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Intersectionality, Chronic Malnutrition, and Visions of Justice

Oaxaca is one of the most unique states in Mexico, a place rooted in history, bursting in culture, and with over 16 different indigenous languages. Yet with all its richness, Oaxaca is considered one of the socio-economically poorest states in the country. Oaxaca faces a pandemic of social injustice, the result of colonialism, poverty, and rural and ecological exploitation, leading many of its inhabitants to suffer from chronic malnutrition. Correction of malformed theologies that perceive God as colonizer, elite, and transcendent will cultivate a theological vision of land and food democracy through an understanding of God's character as colonized, poor, and immanent.

Chronic malnutrition is multifaceted, as it is the result of undernutrition due to food deprivation or junk food diets and to overnutrition due to excessive overeating.[1] Those who suffer from chronic malnutrition due to food deprivation alone make up 23.3 percent of Oaxaca's total population, according to a 2012 study.[2] Indigenous populations consist of 35.4 percent of those struggling with food deprivation.[3] Food deprivation is cause for the stunted growth in infants and children. The majority of Oaxacans are producers of food, as they are "pastoralists," "the rural landless" who work other people's land, and "smallholding farmers," yet many of them are deprived of the very source they spend their lives cultivating.[4] On the other hand, junk food diets are the causes of the rapidly increasing rates of obesity found in Oaxacans. Much of the food consumed is devoid of nutritional value or has excessive amounts of ingredients that are

[1] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015, 60.
[2] "Mexico Tackles Malnutrition with the PROSPERA Social Protection Program." SUN. Last modified January 24, 2017. Accessed November 28, 2020. https://scalingupnutrition.org/news/mexico-program-of-social-inclusion-prospera/.
[3] "Mexico Tackles Malnutrition with the PROSPERA Social Protection Program," Accessed November 28, 2020.
[4] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader*, 60.

extremely harmful to human health.[5] In Mexico, three-fourths of adults are overweight and one in ten adults has diabetes.[6] Oaxaca holds the highest obesity levels for both adults and children in the country.[7] Given this issue of malnutrition in Oaxaca, it is essential that we understand how this once thriving state became a place of destitution, and then offer corrections towards its restoration.

When the Spaniards entered Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, Hernán Cortés, a Spaniard, asserted himself as "God's chosen agent."[8] Spiritual conquest of the indigenous groups, with the destruction of indigenous temples and an emphasis on "poverty and humility" was the Spaniards' initial declaration of power over the indigenous peoples.[9] In their "profit-based religion,"[10] conquering the land was biblical and that "truth" was undisputable. In conjunction with spiritual conquest, the institutionalization of violence justified land theft from resident populations and genocide of these indigenous peoples.[11] The implementations of the latifundia, a system of land holding of large estates, often by corporations, and encomienda or hacienda systems, in which settlers were given large estates from Spain and the indigenous were expected to work in exchange for education and protection, added to the stationary displacement of and exploitation of the indigenous peoples.[12] When they are valued at all, indigenous Oaxacan bodies are valued for their land or their labor.[13] These oppressive systems and the defiance toward the Spanish brought many indigenous people to their graves.

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[5] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." AlJazeera, September 19, 2020. Last modified September 19, 2020. Accessed November 28, 2020. https://apple.news/AdG6hZrj5Rg-x4gW1CogzXw.
[6] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." September 19, 2020.
[7] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." September 19, 2020.
[8] Fray Jeronimo de Mendieta. Joseph, Gilbert M., Timothy J. Henderson. The Mexico Reader. Duke University Press. 2002, 114.
[9] Fray Jeronimo de Mendieta. *The Mexico Reader*, 114.
[10] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015. 1-55, 32.
[11] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, 8.
[12] Enrique Florescano. *The Mexico Reader*, 131.
[13] Kiera Lane. "Weekly Journal: Deep Solidarity." Theories and Theologies of Public Justice. (unpublished papers, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Fall 2020), 2.

