

The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy.

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In *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy*, Nichole Flores crafts an argument that aesthetic expression is key to the promotion of an inclusive, pluralistic democracy characterized by justice and the common good. Countering calls by scholars of political liberalism to constrain religious expression in the public square, Flores seeks to make space for aesthetic expression that is both religious and political and that permeates quests of the marginalized and vulnerable for justice and dignity. As a Latine Roman Catholic ethicist, Flores draws on Catholic theological and ethical resources, including Latine theological aesthetics and Catholic social thought, particularly the principle of solidarity. She illustrates her broader argument through attention to contemporary interpretations, in a variety of artistic media, of the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe's appearance to Juan Diego at Tepeyac, outside of Mexico City, in 1531. On Flores's reading, Guadalupe empowered Juan Diego to make claims on the colonial and ecclesial authorities of his time and empowers activism for justice today.

In her first chapter, Flores skillfully deploys the Guadalupe narrative to undermine the false dichotomy between private religious expression and political advocacy. Here and throughout the book, she describes cases of Guadalupan-inspired aesthetic expression that simultaneously function as protest directed at both political and ecclesial authorities. For example, Flores offers an extended discussion of the play *The Miracle at Tepeyac*, a contemporary retelling of the Guadalupe story set in a fictional Hispanic parish in Colorado. This play is presented to a Chicano parish community resisting the gentrification of Latine neighborhoods in Denver (38–39). Other examples include Guadalupan imagery on United Farm Workers protest banners (39); Guadalupan devotional processions that are also public demonstrations for citizenship rights; and La Antorcha Guadalupana, a torch run from Mexico City to New York City to dramatize the need for migration justice (30–31).

Narratives and symbols may inspire action for justice, but they can generate diverse meanings and interpretations, not all of which are liberating. As Flores notes, the Guadalupe symbol has also been used to critique women's sexuality (110) and to confine conceptions of religion to private, apolitical devotion (27). Some contend that Guadalupe has been used to



valorize *mestizaje* identity at the expense of indigenous aspects of Latine identity or Black identities within Latine communities (32, 111–12).

On an even more troubling note, references to the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, haunt the book. At this event, white supremacists processed with tiki torches to protest the removal of Confederate statues and violently attacked counter-protestors, killing one and injuring many (11). This demonstration had its own insidious aesthetic of processions, chants (“Jews will not replace us!”), and symbols (Nazi salutes, swastikas, Confederate flags) (127).

How do we assess aesthetic productions to determine whether they foster an inclusive common good in a pluralistic democratic society, or whether they promote exclusion, repression, hierarchy, or hatred? This is one of Flores’s central and recurring questions.

In chapters 2 and 3, Flores interrogates the political liberalisms of John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum, respectively. Both thinkers seek to contain religious speech in the context of public deliberation about the basic structure of a democratic society. Though Flores may overstate the influence of Rawlsian thought on actual political practice (49), Rawls and Nussbaum have put forth dominant theoretical frameworks for thinking about the relationship between religious expression and pluralistic democracy. They must be contended with, and Flores adds an important dimension to previous critiques.

While others have noted (and Flores reiterates) that Rawls’s conception of religion is a very specific and narrow one reflecting twentieth-century white mainline Protestant Christianity (50), Flores fleshes out this critique with her aesthetic focus. For Rawls, religion is doctrine—he does not think of religion in terms of ritual, narrative, symbol, or experience. As doctrine, religion parallels other systems of belief that can (he thinks) be compartmentalized and translated into commonly accepted views about basic justice in the context of a pluralistic democracy (61). Several religious ethicists have provided incisive critiques of Rawls’s treatment of religious speech (57–59). But as Flores notes, “[i]f religious speech challenges Rawls’s proviso, religious symbols such as Our Lady of Guadalupe confound it” (59). Symbols generate a surplus of meaning and diverse interpretations. They do not lend themselves to translation into a package of proposals about the shape of a just society that can easily be affirmed across other forms of difference. Rawls’s narrow conception of religion, reflecting his own privileged social location, is a theoretical flaw, one with heightened consequences for historically marginalized groups who draw upon symbol, ritual, and narrative to develop a sense of dignity and inspire activism in the pursuit of justice.

