youth and gang violence is so prevalent, Serene Jones claims it is essential to become aware of how "such an experience shifts how one thinks about language and silence, how one understand the workings of memory, how one assesses the instability of reason and the fragility of our capacity to will and to act, how one grapples with the fragmentation of perception and the quick

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<sup>8</sup> FBI Report in 2008, "The MS-13 Threat: A National Assessment." Published on January 14, 2008. Accessed July 15, 2014, [http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/ms13\\_011408](http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/ms13_011408).

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Mark 16: 8. "And they went out, and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them: and they said nothing to any one; for they were afraid."

<sup>10</sup>I have neither the expertise nor the space to develop a history of the field of trauma theory. However, I offer resources through qualified professionals and my own exposure to a variety of trauma texts that have been instrumental in my understanding of trauma. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2000); Bessel A. van der Kolk, ed. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological and Biological Sequelae* (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> *DSM IV- Sourcebook*, ed. by Thomas Widiger (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 431. One important note is that diagnosis of trauma will also include 'dreams' as ways of expressing the traumatic events. Within my own Latin@ community, dreams provide a more familiar way of discussing these events, than perhaps rational discourse often affords. Laura Rendón's work, located towards the end of the paper in particular makes use of dreams as a way of educating the community.

<sup>12</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 4.

disintegration of order, and how once conceives of imagination, recognizing that at any moment haunting, shadowy scenes of violence can disrupt it, twist it, and shut it down.”<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Shelly Rambo claims that trauma theory provides a reworking of theological practice. She claims that trauma theory points to an uncovering of a middle discourse, which “resists the redemptive gloss that can often be placed, harmfully, over experiences of suffering and to orient us differently to the death-life narrative at the heart of the Christian tradition...Without witnessing to what does not go away, to what remains, theology fails to provide a sufficient account of redemption.”<sup>14</sup> Trauma theory accounts for the middle discourse, in doctrinal terms, the *Harrowing of Hell*.<sup>15</sup> Following Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rambo claims that in the aftermath of the Cross, Christ does not descend into Hell on Holy Saturday and redeem all of its inhabitants. Jesus does not call to life those that are held captive in the depths of Hell. There is no victory over death on Holy Saturday. There is only a life not discernible by conceivable frameworks of understanding. For witnesses of trauma, Rambo points to what remains in the aftermath of the traumatic experience. This remaining is not always redemptive or life-giving, but instead is what she defines as Spirit. The Spirit remains with the victims of traumatic experiences, who are either living in or continuing to be haunted by the traumatic experience(s). This relates to the community in Salinas I have been walking alongside; however, it is not the Christian Hell that our youth are living in or even a category they are using to reflect on theologically. When the *tlamatiquetl*, or local leader, performs the burial ceremony, it is precisely in a recovery of ancient Nahuatl mythical and religious narratives that death is cast. In Nahuatl traditions and in the understanding of this community, it is the person’s death, which marks where their soul will go – *mictlan*, the underworld if the death was a good death. If it is a violent or premature death, our tradition implies they might haunt the community.<sup>16</sup>

What trauma theory and theology is keen to point out in both the work of Jones and Rambo is that the traumatic experience causes a sense of fragmentation in one’s understanding of their communities, their religious, familial and personal narrative, their sense of safety and their understanding of theology. Most importantly, they both suggest that there is a harrowing ‘spirit’ following the violence. It is this harrowing ‘spirit’ that religious educators are being called to address. A new approach to gang-affiliated violence will be suggested with attention paid to the liminal space between life and death. It is here where a decolonial interreligious pedagogy is needed.

### **Towards a Decolonial Interreligious Pedagogy**

*A Rosary said for Jesse. A Vigil in his honor. An altar of Mary with Jesse’s picture constructed. Offerings given. A tlamatiquetl provides smoke, releasing Jesse. I left my Jersey at*

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<sup>13</sup> Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> This Harrowing of Hell is developed theologically from the Apostles Creed: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; *he descended into Hell*; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.”

<sup>16</sup> Because of the way the community views and works through death, specifics of how community members interpret and recover Nahuatl traditions will remain undisclosed, in keeping with the wishes of the community members with whom I have been working.

*the Altar, not knowing why I had put it on in the first place. I saw our shared history rising and disappearing in the smoke, not knowing whether he would venture to mictlan or continue to haunt our fragmented reality.*

Traditionally, the literature on gang and youth violence asks the question “why do people join a gang in *our* neighborhood?”<sup>17</sup> Evelyn Parker pushes religious educators to move beyond the why question. Here, the hope is that religious educators might begin to look at methods and practices of healing for the deep wounds that gang-affiliated youth experience. While very little has been written with regards to religious education and decolonial theory, what has been written is in relation to biblical pedagogy and biblical interpretation. This work provides keen insights for the sort of recovery of healing practices the community needs. For example, Boyung Lee in “When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy,” examines the use of a hermeneutics of decolonization. Lee pays particular attention to “the expansion of Western imperialism, which is one of Western Christianity’s attendant spirits.”<sup>18</sup> By noting how the tradition came to be in this space – Western Christianity’s attendant spirits’ – decolonizing religious education becomes a transformative act, not only for acknowledging that colonial violence happened in the community, but also continues to epistemologically fragment the local and communal narrative. Walter Mignolo suggests “decolonization of knowledge shall be understood in the constant double movement of unveiling the geo-political location of theology, secular philosophy and scientific reason and simultaneously affirming the modes and principles of knowledge that have been denied by the rhetoric of Christianization, civilization, progress, development, market democracy.”<sup>19</sup> This work of decolonizing knowledge opens the door to the local knowledges that religious educators can leverage to heal communities and individuals.

