

If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice. By Maureen H. O'Connell. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012. xix + 336 pages. \$39.95 (paper).
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In her book *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice*, Maureen H. O'Connell gives us a deeply inspiring and invaluable theological and sociological investigation and analysis of community muralism in Philadelphia, a city known for its more than 3,500 public murals.

As attested by the quality and detail of her work, O'Connell diligently and methodically builds the case for greater theological academic attention to the wealth of meaning located within the process and content of community muralism, as these art projects are not senseless beauties or lone images painted for the sake of delivering a pretty wall. Rather, these are pictorial, communal reflections and collaborations. They are "constructed theologies" in which people have purposefully come together and shared their memories, struggles, pains, hopes, and values; they are theologies "from below," constructed in a city with the highest rate of "deep poverty" of America's largest cities. These are contemporary icons meant to be read, interpreted, and engaged. They speak in silence of a community's soulful dignity; that is, they speak of a struggling community determined to survive in spite of the heavy yoke of decades upon decades of racism, marginalization, and poverty, here with a northern twist.

O'Connell connected with Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, now more than twenty-five years old, as a way to understand the process of how these murals emerge and to learn just how important the process is to the circles of participants who contribute to the art of bringing a mural into being. The Mural Arts Program started as a way to get graffiti taggers to clean their markings off walls, but gradually morphed into much more, such as a restorative justice method for prisoners and their victims. The program also became a way for neighborhoods, including church communities, to design public spaces where people could locate themselves within a larger and more compelling story than was there before.

Community murals give voice to religious expression outside the church, whether using religious imagery per se or metaphorical allusions. The secular, spiritual, and religious dimensions of people and life come together through the mural process in a way that is different from doctrinal, deductive, and theological expressions. Community muralism uses inductive, intuitive, emotional, and cognitive methods to generate symbols that express a kind of wisdom that can inspire, console, validate, challenge, ask questions, generate

dialogue, or provoke a new way of perceiving an impossible situation. Community muralism, as O'Connell describes it in Philadelphia, often finds its niche when people come to that place of "impasse," when the burden is just too much, there is no way forward, and a different way of seeing is urgently needed but not necessarily expected.

O'Connell draws our attention to ethics and aesthetics, asserting their intimate relationship. In a time when humans globally are questioning how we live on this planet, O'Connell points us toward a method and resource rooted in the language of images that rises "from below." The community murals she describes are alive with the inclusive and vital spirituality of a community that says poor people, immigrant people, sick people, addicted people, incarcerated people, old people, young people, indeed *all people*, need to be seen. They cry out loud as a consequence of the "code of the street," which bucks the lack of opportunity and encouragement, both systematically "red-lined" out over time by legislation and racist practices. However, while tears are part of these quiet visual texts, they also speak of a light that is rising, a future that is coming, a future that *must* come.

Over the course of her book, O'Connell stresses that communities engaged in muralism are islands of opportunity, places where we are invited to see the mystery/Mystery in our lives, in our neighborhoods, especially in our more marginalized communities. Muralism is one way to study a publicly active and moving "God" in a secular world, but a way that is often neglected, especially by the academic community.

O'Connell is brazen but balanced in her treatment of issues surrounding "white privilege" and the "code of the street." This book is not light reading, but it is well written and organized such that anyone interested will be surprised by its treasures, including many historical and contemporary dialogue partners and resources. The book is divided into six main parts, with a bibliographical section directly following each. Also included is an interesting appendix divided into "Theological Aesthetics and Contemporary Christian Ethics" and "Sources for an 'Aesthetic Ethics.'" I highly recommend O'Connell's book, especially for those interested in the connections between aesthetics and ethics, contemporary culture and theology/spirituality, poverty, race, restorative justice, symbols and meaning making, and constructive theology. This book could be used for both undergraduate and graduate course work.

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