The remembrance of dismembered bodies: 
the promise and challenge of mourning in the 
southwestern borderlands

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Abstract

For nearly three decades, the United States has pursued a border security strategy that has precipitated the deaths of thousands of migrants. Most of these deaths transpire unseen in remote stretches of the Sonoran Desert, where individuals are reduced to disarticulated bones. Endeavoring to overcome political indifference to these deaths, religious leaders, artists, and activists have joined in public works of mourning. These works strive to lend visibility to an otherwise invisible crisis and to grieve otherwise ungrieved lives. Thus, they usher the dead back into the polis and confound the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. However, the effort to re-present the dead runs the risk of making a spectacle out of the violence perpetrated against migrant bodies, inuring us to their witness or, worse, eliciting a perverse enjoyment. This article seeks first to offer a theological justification for political acts of mourning, before going on to articulate a strategy for resisting the dangers implicit in the remembrance of dismembered bodies.

KEYWORDS: BORDERLANDS; MIGRATION; ETHICS; AESTHETICS; POLITICAL THEOLOGY

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The politics of mourning

At the United States–Mexico line, where two bodies politic divide, the boundaries of American territory and identity are maintained through the violation of migrant bodies. In her 1963 monograph, *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt proposes that the ‘problem of beginnings’ laid down in the origins of every political association is a ‘fratricide,’ the disavowal of responsibility through which the eu zen of political freedom is delivered from life ruled by necessity (Arendt 1963). ‘Cain slew Abel, and Romulus slew Remus,’ Arendt recounts, ‘violence was the beginning and no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating’ (1963:20). However, in the borderlands, the fratricide refuses to stay in the past. It refuses to be a mere problem of beginning. Instead, the violation recurs throughout history, causing to bleed into the present that which is supposed to be past.

Since 1994, the United States has pursued a border enforcement strategy that has precipitated thousands of migrants’ deaths. Informed by a logic of ‘prevention through deterrence (PTD),’ strategists wagered that illicit entries could be prevented if the cost of crossing could be raised to so unbearable a degree that migrants would decline ever to begin the journey in the first place. To this end, border enforcement accumulated personnel and technological assets at populous, urban ports of entry, diverting migrant traffic onto ‘harsher terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement’ (US Border Patrol 1994:7). In the sweltering valleys of the Sonoran Desert, migrants face the acute dangers of injury, dehydration, and exposure. Strategy documents make it clear that planners intended for migrants to find themselves in ‘remote, uninhabited expanses of land’ where they would be exposed to ‘mortal danger’ (US Border Patrol 1994:2). Thus, the desert itself was made the primary means for raising and extracting the cost of crossing.

The Sonoran’s deputization into the law enforcement process works two cunning effects. First, it obscures the strategy’s intentionality, making migrant deaths appear as though they were the random consequence of indifferent natural processes. Second, in this extreme environment, PTD makes migrants hostages to their own bodies, seeding an enmity within them and weaponizing their natural needs for water and shelter against them. For thousands, these weapons have dealt lethal blows. Even after the blow is struck, their bodies are not released from the strategy’s service. Prevention through deterrence relies for its deterrent effect on the production and reproduction of migrant deaths. Broken bodies, discarded on the migrant trails, are made to serve PTD as witnesses to the Sonoran’s deadly
efficiency. To the other migrants who encounter them, they are a warning to turn back, lest they suffer the same fate. However, their testimony is not easily controlled, and it conveys a message to the ‘insider’ as well as to the ‘outsider.’

Today, the yearly growing ledger of the dead counts the human cost by which the bounds of US identity are determined. This cost cannot be dismissed as a matter of political indifference. As Erika Doss suggests, the bodies of the deceased, unburied, and ungrieved present the polity with a life frighteningly ‘out of order’ (Doss 2010). Migrant remains, abandoned to the desert, provide a grisly reminder of the violations that mark the thresholds of the body politic. They attest that the bounds of American territory and identity are not produced and maintained without severing some part of the social body and producing an obscene remainder of non-members.5 This remainder points to the contingency not only of the bodies of the disowned, but of the body politic itself, positing the possibility that life could – and perhaps should – be ordered otherwise. To grieve these lives, to acknowledge them as subjects of moral concern, would demand a reckoning for the fratricide.

