An AutoBioTheoEthnoGraphy

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Todo se pasa, Dios no se muda

Teresa of Avila

The first photo of me was taken on April 30, 1956. It was the day of my baptism. The photo shows me in an extravagant floor-length white baptismal gown. I was ten days old. My mother is holding me in her arms, to her left is my grandmother, to her right the Vincentinian sister who midwifed my birth (her pre-Vatican II religious habit is as elaborate as my baptismal gown). This is the faith into which I am baptized: a faith both of extravagant and of austere materiality, a faith of mothers and sisters and midwives, the faith and face of the Catholic Church in its most "quotidian mystery."[1] It is the faith that will shape my days and my nights, my longings and my rebellions, my scholarly work and my vision of a God-sustained universe.

I did not drink this Catholic faith with my mother's milk--the Vincentinian sisters had convinced my mother that she was too old to nurse. Besides, claiming that the Catholic faith came with my mother's milk would be much too short a story. Nor did I become Catholic at baptism, as Tertullian would want one to believe *(fiun non nascuntur christiani*[2]). Family folklore--that is, essentially my mother's story--has it that I owe my existence to a Jesuit priest, a Catholic "icon" par excellence. One of my three Jesuit uncles had visited my parents' home sometime after their wedding, and as my mother wrote to him a few months later, his "visit had not been without consequences." She was "with child." My mother, penning these words, did not realize that Jesuits still had all their correspondence read by their Jesuit superiors. But what the suspicious superior initially surmised, while greatly embarrassing to my uncle, was not true. Rather, during an evening conversation at my parents' house, this Jesuit uncle had been persuasive enough to inspire my mother and father to embrace each other and the possibility of my existence, even though many factors spoke against it. My mother was approaching the age of forty-four, and she had only recently married. My father, a widower, had brought three (displeased) children into the marriage. Furthermore, the times were not easy. It was barely ten years after the end of the Second World War and Germany's unconditional surrender on May 8, 1945. Sixty million human beings had died: six million Jews, twenty million people in the former Soviet Union, gypsies, homosexuals, women at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, the differently-abled. Therefore, when I was born, the Vincentinian sister expressed surprise and delight at having midwifed the birth of a child who was welcome.

I was baptized ten days later. My baptism took place in St. Vincent's Hospital where I had been born, rather than in our local parish. Our parish priest was known to drink heavily, and his parishioners were quite willing to carry him home in the morning from the ditch in which he had landed with his bicycle the previous night. But when it came to the validity of my baptism, my mother knew no ambiguity. She wanted the baptismal rite to be unambiguously "right," even if *Ego te baptizo in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* was all that was really

needed. With her daughter's Catholic identity at stake, my mother opted for certainty. It is no wonder that the first photo of me documents my baptism.

By the time of my baptism, however, my Catholic identity had already been quite well formed. My initiation into the Catholic fold had taken place in my mother's womb. I grew to the daily rhythm of prayer, the Sunday morning Latin Mass, the feast days and fast days of the Church (definitely no meat on Friday for this unborn child), and the materiality of the faith that I could not yet see--the large wooden crucifix in our dining room, the angel holding a shell which in turn held holy water, the rosary, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary over my mother's bed, the prayer book in my mother's hands. And then there was my name, spelled so intentionally against all German conventions that to this day I find myself, when asked for my name, routinely adding "no *h*." My mother had decided to name me after Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) when a book about this Spanish saint captured her imagination halfway through her pregnancy. Teresa of Avila was by no means an obvious patron saint. If children were named "Theresia" or "Therese" at all in my part of the world, it was usually with Saint Thérèse de Lisieux (1873-1897) in mind--the "little flower" for whom my mother actually had a distinct dislike. What about Teresa of Avila precisely captured my mother's imagination I do not know. A sixteenth-century Carmelite contemplative theologian and monastic reformer could not have resonated naturally with my mother's way of life and vision of the world. Thus I am left assuming that it was Teresa's determination, strength, courage ("they say I have no small amount of that, and it is observed that God has given me more than women usually have," Teresa herself noted[3]), her humor, and her way of finding God in everything that enamored my mother. Teresa's saying, "The Lord walks among the pots and pans,"--that is, God is present in the domestic work usually assigned to women, and the everyday lives of women, so often trivialized, are sites of encounter with God--could have been my mother's.[4] In 1970, when Pope Paul VI named Teresa of Avila *doctor ecclesiae*, making her the first woman to ever receive the honorary title "teacher of the church," my mother must have felt that her unusual naming of her daughter after this saint had been wonderfully affirmed. My mother's mother, when she had first heard about her new granddaughter "Teresa," had wondered why on earth I had been given such an odd name, one she associated (for some reason) with women domestic servants.

