

Cartographies of Experience: Rethinking the Method of Liberation Theology

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The core of this article consists of a critical rethinking of the classical “see-judge-act” methodology of liberation theology. The article contends that this method threatens to install a dualism between a universal, secular experience of oppression and a Christian interpretation of it, thereby creating a hierarchical relation that reduces the complexity of the experience of poverty. The author investigates this issue by focusing on liberation theology’s understanding of the “preferential option for the poor” (part 1) and the way in which the see-judge-act methodology affects this understanding (part 2). The article gradually moves on to alternative epistemologies, starting with a discussion of a hermeneutical approach (C. Boff and Schillebeeckx) and the method of “historicization” (Ellacuría), and eventually proposing a new phenomenologically and materially informed methodology for liberation theology that is called “cartography” and is grounded in a “new materialist” metaphysics as articulated by Deleuze, Braidotti, and Barad (part 3).

Keywords: liberation theology, see-judge-act, experience, cartography, option for the poor, new materialism

I. Introduction

The most valuable insights are methods.—Nietzsche¹

I have always felt uncomfortable calling myself a liberation theologian: how can I, as a Western European, middle-class white woman in academia, make claims about experiences of suffering and oppression of (mostly) other people, and even derive knowledge of God from those experiences? I

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Der Antichrist,” in *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, pt. 6, vol. 3 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), 177 (§§12–13).

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indeed find myself in the center, uneasy, conscious of a position in which I enjoy the benefits of Western modernity and the coloniality that constitutes it—that is, a dominating position formed by Western European economics, politics, and culture that originated in the historical process of colonization, but that still continues today. Indeed, decolonial theory contends that the alienating matrix of coloniality, as the underside of Western modernity, still deeply pervades most aspects of our lives today, creating a hierarchical dualism between the “center,” or the Western world, and the non-Western world, which is exploited to a large extent.² At the same time, I want to avoid romanticizing the periphery, the queerness, and the poverty, the theological and epistemological “advantage” of the oppressed (for God would be preferentially found *there*).³ For now, my first task as a liberation theologian is, I believe, not to try to go to the margins and have empathy with the poor while maintaining my middle-class lifestyle—the position that Hegel calls the *schöne Seele*, comparable to the logic of charity, buying off a clean conscience while affirming the existing power dynamics—but to work *from* the center, to try to break it open and imagine God’s liberating power within the center, refusing to abandon that center to right-wing powers, “conservative” theologians (analogous to the political situation in Europe, where the center is occupied with right-wing, nationalist, and conservative neoliberal parties

² See Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Social Classification,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 181–224. See also Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2: “Coloniality names the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization from the Renaissance to today of which historical colonialisms have been a constitutive, although downplayed, dimension. The concept as used herein, and by the collective modernity/coloniality, is not intended to be a totalitarian concept, but rather one that specifies a particular project: that of the idea of modernity and its constitutive and darker side, coloniality, that emerged with the history of European invasions of Anya Yala, Tawantinsuyu, and Anahuac; the formation of the Americas and the Caribbean; and the massive trade of enslaved Africans. ‘Coloniality’ is already a decolonial concept, and decolonial projects can be traced back to the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. And, last but not least, ‘coloniality’... is unapologetically the specific response to globalization and global linear thinking that emerged within the histories and sensibilities of South American and the Caribbean.”

³ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” trans. Robert R. Barr, in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 235–50; Jose Maria Vigil, “The Option for the Poor Is the Option for Justice, and Not Preferential: A New Theological-Systematic Framework for the Preferential Option,” *Voices from the Third World* 27, no. 1 (2004): 7–21.

because the political “left” is too weak to form a block of resistance in that center, ultimately merely confirming the oppression of the margins).⁴

My existential problem as a self-declared liberation theologian resides within a deeper theoretical problem, a problem that I would situate in the domain of epistemology and method, and that is related to the place of the concept of experience within liberation theology. My initial reluctance to devote an entire article to method—coming from the underlying assumptions that (1) a focus on method is a cover-up for poor content (a Cartesian heritage), and (2) the “turn to method” in the humanities is an act of resignation toward the criteria of positive science, which are in themselves reductionist (the postmodern critique)—has been put aside because of the realization that, as liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría puts it, the laying bare of the method of liberation theology eventually unveils its fundamental orientation.⁵ Indeed (at the risk of bringing up a cliché), form and content cannot be separated. Method influences content to a high degree, and a reflection on method allows a discipline to be self-critical. Moreover, especially within the context of liberation theology, a reflection on method is important. As Michel Foucault taught us and as will become clear in my analysis of method with regard to the option for the poor, knowledge is always entangled with power: an investigation into the ways in which we know and the methods we use will reveal the power dynamics involved in the discipline. So, again with Ellacuría, I can say that I am interested “in the prior characterization of this fundamental method, understanding by ‘prior characterization’ the analysis of those fundamental philosophical presuppositions on which theological activity should be based, which should serve to inspire this activity and to give it its criteria.”⁶ What is the philosophical worldview behind the method of liberation theology, and is that worldview consistent with liberation theology’s vision of liberation of the poor as the realization of the Reign of God in history?

In this article I will answer this last rhetorical question negatively. I wish to reflect here on what I would call the “epistemological gap” in liberation

⁴ What happened this year in response to the crisis in Greece is very telling in this way. The European Union and forces of international finance now control and discipline not only the Global South, but also a European country such as Greece. Neocolonial strategies are now applied within the Continent itself, even in the country that is considered the philosophical birthplace of European culture. See, for example, <http://thecolumn.net/2015/07/09/greece-and-the-underdevelopment-of-europe/>.

⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría, “Laying the Philosophical Foundations of Latin American Theological Method,” in *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation*, ed. Michael E. Lee (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 63–92, at 64.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

theology, the gap between experience and interpretation, which is, as I will demonstrate, at the same time a theological gap between the secular and the religious, and in terms of power a gap between center and periphery. My hypothesis is that liberation theology has difficulties bridging the gap between a mostly empirical approach to very concrete experiences of suffering, resulting in sometimes endless and paralyzing descriptions of particular situations of injustice, and the Christian tradition that is “in dialogue” with these experiences and interprets them as moments of encounter with Christ and eventually as instances of hope. Most of the time, the dialogue itself is mediated by a certain reading of Marx (focusing on his historical materialism), or now, in our post-Marxist era, by feminist, postcolonial, queer, or other critical theories. As can be seen, for example, in feminist liberation theology, the dialogue often results in an ambiguous relation toward the Christian tradition, a relation in which the Christian tradition is either rejected altogether or looked at with a feeling of alienation from within.⁷

The most “famous” practical method of liberation theologies, the process of “see-judge-act” that was elaborately theorized by Clodovis Boff in his *Theology and Praxis*, can be seen as an expression of this gap.⁸ The phase of “seeing” refers to a socioeconomic analysis of the situation of oppression, “judging” looks at this analysis from a biblical perspective and asks, “What does the word of God say about this situation?”⁹ and “acting” defines liberation theology’s fundamental grounding in and orientation toward action that transforms reality. Although Boff himself stresses the circular character of this process at the end of *Theology and Praxis*, we can see that the Christian tradition comes into play only in the “judging” phase of the process. The “seeing” part, and often also the “acting” part, even if the process is looked at and effected in a circular fashion, are deemed to belong to the realm of the “secular,” the worldly. In my view, the problem with this gap is precisely the philosophical translation of my existential unease: the Christian tradition,

⁷ Mary Daly ended up rejecting the Christian tradition (e.g., Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1974]), whereas Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza works from inside the Christian tradition, attempting to discern possibilities for a Christian feminist theology (e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [London: SCM Press, 1983]).

⁸ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987). Ivan Petrella calls Boff’s articulation of this method the “canonical method” of liberation theology (Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004], 26).

⁹ Clodovis Boff, “Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,” trans. Robert R. Barr, in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis*, 57–85, at 79.

dominated by Western European theologies and modern philosophies, puts itself in a hierarchical position vis-à-vis the experience of poverty by interpreting it along its own criteria. Or in theological terms: the transcendent God comes into play only when a particular Christian narrative is “used” to interpret a certain situation. If liberation theology holds onto its “deductive” approach to the experience of poverty, it not only “re-colonizes” the margins, but also threatens to weaken its practice because of this incongruence and its affirmation of the center-periphery dualism.

First, I will elaborate on the epistemological gap within liberation theology by focusing on the notion of the “preferential option of the poor” as a core concept of every liberation theology, and on the experience of poverty itself. Precisely in theorizing the complexity of this experience of poverty, the power dynamics between center and periphery are deeply felt. In this respect, I will demonstrate that one of the consequences of the epistemological gap within liberation theology is a reductive approach to the experience of poverty.

Second, in a first attempt to “open the doors” from a position within the center and to break out of this center by questioning its underlying framework of interpretation, I will briefly deepen the problem of the epistemological gap from both a Latin American and a Western context by first looking at Clodovis Boff’s articulation of Latin American liberation theology’s method. I will demonstrate that what might at first sight seem to be a promising strategy, aimed at giving voice to the contextual and the situation, and reconciling experience with the interpretation of it, does not do justice to the fullness and embodiedness of the experience and eventually affirms the dualism between the theological or the religious and the secular. An attempt to review the see-judge-act method is formulated by Ignacio Ellacuría. Although still within a threefold analytical framework that at least structurally resembles the see-judge-act methodology, Ellacuría articulates a hermeneutics in such a way that he prepares for another method by introducing flesh—the body—into his theological method of “historicization,” thereby deepening the immersion in experience.

Third, inspired by Ellacuría’s suggestions, I will point to an alternative epistemology for contemporary liberation theology, a “cartographical” one. This particular epistemology, grounded in the immanent metaphysics of “new materialism” (strongly opposed to scientific positivism, which is also a form of materialism), takes the body into account by allowing it to relate to experiences so that these can engender liberation. In other words, the body is not only involved on the level of “bare” experience (not that such a thing would even exist) but also in the knowledge of this experience. My hypothesis is that cartography, as a method that allows the body to transform

thought, can transcend the epistemological gap in liberation theology. By taking into account the complex web of power relations, the method of cartography is able to transcend the dualism between center and margins. The final aim of this article is thus not to offer a critique of liberation theology, but more positively, to begin to update and renew the method of liberation theology by introducing cartography. I suggest that the metaphysics of new materialism provides a more adequate analysis of our times than does Marxism, and that it might also be more akin to the liberation theological strand of the Christian tradition than are the metaphysics of modernity and the hermeneutical method that came forth from it.

There is no doubt that introducing new materialism into theology and drawing its theological consequences is a task that cannot fully be accomplished in a single article. Indeed, in my discussion of certain features of liberation theology past and present, I have chosen to approach the problem on a general level. This means, for instance, that I have left out specific examples of forms of liberation theology that already attempt to (explicitly or otherwise) theologize from a cartographical method, such as queer theology, indigenous theology, and certain forms of feminist theology. Moreover, some fundamental theological questions concerning the relation between transcendence and immanence, the meaning of incarnation, and the relation between theology and modernity are merely treated tangentially out of a concern to stay focused on the central argument of this article (even if my position on these topics becomes clear throughout the text). In short, although I am not able to address the whole “cartography” of the debate I engage in here, I hope this article helps to open up the debate about liberation theology’s method.

II. The Preferential Option for the Poor: A Critical Account

One of the core characteristics of liberation theology is its “preferential option for the poor”: theology should start from the experience of the poor, because Christ is encountered in the face of the poor, because God self-reveals in relation to the poor. Gustavo Gutiérrez discerns three discrete notions of poverty, one negative and two positive: “real” or material poverty, which is an evil that is unwanted by God and condemned in the Bible; spiritual poverty as openness for God; and poverty as solidarity with the poor.¹⁰ These three notions are not fully separated. Indeed, there is more to being poor than simply the lack of life-sustaining possessions such as food and housing. A theological interpretation of the negative side of

¹⁰ Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” 235.

poverty, a life-threatening situation, has the potential of transforming this situation of indignity and the experience of poverty itself into a spiritual way of life close to God and a battle against structural injustice. As Gutiérrez puts it, “To be poor is a way of life. It is a way of thinking, of loving, of praying, of believing and hoping, of spending free time, of struggling for a livelihood. Being poor today also means being involved in the battle for justice and peace, defending one’s life and liberty . . . and committing oneself to the liberation of every human person.”¹¹ Nevertheless, in this section, I will point out several problematic characteristics of this theological notion of the preferential option for the poor from the perspective of epistemology.