However, these indigenous groups were not passive victims but faced the Spanish colonizers with great resistance. The ten-year revolution beginning in 1910 and ending in 1920 ended the long Spanish dictatorship and established Mexico as a constitutional republic. Post-revolution, caciques, local-level political leaders, eagerly entered the reconstruction phase of Mexico and helped fulfill "the promises of the revolution."[14] One of the focal "promises" was agrarian reform.[15] From the late 1800s to the early 1900s under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, 90 percent of indigenous Oaxacans lost their land, so this reform was absolutely crucial to the livelihoods of the landless.[16] The redistribution of land was a dream too large to realize in this time and space, given that power still lay in the hands of few. Campesinos, or non-land-owning farm workers, pushed for land reform, yet they were faced with further oppression, even the killing the leader of this reform, Rubén Jaramillo, a Zapatista campesino.[17]

Today Mexico faces a reimagined form of colonialism, yet one that still exploits land and people. American fast food chains and stores have colonized the people of Oaxaca. Industrial agriculture in Mexico has displaced millions of campesinos, stripping them of their land, their jobs, and food security.[18] According to Belen Fernandez, neoliberal colonization is killing Oaxacans through "McDonaldization" and "Coca-Colonization."[19] People's health is exploited for the means of big business and ultimately, the desire for capital gain and power over others.

Following the Mexican Revolution, classism became a growing issue in Mexico.[20] Those who were land holders and possessed power and capital were threatened by the push for social change led by the campesinos. Oaxaca, a state largely inhabited by campesinos, many of whom

[14] Rosalie Evans. *The Mexico Reader*, 403.
[15] Rosalie Evans. *The Mexico Reader*, 403.
[16] Kiera Lane. "Weekly Journal: Deep Solidarity," 2.
[17] Rubén Jaramillo. *The Mexico Reader*, 482.
[18] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." September 19, 2020.
[19] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." September 19, 2020.
[20] Rubén Jaramillo. *The Mexico Reader*, 482.

are unemployed, is socially and economically suffering. Growing poverty in Oaxaca is the consequence of a rigged system, a system that favors the wealthy and promotes a corrupt government.[21] Oaxaca is socio-economically one of the poorest states in Mexico. More than sixty percent of its population lives under the national poverty line, with more than a third living in extreme poverty.[22] Classism is "inherently unjust and most harmful to people of color, women, children, and the elderly," and therefore must be addressed intersectionally.[23] The state of Oaxaca is home to sixteen indigenous groups which make up a large portion of Oaxaca's population, most living in rural communities. The inborn indigenousness and ruralness of most Oaxacans land many within the realm of poverty stricken.

Class often impacts health and access to healthcare. Due to high unemployment rates and social location, many indigenous Oaxacans do not have access to healthcare, let alone affordable healthcare. Preventative care, a luxury reserved for the wealthy, is inaccessible, heightening one's susceptibility to unjust illnesses. Critical health issues that develop due to food and land insecurity, often treatable within the medical world, remain untreated. Quality of life decreases when disease due to malnutrition is not attended to. In a land where much harvest is produced, junk food is generally more affordable and accessible.

A common reaction to the poor is pity or judgment which undermines the truth behind how society portrays them. The class society deems as poor is not simply a group that does not have; "they do have. They have culture, ability to work, to work together, to get organized, and to struggle."[24] Oaxaca has a strong culture of resistance and protest, as oppression is not foreign

[21] Maurianne Adams. Warren J. Blumenfeld, D. Chase J. Catalano, Keri "Safire" DeJong, Heather Hackman, Larissa E. Hopkins, Barbara J. Love, Madeline L. Peters, Davey Shlasko, and Zúñiga Ximena. *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. 4th ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018, 226.
[22] Kiera Lane. "Weekly Journal: Classism," 2.
[23] Maurianne Adams. *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 167.
[24] Leonardo Boff. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001, 108.

to its indigenous inhabitants. They are a resilient people seeking recognition of their born human rights to access life-sustaining land and food.

As the Green Revolution grows in Mexico, a developing country, chronic malnutrition is also growing in the bodies of the rural indigenous and the surrounding land. The once self-sufficient state of Oaxaca, primarily consisting of farming communities is now in a state of deep crisis. Due to industrial agriculture and food totalitarianism, an increasing number of large corporations such as Walmart are taking up space and resources in Oaxaca city.[25] Many of the products sold are in nonreusable containers, wraps, bottles, plastics, or bags and they end up polluting a major water source. The Atoyac river, which is running dry, weaves through the city of Oaxaca and has become a dumping ground for local peoples' garbage and waste. Reliance on junk food has skyrocketed because it is what is most affordable to those who have lost their means once sustained by their farmlands, which means the production of harmful waste has grown exponentially as well. "Industrial agriculture has not produced more food. It has destroyed diverse sources of food, and it has stolen food from other species to bring larger quantities of specific commodities to the market, using huge quantities of fossil fuels and water and toxic chemicals in the process."[26] In Oaxaca, chronic malnutrition is largely due to the slow violence of the Green Revolution and extraction of nonrenewable resources. Chronic malnutrition is not solely a struggle for the human bodies of Oaxaca but also for the land. Monocultures, chemical fertilizers, irrigation systems, among other machinery has stripped the soil of its nutrition and life forms. When the land is lacking, the people's bodies too, will lack the nutrients they need.