By the time Teresa of Avila was named *doctor ecclesiae*, I was fourteen years old. I remember kneeling in our parish church after Mass one day and thanking God for bringing me safely and directly into the Catholic fold. I was, after all, growing up in the "diaspora"--the Catholic term for those regions in Europe where Protestants were the majority. My hometown was in the diaspora. In the sixteenth century, the Count of Hanau had joined the Reformed (i.e., Calvinist) faith and allowed French- and Dutch-speaking Reformed refugees to settle in the town. These refugees had been artisans: gold- and silversmiths, diamond cutters and faience artists, who all had made the town famous. In the seventeenth century, French Huguenots similarly found refuge. It was not until the Second World War and its aftermath that Catholic refugees of various provenances came to Hanau. My post-war childhood saw the building of the first Catholic Church in my part of town. Catholics (that is, "we") could not repeat often enough that the "Protestants"--which meant the Lutheran and Reformed churches in town--had actually contributed to the building fund. I also remember the amazing moment when all the church bells of both the Protestant and Catholic churches rang on June 3, 1963, when the beloved Pope John XXIII died. And I remember what it meant to my mother, who grieved for this pope (if for no other), that

Protestants joined in this very Catholic grief. But as I grew up, we also "knew" that Protestants would willfully put their trashcans out in the streets during our Corpus Christi processions. And the Catholic priest forbid my Protestant nanny from peeking into our newly-built Catholic Church. The most noticeable difference between "us" and "them," however, came on Ash Wednesday, when Catholic children were allowed to come to school late, in order to go to Mass and receive ashes on their foreheads. It was always a test of the depth of one's Catholic identity whether one dared to march to class late with ashes still on one's forehead or had rather wiped the ashes off beforehand.

I thus knew that there were "others" around me. Besides the ever-present Protestants, "the Jews" were ominously present in their overwhelming absence (there had been about six hundred Jewish citizens in Hanau before the infamous *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938). In the 1960s, Turkish Muslims were beginning to come as *Gastarbeiter*, "guest workers." But the geography of my childhood was safely Catholic. Given that all around me were signs of the past--the remains of a Roman garrison, the medieval tower in which the soon-to-be-burnt witches were imprisoned, all the maimed bodies of people who had fought in the recent war--my sense of the power and presence of history and of tradition grew up together. The region, after all, had been christianized by Saint Boniface in the eighth century. It even had its share of ancient women saints: the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Lioba whom Boniface asked for help with his mission; the twelfth-century Hildegard of Bingen who was visionary, prophet, composer, and scientist all in one; and the thirteenth-century Elizabeth of Thuringia, whose golden shrine (empty since the Reformation) we admired as children and whose name graced our Catholic parish church. Added to the women saints whose lives had left their imprint on the geography of my childhood were the saints whose names graced the lives of women in my family, especially Hedwig of Silesia. I read about all these women in my book of saints, which my grandmother had given me for the feast day of my patron saint, Teresa of Avila. I was six months old when my grandmother thought it important for me to have this book; it is still part of my library today.

The Catholic faith shaped not only the geography of my childhood but also the quotidian rhythm of my life. My favorite feast day was Corpus Christi, in part because as children we were allowed to walk ahead of the priest carrying the monstrance and strew flowers--the closest I ever came to a proper liturgical ministry as a girl. But part of my love for this feast day was also the anticipation I connected with it. The women of the parish spent many hours before the morning Mass creating a gorgeous tapestry of cut flowers (from our gardens) on the ground in front of the church. After the festive Mass inside the church, the priest would leave the church, with the monstrance lifted high, to begin the procession through our streets. His first steps carried him over the beautiful tapestry of flowers the women had created. I always caught my breath when the priest stepped across these perfectly arranged flowers, and thus the hours the women had worked on their knees to create sheer beauty. Would I have enjoyed the feast even more if I had known what a women-specific feast we were celebrating? The feast of Corpus Christi, after all, came about in the thirteenth century through the vision and efforts of Juliana of Mt. Cornillon and Eva of St. Martin. And as medieval scholarship on women mystics in particular has shown, devotion to the Eucharist was peculiarly intense among women.[5] But this knowledge was not part of my religious instruction in childhood. It would take the work of feminist theory to enable me to see that side of my faith tradition.