First, the word “preferential” has a colonial twist in it. Pope John Paul II even connected the preference for the poor with “Christian charity”: “This [preferential option for the poor] is an option, or *special form* of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity.”¹² He thereby affirmed the dualism between center and periphery, rich and poor. The kingdom of God, however, of which the option for the poor is a concretization, seems to be a much more radical notion than a form of Christian charity that is ultimately affirming the existing power distortions and thus participates in the very causes of material poverty. Since the option for the poor is fundamental to *who God is*, as Jose Maria Vigil points out, the notion “preferential” should be dropped altogether.¹³ Indeed, Christianity’s option for the poor has always been a theocentric option,¹⁴ based on the Love-Justice that the God of the Bible expresses. It would be a theological mistake to weaken the God of Love-Justice with an option that is only “preferential”: the strong connection of God to justice would then be replaced by a connection with “gratuitousness,” no longer requiring us (and God) explicitly to take sides.¹⁵ The addition of “preferential” to the “option for the poor” is not only a theological error; it also installs a power dynamic that keeps the poor in their lower position. This top-down approach prevents having an epistemology that does

¹¹ Ibid., 236–37.

¹² Pope John Paul II, Encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, §42, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.htm (emphasis mine).

¹³ See Vigil, “The Option for the Poor.”

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8: “My thesis is that this rewording and shifting of the focus from God’s Justice to God’s Gratuitousness as basis for the option for the poor weakens and ultimately misappropriates the option (consciously or unconsciously), converting it into a simple ‘preference,’ a ‘preferential love,’ a priority in the order of charity, and thus it is no longer a true ‘option,’ no longer a selective and an exclusive taking of sides, and no longer a fundamental option rooted in the very nature of God.”

justice to the experience of the poor, thereby also denying the possibility of a positive account of poverty as a spiritual force and a political urge for solidarity. This is not to deny that in reality there exists a duality between rich and poor, center and periphery; this duality is indeed the very starting point of my argument. Describing it not as a duality, however, but as a *dualism* entails a warning and an encouragement to continue fighting against the very existence of this difference: the reality of (material) poverty should be rectified.

Second, if God opts for the poor, it is God who takes the initiative, seemingly leaving the “poor” in a passive position. As the Brazilian liberation theologian Ivone Gebara points out, this could lead to a *deductive* theology of liberation, again putting emphasis on a top-down, hierarchy-confirming charity vis-à-vis the poor, rather than an inductive one that would really start *from* the experiences of the oppressed.¹⁶ Of course, a “proper” understanding of the doctrine of incarnation would not allow for a mere “theology from above” based on supranatural reason alone. By becoming incarnate in Jesus, God becomes poor *with* the poor. In that sense, God’s option for the poor is not even an option; “poor” is really *who God is*, and “option” merely refers to God’s freedom. However, the position of the church, and even that of classical liberation theology, especially since the rise of a more Protestant framework of understanding with its emphasis on grace rather than nature (and Max Weber has taught us that this has emerged parallel to capitalism!),¹⁷ have too often resulted in a deductive/charitable approach to the option for the poor. The tension between the natural and the supernatural has always been central to (liberation) theology, and is indeed the theological expression of the epistemological gap I am tracing within liberation theology. When doing theology from the position of the poor—from “the cry,” as Jon Sobrino would formulate it¹⁸—there is always the danger of appropriating the experience of the poor within a preexisting theological discourse that draws upon what Gebara calls an epistemology of eternal truths: “It is as if they appeared in concrete history but were born of a reality that is beyond or prior to that reality.”¹⁹ The alternative of doing

¹⁶ See Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, trans. David Molineaux (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), esp. 19–100.

¹⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930).

¹⁸ See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), esp. 79–86.

¹⁹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 40. See also Joseph Drexler-Dreis, “Toward a Decolonial Theology: Baldwin’s and Fanon’s Orientations of Decolonial Love as

theology beyond the natural/supernatural distinction leads us not to a denial of God's transcendence, but to a relocation of transcendence *within* immanence: the cry, in a way, is transcendent of the system it critiques and questions, and it is there that God self-reveals. God's initiative thus coincides with the poor's initiative. In part 2 of this article, on Ellacuría's method, as well as in part 3, on cartography as a method, I will develop this further.

Third, and in relation to the previous remarks, not only "preferential" but the very word "option" can be placed under critique. Attaching privilege to a preference and/or an option again confirms the dualism between the margins and the center, between those who have a choice and those who do not. Moreover, even if one recognizes that the "option" in this case is more of a self-conscious commitment than a matter of choice, in both interpretations an autonomous subject, rather than an interconnectedness between (human) beings, is presupposed. This results in what I would call, using a concept of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the "logic of faciality," a logic that, as we will see, prevents transformation from taking place. This is a very persistent logic within theology, and within liberation theology as well, as is demonstrated by the attention that someone like Enrique Dussel gives to the "face of the poor" while inspired by Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of the transcendence of the other.²⁰ Whereas in Levinas' and Dussel's work the transcendence of the other's face is the starting point for ethics, positioning the other in the domain of transcendence threatens to cover up the embodied nature of every experience. I want to propose interconnection and entanglement, rather than transcendence, as the basis for liberation theology's method. I believe that it is the cry of the body, rather than the face (which within philosophy still belongs to the domain of representation), that should be the starting point for liberation theology. Deleuze and Guattari have written about "the regime of the face" in *Mille Plateaux (A Thousand Plateaus)*, in which they state that the face is a way of colonizing the self, a centralization or territorialization of power in the phallic representation of a face that represents the norm. Indeed, today, in our society of advanced capitalism, the face is a powerful location. Faces seem to be more important than ever. They are all over the place: our coins and stamps have powerful faces on them, macropolitics is all about faces of powerful people appearing in newspapers and magazines on a daily basis, and of course we are all "on Facebook," otherwise we "wouldn't have a life": we don't exist if we don't commodify ourselves into a face. For

Transmodern Theological Loci" (PhD diss., Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2015), esp. chap. 4.

²⁰ See Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 42 ff.