In the system that has enabled the growth of malnutrition, called "free trade," freedom of choice is stripped from farmers.[27] They no longer can "choose what they grow" nor "what they

[25] Kiera Lane. "Weekly Journal: Rural Exploitation," 2.
[26] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader,* 47.
[27] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader,* 47.

eat."[28] The term "free trade" is a façade covering its reality as "globalized forced trade."[29] According to Belen Ferandez, "in contexts involving the US [free trade] generally means the US is free to do as it pleases while the rest of the participating countries are free to suck it up."[30] With the permission of NAFTA, the United Stated overwhelmed the Mexican market with "sugary drinks, processed foods, and other staples of noxious, corporate-driven existence."[31] Oaxaca, a land known for its cuisine, is forced to send food grown on the nation's land across borders and import hazardous products advertised as food to force-feed its people, causing malnutrition due to scarcity and obesity.

The degradation of the land and its resources and the ailing bodies of the people are the result of resistance to oppressive systems. Land resists its exploiter when it no longer produces due to overuse and misuse. People's bodies resist the Green Revolution and industrial agriculture when they become hungry or obese. Resistance is the vocation to call out malformed theologies and an invitation to correct them with the vision of restored justice.

Malformed theologies that perceive God as conqueror, elite, and transcendent maintain the colonized, poor, and immanent in states of absolute oppression. These theologies that characterize God as violent, individualistic, and hierarchical perpetuate a God that is in opposition to its creation, including humanity. Seeing as God became human, it must be understood that these beliefs are inherently destructive.

Theologies that characterize God as conqueror or colonizer debase the lives of the colonized. The understanding that colonization was predestined by God as a way to clear "the heathens, the Canaanites from the land, in providing a New Israel for the wandering peoples, in

[28] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader,* 46.
[29] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader*, 55.
[30] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." September 19, 2020.
[31] Belen Fernandez. "Neoliberal Obesity and Coronavirus in Mexico." September 19, 2020.

setting up a city on a hill to be a shining light to the nations" preserves the perception of God as violent.[32] God as colonizer justifies the mass genocides of indigenous people, the destruction of land and creation, the altering of seeds, and the pandemic of starvation and obesity.

The poor are oppressed when God is envisioned as elite. In this vision, God is understood as all-powerful reigning from on high, and people step on those with less power to attain an elite status, to become more God-like. Images of God at the top as a lonely individual do not benefit the multitude.[33] Individualism is a lie in which Christians have boxed God in and it makes us lose sight of our need for the other.[34] When we do not know the need for the other, we exploit them for our own benefit. The prosperity gospel has only perpetuated such an ill-informed knowledge of the character of God. It spiritualizes an elite status, showing that those who are blessed have money, health, and material access and condemning those without as unfaithful. In contrast, the spiritualization of poverty takes away from the material reality of being. God as elite validates the individualistic agenda that encourages one to work as hard as one can to achieve a higher-ranking status, even at the expense of others' wellbeing and livelihoods.

Although transcendence is not inherently bad, our colonized minds that understand God as a God who floats in the sky is highly problematic. It belittles the incarnation of God in Jesus and separates the Creator from its creation. It portrays God asserting power down through a hierarchal sequence of creation. This is a process of hierarchy where very few possess the majority of the power. The Christian understanding of humans' relationship with creation as separate from the natural world has justified domination over creation.[35] Claims that humans are

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[32] Eberhart, Timothy. "Shared Mappings, Connections, and Analyses." (class notes, Theories and Theologies of Public Justice, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, November 2020.
[33] Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan. *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. 57-109, 63.
[34] Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan. *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, 63.
[35] Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017. 19-44, 207-217, 239-248, 31.

the sole bearers or the essential bearers of the image of God allows humans to assert power over creation.[36] The Christian assessment that earthly life is insufficient and that death as final is unacceptable permits Christians to stand in opposition to the natural conditions of life and reality.[37] The dualism of the spiritual and material, where the spiritual is seen as more God-like than the material, fosters escapism and the devaluation of earthly life. When we see God as transcendent, we justify the reduction of the material world. It is reduced to less valuable than God and humanity, and land and the created world are exploited, resulting in depletion of resources and degradation of the land. This most directly impacts the earth and those sometimes regarded as slightly more valuable than creation, those whom we call the poor.