In my memory, the feasts and (to a lesser extent) the fasts, images and smells, light and darkness, taste and sound made our faith. I do not remember having or reading a Bible. I do, however, remember the deep disappointment when I first read the New Testament and could not find the story of Veronica handing Jesus a handkerchief on his way to Golgotha in any of the Gospels. Jesus, of course, had wiped his bleeding face with this handkerchief and had given it back to Veronica. On the handkerchief, the face and image of Jesus had miraculously been imprinted: *vera icona*, true icon, Veronica. I knew this story from the Stations of the Cross, a Lenten devotion focused on fourteen moments of the passion narrative. I found out to my dismay and sadness that the story of *vera icona* is not in the Gospels; to this day I wish it were.

My mother, Catholic since her mother's womb, was a firm believer in Catholic moderation. Sunday Mass was a given, and so was regular confession as well as the feasts and fasts of the Church; the cross she traced on her children's foreheads before we left the house was like daily bread. But the "catholic domesticity" of our home clearly had its boundaries, and to some degree, these were inscribed by our class.[6] Upper-middle-class Catholics usually kept their distance from the more flamboyant folk Catholicism and the popular religious practices of "other" Catholics, such as the women in the mountainous regions to the east (where we vacationed), or the working class Catholics in the poorer sections of town (where we hardly ever went), or the catholic refugees from the East who came after the war. Thus, we did not indulge in daily devotions at home, such as praying the rosary together, nor did we go on pilgrimages. We did not have a home altar with statues of the saints. We did not wear religious medals (only my bicycle had a medal of Saint Christopher), nor did we have religious magazines in the house. My mother was devoted to Saint Anthony of Padua, but mostly when she had misplaced things (which did happen with some frequency). Saint Anthony is the patron saint and finder of lost objects. My mother once confided to me that she gave alms (i.e., put money into Saint Anthony's collection box for the poor) not only in gratitude for the saint's help in finding things, but also because my father had once put shirt buttons instead of money into a Saint Anthony collection box. My mother was atoning for my father's disrespect for an ever-useful patron saint—or was she atoning for his disrespect for the Catholic Church as a whole? The only time I remember my father coming to church with us was on the occasion of my first communion. My father's gift of "real presence" at my first communion overshadowed the "real presence" of Christ in the eucharistic elements which I had been taught to expect.

At age forty-six, my mother bore a second daughter. When my younger sister was asked as a child what she wanted to be when she grew up, her reply was swift: "a saint or a dancer." I never aspired to either. By the time I reached adolescence, I wanted to study law and languages, and work at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. My alternative plan was to study Chinese and archaeology--what I planned to do with that remains a mystery. I do not remember ever being told that I could not do something because I was a girl. My mother never wasted any time teaching me how to cook; I learned Latin, English, French, and Russian instead. And to this day I can still picture my father typing my first play on his Remington typewriter. In the play, I had ingeniously assigned to myself the role of a silent queen, since I did not want both to write and memorize a script.

Something however intervened in my budding careers. It was as simple as it was profound. I must have been fourteen or fifteen years old when I attended a church youth group event with my English cousins somewhere in London. A group of young people met together and prayed, just like that, without prayer books and without any priestly or adult mediation. I have never been the same since then, although I have no idea what shook me so profoundly that evening. I do know that with that evening began a time of fervent adolescent evangelical commitment. Before long, I evangelized everywhere, placed Jesus stickers on my guitar, prayed for healings, got up two hours before school started to read my Bible, and spoke in tongues. Whether someone was a Catholic or another form of Christian mattered little, as long as they had "received Jesus into their hearts." Studying law or languages or archaeology seemed an utter waste. In fact, studying anything seemed a waste--even if I had finished high school with the then almost unheard of equivalent of a 4.0 GPA. I envisioned myself on street corners for the rest of my life, preaching good news.

It was a hard time for my mother, especially since my older brother, whom she had raised as her own child, had left the Catholic Church and joined the Communist Party at about the same time, and my younger sister had joined the Seventh-Day Adventists, clearly a "sect" in our part of the world. Our parish priest, whom my mother consulted in her distress, comforted her by saying that at least we were all deeply committed young people. I am not sure my mother found this reasoning very convincing. She had, after all, lived through the years 1933-1945 and seen a lot of very convinced people around her without that convincing her (my mother's family was under the spell of Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen, the "Lion of Münster," who criticized Hitler in his sermons even during the height of Hitler's military victory in 1941). But in relation to her children, the priest's non-judgmental attitude must have been reassuring. In the end, my mother did find a way to redirect at least my commitment. She contacted one of my English cousins, who by that time had become an Anglican priest, and persuaded both of us that the theological college where he had studied might be the place for me.