Deleuze and Guattari, on the contrary, the face is a symbol of death, or of life being captivated in power codes: “The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multi-dimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face.”²¹ From this perspective, giving a “face” to the poor entails decapitating the poor from their body, reducing the diversity and potentialities of their experiences and eventually giving them access to the norms of the center. This is what happens in a dualistic approach in which experience is thought distinct from the interpretation of it, when “seeing” is separated from “judging” (even if the distinction is only made theoretically). Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari contend, “dismantling the face is the same as breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity.”²² From this perspective, encountering God in the “face of the other,” as Levinas defends, entails a hierarchical, powerful, and transcendent God.²³

In his book on the British painter Francis Bacon, Deleuze distinguishes between the face and the head: “[The body] does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body. It can even be reduced to the head. . . . The face is a structured, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is dependent upon the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination. It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath.”²⁴ What Deleuze and Guattari want to effect is a depsychologizing of the face as the door of access to a deeper “self.” Understood in this way, the face functions as a hierarchical instance of power that structures, dominates, and represses everything underneath it, itself obeying the higher law of the center. From this perspective, it is understandable that, for example, Levinas wishes to “give a face” to the “other” or that liberation theologians wish to “give a face” to the oppressed—or, in other words, to give them access to the center. However, it equally becomes clear that such a strategy would simply affirm the underlying logic of oppression and hierarchy between the face and the body. Hence Deleuze and Guattari’s battle for a defacializing rehabilitation of the *head* as an integral part of the body, an overcoming of the matter-spirit dualism through an

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 170.

²² *Ibid.*, 188.

²³ See Emanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1961); and Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1982).

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. W. Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 20.

identification of the spirit with the physical breath. What the poor need is not a face, but the recognition that they have a head and a body, and that there is a diversity among them that should not be frozen in a face.

When maintaining the dualism between center and margins, the margins remain linked with the negative. This legacy of modern rational thinking remains active in postmodern thought, and continues to have too large an influence on postmodern theology today (e.g., in the figure of Jacques Derrida): the poor are identified with what Derrida called an “aporia,” from which a transcendent, ineffable, and nonrepresentable “call for justice” cries, despite its negativity.²⁵ The poststructural alternative, as I will show in part 3 of this article, has a more complex account of power relations, beyond the dualism center-periphery, thereby enabling the periphery as well as the center to find its own *potentia* (power). “Difference” is no longer a negative category, ultimately leaving us in silence (or in negative theology); rather, it is a source of life.

III. The Method Shaping the Option

The overarching dualism that can be discerned within liberation theology’s understanding of the option for the poor can be traced back to its epistemology and method. As I already indicated, there exists a tendency within liberation theology to separate the “see” phase from the “judge” phase within liberation theology’s method. This is partially a consequence of the critique leveled by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at liberation theology’s use of Marx’s theory of historical materialism as a mediation to analyze situations of oppression and structural injustice: if we use only a certain interpretation of Marx in the “see” phase, this materialist, atheist philosopher can no longer influence or (negatively) affect the (purity of the) Christian narrative that eventually urges us to react against this injustice and to transform it according to the vision of the reign of God.²⁶ So whereas liberation theology “used” Marx only as a historical materialist, it rejected the dialectic metaphysics that undergirds his thought.²⁷

²⁵ See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Apories: Mourir, ou s’attendre aux “limites de la vérité”* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

²⁶ Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* (*Libertatis Nuntius*), August 6, 1984, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theolog-liberation_en.html.

²⁷ The reactions to this move have been multiple: some still reproach liberation theology for incorporating “the secular” in theology. For example, John Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994]) and others claim that liberation theology either was never Marxist enough (e.g., Alistair Kee, *Marx and the*

This part is divided into two sections: first, I briefly discuss the “classical” position of Clodovis Boff (b. 1944), which was in large part developed as a response to the various critiques of liberation theology and should be understood in this context.²⁸ Although I value Boff’s attempt to develop a methodology for theology that includes the material world in it, my aim here is to move on to a method that I think is more suitable for our global context today, and is more truthful to the initial intuition of liberation theology as starting from the cry of the poor. I reveal my critique of Boff’s epistemological gap further by connecting it to the hermeneutical theology of the Belgian/Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (1914–2009). Second, I move on to Ignacio Ellacuría’s (1930–89) more integrative position on liberation theology’s method, which offers the theoretical basis for the method of cartography presented in part 3.

IV. The Method of Boff and Schillebeeckx

In his article “Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,” published in the “Bible” of liberation theology, *Mysterium Liberationis*, Clodovis Boff attempts to overcome this separation between seeing and judging, and thereby between secular and religious. He writes that “it is *only methodologically* that we begin with ‘seeing’ or ‘reality,’ when in fact faith is always there as the alpha and omega of the entire process.”²⁹ However, stating this, Boff repeats the dualism on the epistemological level by distinguishing between method and content. He again distinguishes between the theological and secular when he writes, “To enter by the door of material and historical liberation or by the door of spiritual and eternal liberation is a question of purely methodological and pastoral convenience, and not of theological truth.”³⁰ Here Boff wishes to distinguish the vision of liberation theology that starts from a material, historical experience of oppression from the concept of liberation that is used within the Roman Catholic Church, which he depicts as “spiritual and eternal,” starting from the “soteriological dimension of liberation (liberation from sin and death).”³¹ In my view, however attentive to the diversity among the oppressed

Failure of Liberation Theology [London: SCM Press, 1990]) or should have read Marx differently (see Denys Turner, “Marxism, Liberation Theology, and the Way of Negation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 229–47).

²⁸ For a more elaborate discussion of the context and content of Boff’s and Ellacuría’s method, see Drexler-Dreis, “Toward a Decolonial Theology.”