However, scholars attentive to the borderlands have noted the problems implicit in grieving the migrants lost to the Sonoran. Alexandra Délano Alonso and Benjamin Nienass observe that by the time of their discovery (if ever they are discovered), many of the remains retrieved from the wilderness are unidentifiable and are interred, without name, in potters’ fields (Alonso and Nienass 2016). Moreover, predominating discourses that proclaim these migrants’ criminality suggest to us that their lives are not worthy of our sympathy (De Genova 2013). They encourage us to suppose that these nameless remains may even be the artifacts of justice served. If, as Judith Butler has suggested, our ability to grieve a life presupposes our capacity to recognize it as a life worth grieving, and, if this capacity is enabled or obstructed by our political discourses, then grieving is frustrated on two fronts (Butler 2009). First, the unidentifiability of migrant remains holds name and biography under erasure, leaving the impression that the life lost is not analogous to our own. Second the reconstruction of these lives as ‘criminal’ further alienates them from ‘regular’ citizens.

Under PTD, border policing is managed through a careful partitioning of visibility and invisibility, which simultaneously foregrounds policing and disappears the bodies whose movement this policing would regulate.6 To the public eye, the borderlands are replete with border protection officers who cruise the landscape in green jeeps and helicopters. Towering border fences and high-tech surveillance apparatuses project the image of a borderline carefully controlled. Unseen, however, are the actual migrants
against whom the state has arrayed these assets. The Sonoran Desert is vast, claiming more than 100,000 square miles in its expanse. Those pressed to navigate its maze of jagged peaks and valleys are rarely seen or heard from again.

Within this constellation of enforcement apparatuses, lives out of order, and aesthetic partitions, Alonso and Nienass propose that practices of public mourning may serve two countervailing political ends. On the one hand, mourning might function to offer a feeling of closure that laments the tragedy but presses the fratricide back into the past, stifling the ethical and political questions it might otherwise raise. On the other hand, there are practices of mourning that endeavor instead to conjure the ghosts that haunt the borderlands. Calling them from the wilderness and into the streets of the *polis*, this latter practice of mourning draws the violation into view and allows the dead to demand a reckoning from the living.

It is my contention that this latter practice of mourning finds theological justification in the very story of primordial fratricide which Arendt cites. Moreover, it promises the formation of new political coalitions motivated by the sort of ethical experience PTD is designed to preclude. However, if they fixate too closely on the image of the ravaged body, these acts of mourning risk becoming a kind of morbid spectacle. Therefore, if the work of mourning is to achieve a genuine re-membering of the body politic, it must take care in its remembrance of dismembered bodies, engaging in a careful play of presence and absence that allows the dead to haunt the subjectivity of the mourner without fixing their eyes on scenes of grisly violence.

**A theological case for haunting**

According to Arendt’s view, the stories of Cain and Abel and Romulus and Remus are essentially the same, differentiated only by their language of transmission. This implicit equation is underscored by Arendt’s willingness, in shorthand, to refer to them as a single ‘tale’ which speaks clearly a singular moral: ‘whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origins in crime’ (Arendt 1963:20). Through this equation, Arendt establishes a causal relationship between the fratricide and the emergence of the political. Likewise, as causes precede effects, she establishes a temporality which seems to imply that fratricide is a problem of ‘beginnings’ and not an enduring problem for the political present. However, Arendt equates the stories of Cain and Romulus by way of an exegetical conceit which leaps over the time between the fratricide and
the foundational act.\textsuperscript{7} When this conceit is dispelled, Genesis 4 resists Arendt’s reading and makes a theological case for the political significance of haunting.

At least as Dionysius of Halicarnassus conveys the story in his \textit{Roman Antiquities}, Arendt’s interpretation of Remus’ murder seems feasible. The murder is the direct consequence of an intractable feud regarding which hill should provide the site for the brothers’ new colony. This fratricide is the consequence of an expressly political dispute. Romulus wishes to build the colony on the Palatine hill, and Remus wants to build it at Remoria. They go to the gods in search of a sign that would resolve the dispute, but the signs they receive are ambiguous and do little to settle the matter. Conflict comes to a head and the rival brothers’ parties attack each other. Remus is killed in the fighting and violence secures the resolution that the gods do not provide. Consequently, the act presents itself as a direct solution to the problem frustrating the \textit{polis’} emergence. Dionysius does not propose, however, that this exigency leads Romulus to kill his brother in cold blood. Romulus grieves for his fallen brother and buries him at Remoria.\textsuperscript{8} Notably, however, the manner of Romulus’ mourning supports a sense of closure. The spatial distance between Remoria and the Palatine hill mirrors a temporal distance between the fratricide, consigned to the pre-political past, and the political foundation it facilitates. Remus’ ghost may have haunted the countryside, but not the streets of Rome.