When we understand God as colonizer, elite, and transcendent, colonization, poverty, rural and ecological exploitation are sure to prevail, and all of creation, including humanity, will suffer due to land and "food dictatorship."[38] Pursuit of these malformed theologies will only keep us in the "delusion that we can survive long term in a world whose resources are increasingly unshared."[39] The resistance of the landless, poor, and exploited call forth the correction of these malformed understandings of the nature of God.

A theological vision of "biocracy," a "socio-cosmos democracy," that includes land and food justice through an understanding of God's character as colonized, poor, and immanent will free all of creation to live in harmony.[40] Justice is realized when the elite reject individualism and join the multitude in deep solidarity. When poor Oaxacans, wealthy Oaxacans, the Mexican government, and wealthy nations join the multitude, top-down power is rejected and God who is

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[36] Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, 32.
[37] Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, 33.
[38] Vandana Shiva. *The Vandana Shiva Reader*, 61.
[39] Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. 1-44, 20.
[40] Leonardo Boff. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 112.

the God of the poor and oppressed is recognized as One who is part of the multitude. The grassroots movements that indigenous Oaxacans have already begun reject the monotheistic God that rules from the sky and focuses on the doctrine of the Trinity, in which must be understood through perichoresis, that the God of the poor and oppressed is relational and non-hierarchical.[41] An earth-centric approach to a holistic construction of a theological vision for realized justice must be taken so that the whole of creation will experience true liberation.

To realize justice for the colonized, we must know God as such. It is in the life of the person of Jesus where we see God as colonized and not the colonizer. Jesus was born as a landless refugee, as his parents fled their land due to the colonizers' mandate to kill all infant boys. The Roman Empire tortured and killed Jesus through the acts of whipping, flogging, beating, and crucifixion rituals. Jesus' body was devalued and exploited for the benefit of the ones who deemed themselves powerful. Jesus' death is proof of the ultimate resistance to colonization.[42] Jesus stood with the marginalized, taking on a life of powerlessness. God cannot be a colonizer if God is colonized and stands in solidarity with the displaced.

Liberation theology displays Jesus as one who came to free the oppressed. Jesus was poor and hungry, yet he did not spiritualize his material poverty, as he recognizes the body's inherent material necessities: bread, water, and a place to lay one's head. Jesus focused on resisting the elite through development of a multitude through discipleship. Standing up to the elite is a deep expression of love.[43] It does not erase the dominant, rather they become part of the multitude and make productive contributions to society.[44] To realize justice, we must comprehend our need for each other and that uniting is the only way forward.[45] Resources are shared and class structures

[41] Kiera Lane. "Weekly Journal: Deep Solidarity," 2.
[42] Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, 33.
[43] Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan. *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude,* 81.
[44] Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan. *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude,* 78.
[45] Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan. *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude,* 59.

are eradicated through deep solidary and the understanding that the God who is poor cannot also be elite.

When we understand God's immanence, we know God's relationality. Through the incarnation, God made flesh in Jesus, a poor, alienated, hungry, outcast, displaced man, we know the truth of God's immanence. God is integrally found within God's creation, not separated from it. Jesus' immanence, his power that is evident in the material world, is nonhierarchical and portrays an earth-centric mindset where Jesus accepts death as part of the natural order. He does not escape this reality through favoring the spiritual over the material, yet his life and death are proof of fully living as part of creation. The God who is immanent cannot be transcendent in an oppositional manner.

God's colonized, poor, and immanent character offers a hope of realized justice. It rejects the status quo that religion readily blesses and invites revitalized theologies of humanity and creation.[46] This theological vision proposes the deconstruction of exploitive systems and the construction of new structures that mimic the character of God. Within this realm of realized justice, communities are unified, all resources are shared, and humanity lives in solidarity with the natural world. Food and land democracy for poor indigenous Oaxacans facing the crisis of malnutrition, as well as demands for the revival of all of creation are the results of justice realized through correction of malformed theologies.

[46] Dr. Angela Cowser. "Heterosexism and Queer Theology." (class lecture, Theories and Theologies of Public Justice, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Zoom class, November 11, 2020).

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