²⁹ Boff, “Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,” 59 (emphasis mine).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

Boff may be,³² and however nuanced and elaborated his method,³³ he disregards the potential theological truth *within* the material experience of poverty and oppression. Although Boff made an admirable attempt at taking the material world seriously in his theology, for him theological truth belongs to the “judging” phase, when the hermeneutic of the Bible helps liberation theologians to interpret God’s message as one of liberation for the poor. According to Ivan Petrella, this distinction “implicitly sets up a divide between theology and the social sciences that disables liberation theology from moving from a discourse *about* liberation to the pursuit of liberation as a social reality.”³⁴ The epistemological gap between the “seeing” phase (the socioanalytical mediation) and the “judging” phase (the hermeneutical mediation) thus threatens to prevent liberation theology from being materially liberating. Moreover, it leads to a misunderstanding of the material situation itself, as Gebara points out when referring to a “deductive understanding” of the option for the poor: “This perspective maintains that the whole range of things we know naturally can be changed, but not the truths of faith, the order of things revealed by God These ‘revealed truths’ come almost to have a life of their own: they end up becoming truths that cannot be questioned in light of Christian communities’ history and lived experience.”³⁵ Indeed, tracing back these “revealed truths” within the history of Christianity, we discover the trinity of see-judge-act in the work of Thomas Aquinas, as well as in the hermeneutical paradigm of someone like Schillebeeckx, who developed his theology in response to the secularizing, modern world in which he found himself.³⁶ By putting the negative “contrast experience” in the center of his theology, Schillebeeckx reveals himself as a political theologian with affinities for liberation theology. In developing a hermeneutical, praxis-oriented theology, Schillebeeckx, in Lieven Boeve’s words, has placed “Christians in the midst of an emancipatory and liberating struggle of humanity for a

³² *Ibid.*, 77: “We cannot attend exclusively to the purely socioeconomic aspect of oppression—the aspect of poverty itself—however basic and determining it might be. We must also look at the other levels of social oppression: racial (*blacks*), ethnic (*Indians*), and sexual (*women*).”

³³ Boff’s article in *Mysterium Liberationis* is based on his doctoral dissertation, later published as *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (see note 8).

³⁴ Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 29.

³⁵ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 43.

³⁶ For a complete overview of the place of “praxis” within theology, see Daniel Franklin Pilario, *Back to the Rough Ground of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

more just and humane society.”³⁷ Indeed, Schillebeeckx’s frame of thought can be viewed as sharing much of the epistemological framework of classical liberation theologies such as Clodovis Boff’s.

At first sight, it seems that Schillebeeckx’s “theology of experience” succeeds in bridging the gap between the secular and the religious. For him, the “relationship with lived experience is the criterion for the meaning of theological interpretations.”³⁸ However, despite this intention, the contrast experience remains a *pre-religious experience*: a negative contrast-experience is a “basic and human pre-religious experience and thus a basic experience accessible to all human beings, namely that of a ‘no’ to the world as it is. . . this experience is also more certain, more evident than any verifiable or falsifiable knowledge that philosophy and the sciences can offer us It discloses an openness to another situation which has the right to our affirmative ‘yes.’”³⁹ By categorizing the contrast experience in the pre-religious domain, Schillebeeckx testifies to a dominance of the “humanist,” secularist worldview: it allows him to consider these experiences as having a universal value, on anthropocentric (rationalist) grounds. Thus, Schillebeeckx aligns himself with the tradition of critical theory. He even mentions the “negative dialectic” as the “universally acknowledgeable pre-understanding of all positive human projects of meaning” (the negative, the experience of suffering, as the precondition for hope).⁴⁰

Another consequence of this categorization is the affirmation that the theological question for salvation becomes a question of being a human being, part of a larger humanity⁴¹—an anthropocentrism that is hard to hold onto in our “posthuman” times, when structural and poststructural theories have helped us realize that the human subject is a construct, a crossroads of lines of power that encounter each other. Moreover, Schillebeeckx’s account of the contrast experience installs a dualism between experience and the Christian tradition, which in turn veils the experience with hope, as it were. The distinction also allows Schillebeeckx to “idealize” the margins to a certain extent, saying that “the place where people are dishonoured, oppressed and enslaved, both in their own hearts and in society, is at the same

³⁷ Lieven Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology,” in *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origin to Ricoeur*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming, *Studies in Philosophical Theology* 23 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 199–225, at 200.

³⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974), 14.

³⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5–6.

⁴⁰ Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” 204.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

time the *privileged* place where religious experience becomes possible.”⁴² By analyzing the contrast experience hermeneutically—that is to say, within a *linguistic* worldview—the “body,” the matter of this experience, is disregarded in favor of the interpretation of it (in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the face that I described above, we could say that the body is “facialized”). As Boeve confirms, Schillebeeckx “accentuates the *reflexive* character of experiences: experiences are not so much concerned with unmediated ‘sensations’ or ‘affections,’ but rather with interpretation and reflection.”⁴³ Though one cannot easily deny that all experience is mediated, I will further propose that a “correct” understanding of experience is not mediated by language, but by the body. The body is necessary to discern the affirmative power that can lead us beyond the negative, into the creation of alternative ways of *living* and not only of thinking.

Boff’s and Schillebeeckx’s epistemologies thus seem to contain an inherent contradiction: how can a modern, hermeneutic epistemology help us articulate the option for the poor, the latter being precisely the *victims* of this paradigm of modernity? Even if we admit to certain positive elements within modernity (e.g., emancipation or equality), it remains a fact that precisely the potentially oppressing dualities that are so characteristic of a modern rationality, as well as the focus on spirit (language) rather than matter (body), and modernity’s anthropocentrism, are present at the heart of Boff’s and Schillebeeckx’s epistemologies.

V. Ignacio Ellacuría: From Linguistic Hermeneutics to Realist Hermeneutics

Within this debate, I consider the Jesuit theologian Ignacio Ellacuría as occupying a position in the middle. On the one hand, his reflections are still a product of a modern philosophical education and background, but on the other hand, he envisions an attempt to transcend the oppressive dualisms that result from a modern paradigm. While Boff’s method was developed in an apologetic reaction to Rome’s and others’ criticisms, Ellacuría reflects from the urgency of situations of oppression in reality: “My aim is not to ape the latest European fashion in theology. Quite aside from the theoretical reasons which demonstrate that we must historicize salvation, that it is not a matter of merely being fashionable, these pages are prompted by a real-life

⁴² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 59–60.

⁴³ Boeve, “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx,” 215.

situation and a real-life necessity."⁴⁴ Ellacuría involves the body in a broad sense *within* theology (understanding "embodiment" as our essential connectedness to reality and to history). Even though his theological method maintains a threefold structure that is to some extent in line with the see-judge-act method, "lived reality" (as opposed to reflecting upon the abstract philosophical concept "Being")⁴⁵ is central in each phase. A double crossover is thus realized: first, the body acquires its rightful dimension within theology, while theology also "reclaims" history, the secular, or the material as a *locus theologicus*.