The fourth chapter of Genesis withholds any such separation, along with whatever sense of closure this separation would afford. Like Romulus, Cain kills his younger sibling. However, whereas the dispute between Romulus and Remus is political, the one between Cain and Abel is not obviously so. Cain’s enmity toward his brother stems from the favor that God shows for the younger sibling’s offering (Gen 4:1–7).\textsuperscript{9} The favor shown to Abel might evince a disruption of the normal state of affairs within the household. The subversion of the primogeniture’s rights is a motif that recurs in the Pentateuch. Nevertheless, Cain’s status as the eventual founder of the first city comes nowhere into question. Consequently, it is difficult to suppose that Abel’s murder stands in any causal relationship with the City of Enoch’s founding. The pericope fails anyway to provide an obvious analogy with the story of Romulus and Remus.

Unlike Romulus, moreover, Cain does not bury or mourn his brother. Determined to be rid of him, Cain leaves Abel’s bloodied body in the field. The establishment of Enoch does not follow directly thereafter. First, God intervenes to confront Cain on Abel’s behalf: ‘Listen!’ This is the divine imperative which meets Cain. Abel’s blood cries out from the ground and, although Cain might want to leave his brother behind, God refuses him
this option (Gen 4:10). Instead, Cain is charged to keep his brother’s cries forever ringing in his ears. This charge of remembrance and the curse that follows it give Abel an afterlife that Remus never receives. Prior to Abel’s death, Cain, who tended the fields, had the identity of one who dwelt on the land. Abel, the shepherd, wandered the earth with his flock. However, with the fratricide, Cain is cursed from the ground. The soil which opened its mouth to receive his brother’s blood spits the crime back at him. ‘When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength,’ God declares, ‘you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth’ (v. 12). No longer able to dwell upon the earth, Cain takes on his brother’s identity. He becomes a wanderer. Cain slays Abel. Nevertheless, it is the one who dwells, and not the one who wanders, that is left behind in the field. Whatever his protest, in assuming Abel’s itinerancy, Cain becomes his brother’s keeper.

With Arendt, we might suppose that Cain, like Romulus, seeks freedom from responsibility for his brother. The life of the other presents itself as an encumbrance that would stifle the political community’s emergence. However, whereas Romulus’ mourning facilitates a closure that establishes a threshold between past and present, responsibility and freedom, the divine imperative to listen ensures that the past spills continually into the present. The curse that makes of Cain a wanderer proposes that the fratricide does not release freedom from responsibility, the political from the ethical. Rather, it allows the good of the life denied to define freedom’s ambit. A politics of mourning informed by Genesis 4, then, must confront the political with this good’s haunting endurance in the present. In so doing, it should stir up longing for a reconciliation that a political life premised on self-determining freedom cannot provide. It should incline us to listen out for the disruptive, ethical demand crying out to us from the ground.

The promise of mourning

Simon Critchley proposes that the motivational force necessary for radical political change depends on a form of ‘ethical experience’ conveyed by just such a demand (Critchley 2007).¹⁰ That is, our ethical subjectivity does not first emerge, on Critchley’s view, in a Promethean moment of autonomous self-legislation. Rather, it is founded in the self’s encounter with a good that approaches it from without and makes a demand upon it, delimiting and orienting its freedom. The political effect of this demand is to yield a divided subject laid open to otherness. This openness, in turn, provides the space for the formation of new political coalitions oriented around those who were once excluded – if only we would listen out for their demand.
The present border enforcement regime threatens to preempt any such ethical experience by banishing to the wilderness and rendering invisible the others who might register the demand. As the desert claims them, and they pass from the company of the living, the Sonoran seems to stifle the outsider’s ethical and political agency. However, whatever release this exile might appear to facilitate for the polis, the story of Cain and Abel rejects the notion that freedom can ever be delivered from the claim that the other might make upon it. The work of mourning attains ethical and political significance, as it publicly contests the boundary between visible and invisible, and exposes the polis once more to the good of the lives it denies.