Flores then turns to Nussbaum’s account of political emotions and her argument that carefully curated aesthetic experiences (notably, Anglo-American realist novels) can help form wise judges and democratic citizens (94). Nussbaum appears more promising for an aesthetic account of solidarity, given that her list of capabilities essential to a fully human life includes many that can be seen as aesthetic: senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; and play (78). However, Nussbaum argues that certain emotions (compassion, love) promote stable democracy and others (anger, shame) tend to undermine it (87). In effect, Flores argues, Nussbaum’s constraints on the sorts of political emotions that should be encouraged parallels Rawls’s constraints on the sorts of reasons that may be offered in public deliberation (96). Both curtail the ability of marginalized groups to demand that society grapple with histories of systemic oppression.

While Rawls and Nussbaum fail to appreciate the powerful positive potential of religious and aesthetic expression in the public square, its inevitability, and its particular importance to the oppressed and vulnerable, they are certainly correct that such expression can also be harmful (as Flores herself makes clear). Accordingly, Flores turns toward the constructive project of articulating a standard of justice by which to assess aesthetic expression, drawing on resources within contemporary Catholic theology and ethics.

In chapter 4, Flores turns to Latine theological aesthetics. Some have criticized the turn to aesthetics within Latine theology as inordinately focused on cultural expression at the expense of justice concerns. However, Flores finds and articulates an implicit ethic of justice within this body of work. At the interpersonal level, justice involves a deep respect for human persons as subjects. Flores explicates this in terms of Margaret Farley's account of respect for persons grounded in the two obligating features of personhood, autonomy and relationality (32–36). Such respect is revealed in the truly intersubjective encounter between Guadalupe and Juan Diego. Following Roberto Goizueta, Flores locates the liberative potential of the Guadalupe narrative in this relationship, as it calls forth Juan Diego's dignity, equality, and political agency to make claims on colonial and ecclesial powers (31–35, 142).

At the social level, a just community will honor difference and individuality, and will navigate tensions that may emerge from difference. Here Flores draws on Alejandro García-Rivera's "community of the beautiful," which embraces and celebrates difference; he argues that aesthetic expression can build solidarity across difference in a community devoted to "lifting up the lowly" (114–17, quoting García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999]).

In Catholic social ethics, justice is instantiated in the common good—a state in which each individual member of the community is treated with dignity and possesses the prerequisites of flourishing. Taken together, according to Flores's summary, these notions of interpersonal and social justice are instantiated in a community characterized by equality, mutuality, and participation. Flores argues that aesthetic expression promotes justice, then, when it promotes equality, mutuality, and participation for all members of society (137).

In her final chapter, Flores explores the central Catholic virtue of solidarity, or a deep, abiding commitment to justice and the common good. Recent scholarship in Catholic ethics specifies this virtue further in terms of practical solidarity and intellectual solidarity. *Practical solidarity* means that solidarity must be instantiated through concrete action to promote the common good in specific circumstances (131). To illustrate practical solidarity, Flores draws on Isasi-Díaz's notion of *lo cotidiano*, the everyday contextual situations in which we live our lives, honor relationships, and strive for justice and flourishing (132–33). She connects this *mujerista* concept to a Thomistic notion of practical reason that highlights the importance of contextualized moral agency expressed in everyday decisions and activities (131–32). In this attention to the particular and contextual, Flores finds an affinity with artistic expression, drawing yet another connection between aesthetics and Catholic social ethics.