Knowledge generation as a political act, or more precisely, a geo-political act, in religious education is not new. Thomas Groome defines political in terms of the Greek *politike* meaning the art of “*enabling the shared life of citizens.*”<sup>20</sup> The political beginnings of knowledge for Groome are traced in Christian religious education from Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, through the European Enlightenment to today. By introducing decolonial discourse, religious education might trace a different epistemological history – at least in the to acknowledge those mythical and religious realities of the context from which I am writing – that offers a more expansive and inclusive pedagogical impetus for enabling the shared life of the community. Following Mignolo once again, this knowledge generation “is a story that does not begin in Greece; or, if you wish, has two beginnings, one in Greece and the other in the less known memoirs of millions of people in the Caribbean and the Atlantic coast, and better known memories (although not as well known as the Greek legacies) in the Andes and in Mesoamerica.”<sup>21</sup> Pointing out the need to identify other knowledges that exist or that have been subjugated under the weight of colonization is not just to show that religious education has played a part in subjugating local and indigenous knowledges and people. Rather, the purpose is to show that drawing on the local

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<sup>17</sup> Martine Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1991), 40-47.

<sup>18</sup> Boyung Lee, “When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy,” *Religious Education*, 102, 1 (Winter 2007), 46.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Delinking,” *Cultural Studies*, 21, no. 2 (2007): 463.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastor Ministry* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

histories, local practices and religiosity of the people for healing after traumatic violence could be a faithful act of religious educators.

### Conclusion

Though much of what is located in this paper draws on the work of Christian religious educators, there are a few insights/adaptations that make up the interreligious pedagogy for the population in Salinas. This pedagogy comes from the work with local leaders in the community and working with formerly gang-affiliated persons with the sole intent of addressing he experience and witness to trauma. Drawing on Evelyn Parker's work, the recommendations for an interreligious pedagogy are

- 1) Alternative forms of ministry,
- 2) Working with community partners, and,
- 3) Focusing on individual transformation through communal practices.

Parker suggests that programs designed to empower youth can provide alternative spaces for them to congregate.<sup>22</sup> Because these young people are surviving both psychologically and perhaps even physically between life and death, religious educators are beginning to imagine new ways of offering healing to these individuals. One example of moving beyond work and towards an interreligious pedagogy is recognizing that ministry is not just drawing on the Christian practice. Rather, one can draw on those religious practices of healing that are infused with a sense of decolonial recovery and draw on the subjugated knowledges of the community. As noted above in the story about Jesse, a local *tlatamiquetl* or person of knowledge, offered a Nahuatl practice of transition Jesse (and the community) into death.

Second, Parker suggests that working with government and other non-profit agencies is one way congregations can get involved in responding to gang and youth violence. The civic responses are often made through the judicial and other social services. While these outlets offer healing of sorts, as noted earlier, are typically responses to gang affiliated youth as a *problem*. Alternative community partners in Salinas would be the local community groups that have their own "healing circles." Here they offer the healing practices of our ancestors and attempt to recover ancient Aztec healing practices. These "healing circles" meet in community centers or in local homes and reflect the desire of a community to address and heal its own wounds.

Third, Parker suggests that congregations should focus on an individual's transformation, paying attention to the *somebodyness* of the individual. Following Jacquelyn Grant she claims "to be somebody is to be human," and that these young people need to be recognized as humans too.<sup>23</sup> This focus on individual transformation is also where interreligious practices come into play. By asserting a recovery of one's ancestry and harkening back to lost or subjugated practices, individuals are able to recover a sense of self. For victims of trauma, such recovery is important as they attempt to piece together lost or broken narratives. More importantly, spiritual and religious practices in the aftermath of trauma reflect the shared histories and needs of the local community. Laura Rendón notes the importance of recognizing Aztec spiritual practices that also served as education practices. She calls upon educators to become "spiritual warriors," and to be guides that can "breathe through the cracks of our open hearts. And may our collective breath be the vision of a transformative dream of education that speaks the language of heart and

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<sup>22</sup> Parker, "Hungry for Honor," 160.

<sup>23</sup> Parker, "Hungry for Honor," 160. C.f. Jacqueline Grant, "A Theological Framework," in *Working with Black Youth*, ed. C. Foster and G. Shockley (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989), 69.

mind and the truth of wholeness, harmony, social justice, and liberation.”<sup>24</sup> An interreligious pedagogy calls upon religious educators not only breathe life into the fragmented narratives of gang-affiliated youth and the communities that experience gang violence – as Ehecatl breathes life into the void – but also challenges religious educators to know the spiritual practices of the community and how to leverage those practices to serve personal transformation for those who are trying to heal from deep wounds.

*In the Harrowing of Hell,*

*The Church wears the blood stained jersey of Jesse.*

*On Holy Saturday I enter mictlan,*

*And my stainless jersey rattles in its shackles.*

*Longing to be free.*

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<sup>24</sup> Laura Rendón, *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice, and Liberation* (Sterling: Stylus Publishing, LLC., 2008), 151.

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