Barbara Sostaita has demonstrated how the seemingly innocuous act of planting crosses at the sites where migrants have died can provide an occasion for ethically and politically transformative encounters with the dead. Her 2016 essay, ‘Making crosses, crossing borders,’ offers a careful analysis of the aesthetic interventions being made by Arizona artist Alvaro Enciso (Sostaita 2016). Working in tandem with the Samaritans, a network of borderland humanitarians, Enciso designs, creates, and plants crosses in places where migrants have died. These crosses provide a material interruption in the landscape that grants visibility to a crisis PTD attempts to disappear.

Figure 1: Alvaro Enciso (2022), Cross for an unidentified male migrant [sculpture]. Donde Mueren Los Sueños. Digital multimedia project.
The cross, Sostaita observes, is a symbol freighted with multiple meanings. It is PTD’s cunning to make it appear as though migrant deaths are a consequence of natural chance rather than conscious strategy decisions. However, before the cross was a symbol of Christian faith, it was a tool of state-sponsored execution. In this sense, the cross insists not only on visibility for the life of the excluded, but also on the state’s responsibility for this life and what became of it. By illuminating border enforcement’s cunning intentionality, the work of mourning draws into view both the life denied and the choice to deny it, confronting the *polis* with the frightful decision through which its bounds are constituted.

Beyond the crosses’ material significance, Sostaita takes care to capture the subjective impact of carrying them into the desert. Enciso’s crosses are planted by (primarily Anglo-American) volunteers. To do this work, volunteers must suspend the normal patterns of movement and routine that order their days. Stepping out of this order to sojourn in the desert, they are beckoned to join the fallen migrants in an intimate experience of life lived out of order:

Not only are migrants ‘betwixt and between’ their home and receiving countries and life and death, Alvaro and his team are also liminal entities in the sense that they engage in a ‘state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status.’ (Sostaita 2016)11

Critchley contends that ‘ethical experience’ is an experience of ‘hetero-affectivity,’ of being affected by an other. Sostaita notes that those who bear the crosses into these liminal spaces are often moved to tears, to prayer, and to reflections on their own suffering. Together, these responses establish commonalities between the volunteers’ lives and the lives lost. This shared experience presses volunteers into a social space no longer defined by the labels that majority society imposes. This undefined space provides a clearing in which a new community between the mourner and the one mourned can emerge. Sostaita’s intervention is to underscore Genesis’ message that our ethical experiences with others are not limited to encounters with our fellows among the living. They also include ghostly rendezvous with the dead.

Alonso and Nienass’ work adds that those who memorialize migrant deaths in the borderlands are not satisfied with bringing those who dwell in the *polis* out into the wilderness; they seek as well to bring the dead in. Ceremonial crosses can be found in demonstrations across the borderlands. In Tucson, for instance, on *El Día de Muertos*, the organization Coalición de Derechos Humanos organizes an eight-mile processional through the
south side of the city. Participants carry crosses, one for each migrant who has died in the desert during the year. Some bear names, many others the label ‘desconocido/a.’ At the procession’s end, the crosses are joined with those from previous years, producing a collection that numbers in the thousands. Just as Enciso’s crosses aim to facilitate an encounter between the living and the deceased, the Coalición’s crosses signify the dead’s presence. Their overwhelming number depicts with clarity the staggering scale of the crisis. Despite the sheer number of crosses, Alonso and Nienass note that volunteers with the Coalición treat them with great care. They do not call them props, but ‘actors,’ underscoring the dead’s agency in animating the procession and demanding a reckoning from those who would allow them to pass from this world unseen (Alonso and Nienass 2016:435).