For Ellacuría, liberation theology is the theology of historical reality, understood as "the differentiated and structured totality of reality."⁴⁶ This means that history is the "fullest location of reality and salvation."⁴⁷ There is only one history in which Christian salvation appears. In a response to Cardinal Ratzinger's critique of liberation theology from the mid-1980s, Ellacuría puts it this way: "Christian revelation and salvation not only have appeared in history, but they constitute a salvation history. Because there is no possibility of revelation except in the historical and for those who are a part of history. Revelation itself can only continue by passing through history and cannot be completely concluded."⁴⁸ Thus the starting point for theology is the human encounter with reality; this is the basis for Ellacuría's method of liberation theology.⁴⁹ He distinguishes three aspects of this encounter that are in a way linear or accumulative in terms of intensity and engagement.

First, in the "noetic" phase, one "realizes the weight of reality," implying an intellectual and bodily presence within reality. For Ellacuría, "human intelligence is not only essentially and permanently sensitive but is initially and fundamentally a biological activity."⁵⁰ The "hermeneutics" involved in this encounter need to remain connected to reality: "Hermeneutical investigation should thematically and permanently ask itself, to what social world do the formulations respond, seeing that not even a purely theoretical formulation

⁴⁴ Ignacio Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh: The Mission of Christ and His Church*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 4–5.

⁴⁵ See Xavier Zubiri, *On Essence*, trans. A. R. Caponigri (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1980).

⁴⁶ Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Christian Challenge of Liberation Theology," in Lee, *Ignacio Ellacuría*, 123–36, at 125.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 125–26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁹ See Michael Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation: The Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2009).

⁵⁰ Ignacio Ellacuría, "Laying the Philosophical Foundations of Latin American Theological Method," in Lee, *Ignacio Ellacuría*, 63–92, at 79.

completely explains its meaning only from itself.”⁵¹ Indeed, we do not need another “framework of interpretation” for this world, but a material transformation of it.⁵² So even if Ellacuría uses a linguistic, hermeneutical framework as a methodological tool of understanding the world, and even if he still makes a distinction between “the biological” and the “intellectual” as separate categories, this hermeneutics is deeply grounded in materiality of the real: “There is no pure [hermeneutical] circularity between a theoretical horizon and the comprehension of the meaning of some specific thing. The circularity is physical: it is physical in the point at which all comprehension and all activity starts, and it is physical in the movement by which the concrete determining factors are constituted.”⁵³ One wonders, indeed, whether Ellacuría should have referred to hermeneutics in the first place, even if he opts for a “realist hermeneutics” instead of a theoretical or historical hermeneutics: “We should utilize a realist hermeneutics that takes into account what every action and interpretation owes to the actual conditions of a society and the social interests that sustain them. We should do this with regard to both the interpreted and the interpreter. This is not to exclude technical, methodological hermeneutics but to subordinate them to an approach to the hermeneutical labor that is more general and more profound.”⁵⁴ I will put forward another, less dualistic possible way of understanding reality that starts with the body rather than simply referring to it or involving it. Ellacuría’s proposed method for liberation theology comes close to the “cartographical” method on which I will elaborate below. It is important to realize that “reality” for Ellacuría, as for his mentor, the philosopher Xavier Zubiri, does not equal “being.” As a consequence, the senses are naturally involved in this encounter with reality. This “sentient intelligence” (Zubiri’s term) also connects the three dimensions of Ellacuría’s method.

⁵¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, “Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico Latinoamericano,” in *Liberación y cautiverio: Debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina*, ed. Enrique Ruiz Maldonado (Mexico City: Encuentro Latinoamericano de Teología, 1975), 627, quoted in Kevin Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 103.

⁵² Ellacuría, “Laying the Philosophical Foundations of Latin American Theological Method,” 70 (on Leonardo Boff): “This is the person who finds himself or herself having not to opt for one or another system of interpreting the universe, but rather for one or another system of transforming his or her historical reality. Consequently, history and hermeneutics take on a different meaning.”

⁵³ Ellacuría, “Laying the Philosophical Foundations of Latin American Theological Method,” 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

Second, there is the ethical dimension of “shouldering the weight of reality.” The expression itself—“shouldering”—indicates that this dimension speaks not only to the human mind; the ethical choices one makes in one’s engagement with reality have a spatial dimension. In Kevin Burke’s words, “What one knows and who one becomes depend on where one puts one’s body, understanding by *body* both the materiality and sociality of the human.”⁵⁵ For Ellacuría, the preferred theological place is among the poor and the oppressed. Like Boff and Schillebeeckx, Ellacuría thus situates the option for the poor in the ethical (“judge”) dimension, although Ellacuría connects this judging phase with the body, as opposed to the scriptural/textual approaches of both Boff and Schillebeeckx, and thereby shows his awareness of differences in power positions: “The poor of Latin America are the theological place [*sic*] insofar as they constitute the maximum and scandalous, prophetic and apocalyptic presence of the Christian God and, consequently, the privileged place of Christian praxis and reflection.”⁵⁶ It is in this phase that the actual “option for the poor” is taken not as an intellectual choice that inspires certain reflections, but in the form of a bodily “re-location.” This relocation inevitably leads to a third dimension of the human encounter with reality: “taking charge of the weight of reality,” the actual praxis that is aimed at a transformation of reality. The nature of this action, as well as its concrete tactics, depends on the situation.

With his account of Christian salvation as salvation in (and of) history, and with his understanding of transcendence within history (the method of historicization), Ellacuría attempts to overcome the epistemological gap that can be found in different methodological expressions of liberation theology, and in particular in the see-judge-act methodology. He has developed a “critical theology” in which the critical aspect is not limited to the Marxist analysis of oppressive social and economic structures, but permeates his entire theology.⁵⁷ However, Ellacuría’s method, which has the human encounter with reality as a starting point, is rather anthropocentric in kind, even if this human being’s body is also included in the hermeneutical reflection. Moreover, Ellacuría seems to develop this method for the liberation theologian, for the privileged and educated person who is able to reflect upon situations of oppression and Christian discipleship, rather than for people who are poor. This has to do with Ellacuría’s notion of discipleship, with how he thinks Christians should live in and act upon the world, expressing their

⁵⁵ Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 104.