Flores engages David Hollenbach's definition of intellectual solidarity as a willingness to dialogue with others who have very different conceptions of the good life. Intellectual solidarity, for Hollenbach, requires a willingness to offer reasons for one's views, to listen deeply to others' views, and to be willing to revise one's views (125–26). Flores considers intellectual solidarity "necessary for the life of democracy" (125) but insufficient to produce justice. Some people's conceptions of the good reflect deep investment in privileged identities and power relations that benefit them. In such cases, seeking mutual understanding is not the only need: to promote justice, public discourse should reveal oppression and power dynamics. Hollenbach may overemphasize civility at the expense of justified anger in public discourse, particularly from the marginalized, vulnerable, and excluded (126–28).

In addition, casting solidarity in terms of listening to arguments may leave insufficient space for aesthetic bases of expression such as symbol, narrative, drama, and visual art. As the culmination of her argument, Flores calls for an additional form of solidarity: aesthetic solidarity. Flores defines aesthetic solidarity as "an imaginative and affective basis for relationships that are characterized by mutuality, equality, and participation necessary for fostering the common good" (141). Aesthetic solidarity "is essential to moral formation of people and communities for the work of justice and solidarity" (136).

From the beginning of the book through her own poem about her grandmother Guadalupe in the final pages, Flores intersperses theoretical arguments with concrete examples of aesthetic expression. While the reader is not watching *The Miracle at Tepeyac* or directly witnessing the torch run, Flores's frequent move from academic exposition to descriptions of art and symbol reinforce her argument that some truths and values can best be conveyed symbolically and aesthetically. By containing democratic political expression to primarily discursive modes, political liberalism suppresses these truths and reinforces hegemonic, Enlightenment-based assumptions about what we all can or should hold in common.

Flores is quite compelling in her argument that aesthetic dimensions of human existence are essential to the search for justice and the common good. She is equally compelling in showing that efforts to contain or circumscribe aesthetic expression in our shared discourse about the basic structure of democracy are disproportionately harmful to those on the margins, who may not have access to other modes of democratic participation (such as voting). She is less successful in her proposal for a conception of justice that can assess aesthetic harm, the harm that drives Rawls to hide particularities behind the veil of ignorance and translate religion into what Rawls terms a comprehensive doctrine.

The tradition on which Flores draws to construct a notion of justice and solidarity, Catholic social ethics, is a fundamentally optimistic one. This tradition is based in a Thomistic theology that presumes an ordered, providential creation where the needs of all can be met and an ethic based in a relatively positive assessment of human capabilities for good. Catholic social teaching is often critiqued for its minimal attention to power relations and structures of oppression. This is true even of contemporary Catholic social thought, with its preferential option for the poor and conceptions of structural sin. In her exploration of the possibility of aesthetic solidarity, Flores repeatedly redirects attention to the voices of the marginalized. And yet liberationist strands of Catholic ethics that she invokes often stand in an uneasy tension with more sanguine natural law perspectives upon which she also draws.

This problem is a thorny one, and certainly not specific to Flores. Rather, it pervades most of the contemporary Catholic scholars upon whom she draws (and she draws on many more than this review can touch upon). Her tendency is to tug those thinkers in a more liberationist direction, a direction more attuned to histories of oppression. This is good and necessary and one of Flores's important contributions.

But it seems to me that Flores underappreciates the difficulty of assessing which aesthetic expressions are justice-promoting and which are harmful to an inclusive democracy. The categories of Catholic justice ethics are broad and general: dignity, equality, mutuality, participation. They require interpretation and specification in particular circumstances, as do aesthetic expressions themselves, for such interpretations can vary widely. And the artistic value of many aesthetic expressions lies at least partly in their capacity to highlight tragedy, ambiguity, competing values, and the impossibility of finding a way forward that is thoroughly good or just to all. Flores's account of aesthetic solidarity, at least at its present stage of development, reads as a bit too sanguine to me on this account: the problem is solved too neatly with the broad and general categories of Catholic social thought.

Flores has provided a valuable book. Her juxtaposition of political liberalism, Catholic social thought, theological aesthetics, and Guadalupan-inspired aesthetic and political expression reframes the conversation about a twenty-first-century democracy in important ways. It may point toward the need for even more reframing.