By making the dead present, these acts of mourning furnish a second chance for ethical experience. Of course, the dead are not literally present. Their bodies are not exhumed. Their voices do not move the air. But neither are they wholly absent. The dead do cry out. Crosses in the natural landscape and the streets of Tucson present a material trace of the life that was absent. Lingering in the margins between life and death, the ghosts haunt the polis with the decision that border enforcement tries to hide. It is not simply that these poor gamblers wandered into a forbidding wilderness that proved too much for them. There was once a choice. A moment of freedom. In that moment, we might have met the outsider with compassion instead of contempt. Their need for water and shelter might have been attended to rather than weaponized. Things could have been otherwise. For the life mourned, however, this possibility endures only in its subversion. The past cannot be changed. That choice is now beyond us. Nevertheless, if we can be compelled, in our mourning, to live alongside the ghosts, we may yet choose compassion when next such a life confronts us.

The danger of spectacle

For all its ethical and political promise, conjuring ghosts is a perilous enterprise. It is perilous not only for the living, but for the dead as well. As the work of mourning enters into the public space, it risks becoming a kind of spectacle. It may even become so on purpose. In recent years, frustration with decades of entrenched border policies have led some demonstrators to trade crosses for placards bearing images of decomposing migrant bodies. Set in opposition to the spectacles of criminality that serve to legitimize border security efforts, Alonso and Nienass suggest that these graphic images constitute ‘counter spectacles’ that demand redress (Alonso and Nienass 2016:437–9). On the one hand, these images display
in grisly detail the violence that PTD perpetrates against migrants’ bodies. On the other hand, they run the risk of drawing the politics of mourning into the same kind of bodily instrumentalization as that practiced by the regime they mean to criticize.

Just as PTD makes use of the production and reproduction of migrant deaths, I fear, so too may those who place images of ravaged bodies at the center of public spectacle. Immanuel Kant would likely balk at the idea of calling the dead (or their bodies) ‘persons’ in any technical sense. Nevertheless, to speak of the dead as ‘agents’ seems to imply this possibility. Moreover, this is a possibility embraced by many borderlands activists. Again, participants in the Coalición’s procession do not refer to the crosses as props or objects, but as ‘actors.’ If the dead are not merely bodies but persons, as this wording seems to imply, then it seems that they too ought to be treated as ends. To make them means of moral persuasion is still to make them means. It is to subvert their personality and risk perpetuating a dehumanizing process structurally analogous to the one deployed by PTD.

This practice also risks re-entrenching, if inadvertently, the racial violence that the border enforces. Most of these images depict black and brown bodies. Yet the images of the dead are arrayed before a primarily white gaze. Saidiya Hartman, in her 1997 study, *Scenes of Subjection*, warns that gruesome spectacle such as this can inure just as easily as inspire indignation at the body’s violation (Hartman 1997). Hartman opens her book with a series of reflections on a scene oft repeated in attempts to indict the racialized violence of antebellum and reconstruction era America: the savage beating of Fredrick Douglass’ Aunt Hester. It was this ‘terrible spectacle’ that introduced Douglass to the horrors of slavery. Hartman concedes that it is one of the ‘most well-known scenes in the literature of slavery’ (Hartman 1997:4). Nevertheless, she refuses to quote it at any length herself. To do so, she warns, risks plunging the spectacle into a repetition that would not only desensitize us to its effects, but normalize the brutalization of black and brown bodies. Like the ‘terrible spectacle’ that initiated Douglass’ response, the placards in the borderlands are held up in the hope that they will awaken the polity to PTD’s inhumanity. However, at a border that is considerably more open to those who are not marked as racialized others, this hope cannot be divorced from the anxiety that the image might alienate rather than compel.

Hartman’s work also connects spectacle’s ambivalent effects with its theatrical quality. In the theater, the audience and the characters on the stage exist in different worlds. As Stanley Cavell explains, there is no path by which we may cross between them (Cavell 2003). Indeed, we could climb out of our seats and onto the physical stage. However, in that precise
moment, the play would be halted and the characters would vanish, leaving behind befuddled actors. Hence, Cavell proposes that the effect of tragic spectacle is not to teach us to intervene, but to confront us with our own impotence before monumental tragedies that should not be so, yet cannot be made otherwise. Like the character on the stage, the body depicted in the photograph exists in a world distinct from our own. Caught in a still frame, it is plucked from temporality and removed to an unassailable point. Beyond the reach of our action, it is presented as an object of perception, but the gulf that now separates us cannot be bridged.