⁵⁶ Ignacio Ellacuría, “Los pobres, ‘lugar teológico’ en América Latina,” *Misión Abierta* 4–5 (1981): 225–40, quoted in Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 105.

⁵⁷ Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 7.

understanding of salvation through Christ.⁵⁸ To put it perhaps too sharply, the poor themselves are in danger of remaining invisible within this theorization;⁵⁹ indeed, they have no “language” except their broken bodies. They might be the starting point, but they are not the subject of the theology of liberation. Thus, there is the danger of maintaining a last dualism: that between the “rich” (even if he/she shows solidarity with the poor) and the “poor.” Leaving behind the hermeneutical and linguistic framework altogether might render the poor visible again, or might make them heard, not in the “representational” sense, but in a visionary way.

In the final section, I will effect a postmodern and posthuman “turn to the body” by outlining briefly a new account of epistemology for contemporary liberation theology and applying it immediately to the option for the poor.

VI. Cartographies of Experience: Toward a New Epistemology and Methodology for Liberation Theology

How can we think the body and materiality in a non-anthropocentric way, so that the “option for the poor” is not limited to a perspective from the center and no longer treats the experiences of poverty in a reductive fashion? Here I propose the method of “cartography” as a new method for contemporary liberation theology. The three “traditional” components of social analysis, (bodily) hermeneutics, and praxis are all discernable within the method of cartography as well, although they are intertwined and cannot be viewed as separate phases. As a consequence, their function and meaning are altered, as will become clear in what follows.

The use of “cartography” as an epistemological and ontological concept can be traced back to the French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari. Feminist philosopher and critical theorist Rosi Braidotti has taken up and elaborated on the concept, defining a cartography as “a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present. Cartographies aim at epistemic and ethical accountability by unveiling the power locations which structure our subject-position.”⁶⁰ Central in a cartographical approach is the consciousness of the power one has in a particular position (an individual’s amount of power can change according to his/her/its position in the world, and is defined by this individual’s relations at any different point in time). As a consequence, the starting point of this epistemology is not an “ego” or an “I,” but the

⁵⁸ See Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation*.

⁵⁹ See Clemens Sedmak, “Human Dignity, Interiority, and Poverty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 192 (2013): 563–75.

⁶⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 164.

embodied and relational structures of subjectivity, not limited to human beings, interwoven in a web of power relations. The map that is drawn in the process of a cartography, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, is "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation."⁶¹ Power positions, in other words, are not fixed, nor are they attached to one individual.

"Cartography" is a more accessible term for what Deleuze and Guattari also call a "rhizome," a botanical term used to depict a certain structuring of desire and power relations. The rhizome is a particular root structure in which the roots (e.g., of grass) are a horizontal network without a center. It grows in all directions—as opposed to the tree, which emerges from the soil and branches out from a central stem. A rhizome operates according to the principles of heterogeneity and connection: "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be."⁶² A rhizomatic community is one in which there is no hierarchy: the dualism between center and periphery is replaced by a complex but horizontal network of power relations. This description of the rhizome as a dynamic "locus" indicates its potential for agency at the same time. No longer is action the result of a conscious decision of a (rational) subject. When operating from a cartography, praxis is the result of power relations; it is a process that happens in between two points in a network. In a joint interview with Foucault entitled "Intellectuals and Power," Deleuze pictures a new relation between theory and praxis as a field of relays, points of connection of energy, where practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. Thus a multiplicity of relays/interconnections emerges, so that there is only action: theoretical action and practical action. This action is not necessarily the action of a conscious subject or individual: it is always collective, invisible (non-representable) action.⁶³ Note that action, from this perspective, is no longer an anthropocentric enterprise. I contend that this understanding of action allows for theology to really emerge from the poor. Indeed, the poor, I would argue, are not in need of a (Western)

⁶¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶³ See Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205–17.

intellectual who raises their consciousness, whom they might need to gain knowledge. Foucault speaks about “the indignity of speaking for others” in this regard, referring, for example, to the way prisoners are treated, or children in a day-care center, or even in school: “It is a theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf.”⁶⁴

Of course, by merely looking at things differently (a cartography of power relations instead of a center-periphery dualism), abusive power relations and situations of oppression do not simply disappear. But the refusal of thinking in dualisms is no doubt a political choice that enables different strategies and tactics that are able to avoid an affirmation of existing power positions (such as this center-periphery divide). Indeed, a cartographical perspective starts from the entanglement of language and matter. Matter and meaning are not separable elements. Karen Barad, who combines quantum physics with critical and feminist theory in her work on “ethics of entanglement,” puts it this way:

Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated.⁶⁵

In this way, cartography is a radical move of de-identification or de-facialization, and therefore, it is a political endeavor. It is, in Braidotti’s words, a “politically informed map of one’s historical and social locations, enabling the analysis of situated formations of power and hence the elaboration of adequate forms of resistance.”⁶⁶ In relation to the poor, this posthuman approach transcends a politics of identity and entails that we are all connected with the experience of the poor. We are involved through the axes of power that situate us, even though we are in the center (and even because of it). Designing a cartography means including the factor of “power” in our epistemology. Indeed, power comes with “being,” not with “having” (the latter would be a remnant of a

⁶⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁶⁵ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 152.

⁶⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 271.

politics of identity). But once one leaves the dominance of identity discourse, things become more complex. Foucault distinguishes between power as *potestas* and power as *potentia*: the first indicates macropolitical forms of hierarchical power representations, while the second indicates micropolitical, situated forms of “empowerment.” Critique of power as *potestas* thus becomes linked with the creativity of *potentia*,⁶⁷ the level at which the cartographical approach operates. The functioning of cartography at the level of micropolitics, however, does not entail stasis in the domain of macropolitics. When one is convinced that matter and meaning are entangled, that entanglement is intrinsic to the world’s vitality,⁶⁸ and that changes in either domain at a microlevel materially affect the macrolevel (also proven within quantum physics), one realizes that the macropolitical enterprise is also involved in and critiqued by a cartographic approach. The latter in particular questions the representational logic that underlies the macropolitical, a categorizing logic that works according to a dynamics of exclusion, such as the center-periphery dualism. Over against the logic of representation, Barad proposes a performative understanding of discourses: they immediately have an impact on matter: “A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things. Unlike representationalism, which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being.”⁶⁹ Transcending the distinction between language and matter does not mean that theory is absolved into praxes; it means that the boundaries between theories and practices are blurred and mutually influence one another. This insight all the more stresses the importance of an epistemology that responds to and is engaged with reality, instead of being a construction placed on top of it.