Alonso and Nienass suggest that the transition from crosses to corpses was the consequence of frustration. Years carrying crosses appeared to have done little to inspire policy change in Washington, D.C. However, in the years that have passed since their study, it is doubtful whether this transition has achieved the change it was meant to inspire. Even as the Trump administration (reluctantly) passed the baton to the Biden administration, talk of more ‘humane’ immigration policy did not at once precipitate many policy changes at the US–Mexico line. Even the promised US Citizenship Act of 2021, which proposed the installation of ‘rescue beacons’ in the borderlands, would have continued the decades long escalation of enforcement technologies at urban ports of entry. Therefore, it would seem as though the representation of corpses is no more effective in inspiring federal policy change than are crosses. Worse, in making them objects of macabre fascination, it may undermine the value of the lives it sets out to champion.

However, if, as Sostaita observes, the ethical and political effects of mourning should be judged with reference to their facilitation of more intimate, local encounters between the living and the dead, then the politics of mourning ought not to be judged on their ability to sway legislators in Washington. Rather, the transgressive political coalitions that they promise to produce are more likely to emerge in the borderlands themselves, where networks of actors band together to preserve vulnerable life, and call into question the identarian and political boundaries that these lives’ disavowal would reinforce. It may be, as Alonso and Nienass contend, that the shift to the spectacle, and its concomitant perils, is undertaken due to a loss of confidence in more abstract means of making the dead present. Therefore, I conclude this essay by turning to Arizona-based artist Valarie James’ sculpture *Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas*. This piece provides an instance of abstract representation that facilitates a visceral experience of the other’s demand without disinterring (photographically) their body.
Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas: an embodied encounter with the ghosts

Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas, installed on Pima Community College's east campus in 2005, engages a haunting play of presence and absence. The life-sized statue portrays three mothers, standing at the desert's edge, their eyes closed in sorrow and their hands crossed over aching hearts. Each one serves as a memorial for more than 1000 migrants who have lost their lives in the corridors that pass through the Sonoran. As a mother implies a child, the figures invoke these sojourners’ presence through a kind of visual metonymy. However, their connection to the migrants runs deeper. It is not only that the mothers’ presence implies the absent children. The statues are composed of found materials, scraps of pants, shirts, and backpacks that have been discarded on the migrant trails. Consequently, as Jessica Auchter notes, ‘the bodies of the mothers are literally constituted by the attributes of the children’ (Auchter 2012:101).

James’ home in Amado, Arizona, sits near to a heavily trafficked migrant trail, and each day she and her dogs walk the nearby arroyos (Regan 2010). On these walks, she finds the supplies for her artwork. While many of her
installations keep these found objects intact, carefully arranging them into makeshift memorials, for *Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas* she combined them with desert plant material to form a kind of pulp that she backed with plaster and rebar. The result is a trio of organic statues, coated in resin, that now stand exposed and vulnerable to the natural environment. Since the sculptures’ installation, the environment has taken its toll, causing the resin to melt and drip down the statues’ faces. As the resin deteriorates, it allows the artifacts that it once protected to return to the desert, and gives the impression that the statues themselves are crying for the children who have slipped out of their hands.

Although the statue may lack the references to PTD that Sostaita observes in Enciso’s work, Auchter notes that this piece achieves its political affect by situating resistance in the mothers’ bodies (Auchter 2012:100). The statues’ distressed surfaces depict in real time the impact of the migration on the people who attempt the crossing. Slowly succumbing to the sun and the wind, the statues illuminate ‘both the body’s biological struggle for life in the harsh desert conditions, and the body’s biopolitical struggle for qualified life in a zone of indistinction where certain bodies matter and others fade into the desert’ (Auchter 2012:100). Despite their potentially polarizing political message, Auchter judges that the works retain their far-reaching affective force because, as James explains, attending to the mothers’ bodies contextualizes ‘what is so often a … contentious debate … in the viewers body, in the heart’ (Auchter 2012:101). James’ work does not rely on an articulated discourse. It dispenses with talk about ‘citizens’ and ‘aliens,’ and appeals instead to the silent eloquence of bodies.
Nevertheless, the bodies conspicuously absent from this deeply visceral encounter are the migrants’ own. *Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas* is a piece suffused with absence. The three mothers’ eyes are closed, as if to underscore that the thousands of migrants, for whom they stand, have long ago passed from view. James does not attempt to depict them. Instead, she challenges her viewer, standing face to face with the mothers they leave behind, to reckon with that absence. Composed of found materials, the mothers are the traces of traces. Scraps of clothing and artifacts from the migrant trail do not make their former owners physically present and they tell us exceedingly little about them. They tell us that someone has passed this way. However, we do not know who that person was. We do not know why they undertook the journey. We do not know whether they reached their destination or fell short somewhere in the landscape beyond. They are so close that we might touch the hem of their garment, but not close enough to capture within our gaze.