Deepening Ellacuría’s movement of a historicization of theology, an “encounter” with the poor on one of our power axes is no longer described as a seeing and recognition of the face of the poor or the other. Barad’s term “diffraction,” a concept that could very well function within the cartographical epistemology, might be better suited to describe what’s going on in this process of “dealing” with the poor. “Diffraction” stems from the world of theoretical physics, referring to the way in which waves behave when they

⁶⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 164: “Critiques of power locations, however, are not enough. They work in tandem with the quest for alternative figurations . . . in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*).”

⁶⁸ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 396.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

encounter each other. The concept has gained much credibility in our post-Newtonian era, when particles are recognized as having a wave character as well. Barad points to the potential of the concept: "Diffraction can serve as a useful counterpoint to reflection: both are optical phenomena, but whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference."⁷⁰ By focusing on processes of interaction, diffraction helps us to understand how we can bypass the binary between matter and "culture"/language, between experience and tradition, and ultimately, beyond a politics of identity. Following the meaning of diffraction, both parties, both lives that are involved in the encounter, are changed by the encounter. Diffraction is a process that allows for knowledge "without a distance," bodily knowledge, which is exactly what we learn from quantum physics: it makes us aware of the extent to which we are a part of the phenomena that we try to understand.⁷¹ This insight brings to the fore a relational ontology and an a priori ethical engagement (and thus not an ethical choice "added" afterward to the analysis of a certain situation of oppression, which we saw was a potential pitfall of liberation theology's see-judge-act method). When encountering the poor within this frame of posthuman embodiedness, the God who is encountered in the margins is a radically immanent God, although God is not representable and remains therefore in some way also transcendent to our "facializing" tendencies: God becomes a transcendence *within* the immanence of the cartography of power relations. Cartography is thus a form of immanent materialism, usually called "new materialism,"⁷² that starts from an understanding of being as a dynamic, differentiating reality, avoiding static, rational categories, and that needs to be distinguished from a humanist materialism such as Marx's. On the other hand, the choice for a materialist metaphysics does not affirm a nature-culture divide, nor a spirit-matter dualism. As defined by Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, "New materialism is a cultural theory that does not privilege matter over meaning or culture over nature. It explores a monist perspective, devoid of the dualisms that have dominated the humanities (and sciences) until today, by giving special attention to matter, which has been so neglected by dualist thought."⁷³ While the concept of difference is traditionally connected to transcendence (difference as referring to the other/Other),

⁷⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁷¹ "Interview with Karen Barad," in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, ed. I. van der Tuin and R. Dolphijn (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 48–70, at 52; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 247.

⁷² See Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, *New Materialism*.

⁷³ Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, *New Materialism*, 85.

a cartographical approach that is inherently immanent will have to articulate a novel understanding of difference. Indeed, within the framework of new materialism, difference is no longer a category that refers to otherness and eventually distances beings from each other. On the contrary, difference is “about making connections and commitments.”⁷⁴

The immanentism of new materialism could, of course, engender serious theological problems. From a liberation theological perspective, the main question would be the ethical question: how, within an immanent worldview, is it possible to be critical, to make ethical choices, and to fight for a just world? The very nature of diffraction and cartography provides the answer to this concern: critique, from a cartographical point of view, is a negative endeavor that uses a false distance as its condition. Critique, says Barad, is a “practice of negativity that I think is about subtraction, distancing, and othering.”⁷⁵ The ethics of diffraction is not about seeing and judging, but about entanglement and “respectful, detailed, ethical engagements.”⁷⁶ In this respect, Donna Haraway calls for “another kind of critical consciousness”: “Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form, thereby giving rise to industries of [story-making about origins and truths]. Rather, diffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness.”⁷⁷

Critique as a modern category is thus no longer relevant. As a consequence, ethics no longer comes after the fact; it is always already present in all worldly activities and not limited to human beings’ situational and temporal choices. Ethics becomes a response-ability, a matter of the ability to respond. “Ethics is therefore not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part.”⁷⁸ Ethics, in short, belongs to the very nature of matter, instead of being added to it after the fact. Being, the world, is always already an ethical matter. Quantum physics teaches us that seeing, judging, and acting cannot be separated phases of a methodology, but have to be replaced by a cartography that is ethical in its very core.

⁷⁴ “Interview with Karen Barad,” 69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷⁷ D. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@MeetsOncoMouse*™ (New York: Routledge, 1997), 173.

⁷⁸ “Interview with Karen Barad,” 69.

Another possible criticism, formulated from a Schillebeeckxian point of view, could be that this proposal loses sight of the Christian tradition, and that I am putting all my bets on the quantum physics (the matter) of the situation. The tradition, however, has not at all disappeared after a “diffraction” with cartography. Just as when waves encounter each other, creating new patterns in different directions, becoming bigger or more complex, a “diffractive reading” of the Christian tradition with cartography could result in a new vision for liberation theology. Indeed, the method of cartography, replacing the “see-judge-act” method of liberation theologies with its relational account of the subject, its consciousness of the complexity of power relations, and its embodied way of thinking, can enable liberation theology to better uncover oppressive power relations and resist exploitative expressions of advanced capitalism. Cartography can do this better even than a humanist Marxist analysis, which often reflects “modern” dualisms. In Braidotti’s words, “Given that the political economy of global capitalism consists in multiplying and distributing differences for the sake of profit, it produces ever-shifting waves of genderization and sexualization and naturalization of multiple ‘others.’ It has thus effectively disrupted the traditional dialectical relationship between the empirical referents of Otherness—women, natives, and animal or earth others—and the process of discursive formation of genderization/racialization/ naturalization.”⁷⁹ It is an epistemology that respects the knowledge of the body, of real experience beyond its representation, and can thereby discover the reality of life in the margins and the power, the *potentia*, it contains. The starting point of this liberation theology is not the “face of the other,” nor even the “encounter with a suffering other,” but the community of interrelated individuals, human and nonhuman.

⁷⁹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 27.