And yet, those whom spectacle renders unapproachable through direct depiction, *Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas* brings intimately close by indirect depiction. *Las Madres/No Mas Lágrimas*’ effect on the viewer is to populate their imagination with the children the statue declines to portray. The women do not move, yet through them, the dead are allowed to make the approach that PTD denied them. The memorialized dead haunt the viewer’s subjectivity and, in so doing, they confront the viewer with a choice. The viewer may resist them and seek to exorcise the ghosts and return them to the same oblivion into which PTD would cast them. Or, if this temptation can be resisted, the viewer may bear the dead along with them. They may choose the haunting and make the dead their responsibility. To choose the haunting is to blur the lines between inside and outside, self and other, life and death. It is to become the sort of divided subject, laid open to otherness, that Critchley sees as the subject of radical political change.

**Conclusion**

Although it may fade into the desert long before it makes its way to any exhibition in the national center, James’ sculpture models the political promise borne by the work of mourning. Scattered among the roots of tangled acacias and ironwoods are the bodies of thousands of mothers’ children. Lost in the Sonoran’s expanse are the abandoned siblings whose lives threatened to burden our prerogative to autonomously determine the outlines of our body politic. But the partition that PTD drives between the visible and the invisible is not perfect. It can be contested. The absence
that PTD achieves is not final. It does not forbid the dead’s presence as efficiently as it might hope. Nor does the disavowal of the estranged sibling deliver our freedom from the mark that the fratricide would leave upon it. The borderlands are a haunted place. Blood cries out from the ground and mourning calls us to listen.

Artists like James (and Enciso) teach us that to mourn, to remember the dead in the borderlands, does not consist most essentially of a kind of fact-finding. If mourning were to be conceived as a form of remembrance, and remembrance as a recollecting of biographical information, then, in the Sonoran, mourning would be faced with the problem of a storehouse that is largely empty. Here, the work of mourning directs itself to strangers with unknown names and stories. What might it mean to mourn los desconocidos? With recollection ruled out, borderlands artists and activists have modeled a form of mourning that is defined by an effort to make the dead present to the community. The remembrance of los desconocidos, that is, is a concerted effort to call to mind the exiled dead – and, perhaps, the broken bodies whose violation determines the boundaries of our bodies politic. It is an effort to expose the polity to the good of the lives it denies.

Interventions like Enciso’s crosses, the Coalición’s processional, and James’ sculptures reveal mournful remembrance to be an imaginative activity that contests insular political aesthetics by emphasizing the embodied commonalities that bind the ‘citizen’ and the ‘alien,’ the living and the dead. It invites the dead to occupy the imaginations of those who mourn, traversing the boundary between self and other. This work of remembrance makes of disarticulated bones not criminals, but fellow human beings, animated by hunger and thirst, joy and sorrow, hope and despair. In so doing, it invites them to traverse political boundaries and rediscover the hidden connection between the polity and the extended social body abandoned in the fratricide. Disabused of any sense of closure the crime might imply, mourning anticipates the emergence of compassionate political communities formed around mutual interdependence rather than national identity. Thus, if the work of mourning can sustain the haunting and resist the temptation of closure, it may yet fire our longing for a redeemed politics, wherein the divisions that separate bodies politic no longer provide justification for which human bodies are allowed to live and which are made to die.

About the author

Bryan M. Ellrod is a graduate of Emory University’s Graduate Division of Religion. His research engages questions of membership, identity, and responsibility at the intersections of religion, law, and politics. He is currently serving as the Postdoctoral Fellow in Leadership and Character for Pre-Law Professions at Wake Forest University.
In the spring of 2021, Ellrod defended his dissertation, ‘Can these bones live: Christian ethics and a politics of responsibility for the US–Mexico Borderlands,’ which explores what it would mean to become neighbors to the migrants who have lost their lives trying to cross into the United States. Adopting the borderlands as a context for theological reflection, Ellrod argues that to become a neighbor is to inhabit an ethical subjectivity founded by the demand of the excluded outsider. However, in a region where enforcement apparatuses conspire to occlude the demand’s fulfillment, this subjectivity takes the form of a ‘haunting,’ chastening our political visions of redemption by the good of the lives they too often deny. The upshot of this haunting is a call for practices of mourning and healing that traverse territorial, racial, and identitarian boundaries, sounding the question to heaven, ‘Son of Man, can these bones live?’

Ellrod is currently revising the dissertation manuscript for publication. He resides in Winston-Salem, North Carolina with his wife, Courtney, and their border collie, Ekko.

Acknowledgments

This article was the result of a particularly challenging question posed to me by Vincent Lloyd at my dissertation defense. In addition to Dr. Lloyd, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to the editorial staff of Body and Religion, and to the members of the Political Theology unit of the American Academy of Religion. Their thoughtful feedback helped me to further refine the ideas presented in this article. I would also like to thank artists Valarie James and Alvaro Enciso for their insights, and for sharing images of their artwork for this article.

Notes

1 Arendt proposes that it was to the French Revolutionaries’ detriment that the ideas of good and evil ‘haunted [their] minds.’ Thus, in the pangs of thirst and hunger, Robespierre mistook for political problems the interminable insecurities of the human condition. In his determination to relieve these pains, Robespierre and his government lashed the young republic to a problem that would never leave them and was pulled under by its weight. The sovereignty of the good and the legislation of virtue, Arendt judges, is no less corrosive to democratic institutions and the rule of law than is the sovereignty of evil. Therefore, if a political association is to survive, it must relinquish its responsibility for ‘the social question’ of the people’s deliverance from poverty.

2 In this quotation, Arendt identifies the biblical story of Cain and Abel and the classical account of Romulus and Remus (which narrates the founding of Rome) as originary tales in our political imagination. Whereas Genesis 4’s account of Cain and Abel may be familiar to the reader, the story of Romulus and Remus has been variously relayed by classical sources, including Livy, Ovid, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. I rely in this article on the version of the story relayed in Dionysus of Halicarnassus’ Roman Antiquities. (See also Ovid’s Fasti or Livy’s History of Rome.)

3 Hereafter, I use the acronym PTD to refer both to the logic and the strategy it informs.
4 For an extended study of the Sonoran Desert’s ‘agency’ in border enforcement, see De León (2015).
6 This partitioning of visible and invisible produces what Jacques Rancière refers to as a ‘distribution of the sensible,’ ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and partitions within it.’ Within this system of parts and partitions, the undifferentiated mass of the demos is distinguished through the roles and dispositions that ostensibly make their bearers appropriate subjects or objects of political rule. Moreover, the consensus that the system permits must be enforced through a careful policing of who is allowed to be visible or invisible, audible or inaudible, intelligible or unintelligible to that which is held in common (see Rancière 2004).
7 Ted Smith (2020) examined the theological and political consequences of this conceit as they bear on the concept of sovereignty.
8 Ovid also suggests that Romulus regrets his brother’s death, unsuccessfully ‘smother[ing] his rising tears’ and lovingly granting his brother funeral honors (see Ovid, Fasti, Book IV, ‘April 21: The Parilia’).
9 Cf. Burggraeve (2008). Citing vv. 5–6, Burggraeve traces Cain’s enmity toward Abel to a sense of jealousy and an underlying desire for self-assertion in the absence of the other.
10 This idea does not begin with Critchley. Cf. Løgstrup (1997) and Levinas (1985).
13 By this, I don’t mean to suggest that there is no place for fact-finding. Indeed, the Tucson-based Colibri Center has made it its mission to identify the remains recovered from the desert, and to match them with missing persons reports from the United States and Mexico. Of course, this endeavor surpasses a bare fact-finding expedition. Rather, its aim is the restoration of relationships severed by the border. Thus, even where this effort fails, the work of remembrance is not rendered impossible.

References