Fourteen years later, when I received my second doctorate in theology (and this one from a Catholic faculty), my mother was there for the graduation. In a public ceremony, I swore with my hand on the prologue to the Gospel of Saint John ("In the beginning was the Word…") to uphold the Catholic faith. My mother did not say much about what this meant to her, but she wore her most beautiful turquoise silk dress and her most spectacular jewelry, an opal flower with diamonds that my father had had made for her.

Fourteen years and five theological degrees had given me ample space to bring together my "love for learning and the desire for God."[7] The three years at an Anglican Theological College showed me how a vibrant faith and scholarly engagement with that faith could thrive together (it did take a while to see). At the end of these three years, I returned to Germany, where a prestigious scholarship had awaited me ever since I had finished high school. My years at the Theological Faculty of the University of Mainz gave me an abiding love for the ancient languages--particularly Hebrew, but also Greek and Latin--, a distrust of New Testament scholarship, and an ever-deepening passion for the history of liturgy. A year at the Reformed Theological Faculty of Geneva, in French-speaking Switzerland, imprinted on my mind the never-fading image of a baguette used as eucharistic bread in a worship service and the left-over eucharistic bread appearing at the dinner table buttered. Notwithstanding that image, I received my doctorate in Protestant Theology from the University of

Heidelberg in 1984. I had written my dissertation on the liturgical theology of the men around John Henry Newman, a quintessential group of DWEMs (dead white European males). They had begun a Catholic revival within nineteenth-century Anglicanism that led John Henry Newman, among others, into the Roman Catholic fold. My own return to the Catholic fold was taking place as I wrote my dissertation, although I did not realize it at the time. What John Henry Newman struggled toward as a new horizon, I simply had to slip back into, for it had always enveloped me. There was no break or fracture between my Catholic past and my Catholic future, it seemed--only an adolescent, fervently evangelical pause. I did not look back to that pause even when, some years later, the Vatican forbid me to teach at a number of Catholic theological faculties in Europe that had offered me positions. Granted, I fought the Vatican's refusal of the required *nihil obstat* (i.e., the permission to teach) all the way into the Vatican's own highest legal court. But when a reporter asked me why I remained Catholic with "the church" against me, I responded without much thinking that it was primarily some men in the Vatican and three conservative German bishops who were against me, not "The Catholic Church." Even my patron saint Teresa of Avila, after all, had lived for many years under the shadow of the Spanish Inquisition, and her autobiography was made to disappear for several years by that same inquisition.

The real break in my vision of the world came in terms of geopolitics and gender, with geopolitics leading the way. Having a Ph.D. in Protestant theology but self-identifying as a Catholic was not a long-term possibility in Germany. We Germans spearheaded the sixteenth-century Reformation, after all, and to this day, our theological faculties are neatly divided confessionally. I was the first (and, to my knowledge, remain the only) Catholic ever to have been granted a doctorate from a Protestant theological faculty in Germany. And I was made to understand that I was very much *aus der Reihe getreten*. So I left Germany in 1984 with a prestigious postdoctoral scholarship and came to Duke University. I planned to stay for nine months and then return (why I imagined anything would be different in Germany after nine months is another mystery in my life).

The change in geopolitics enabled me to see a particular cultural given that I had so far hardly paid attention to: gender, especially my own. I began to realize how pervasively gender shapes all cultural formations, including practices of faith. This realization, however, grew indirectly, namely by confronting the way race functioned in my new environment, the Southeastern United States. Not that I, as a German, needed to be reminded about the deadly power of racializing. In fact, when I faced, for the first time in my life, a question about my own "race" on a U.S. government form, I was stunned; I had no idea what was being asked. I suspected that no one was interested in whether I was a "Jew" or an "Aryan." But I also could not find a box to check that matched any racial category with which I could identify. When a friend informed me that I was "Caucasian," I laughed in disbelief. What did I have to do with a mountain range in the then Soviet Union?

My newly-racialized self soon realized just how powerfully pervasive the seemingly silly labels were. I had come to a divinity school in "the South" were the world was very neat indeed. No wonder, the housekeeping staff came in to clean around 4:30 A.M. EVERY DAY. But what was most telling was the neatness of the division of labor in terms of gender and race in this Divinity School. The housekeeping staff was entirely African-American and overwhelmingly female. The faculty of the Divinity School, on the other hand, was

overwhelmingly white and *exclusively* male. There was not a single woman with a Ph.D. who taught at Duke Divinity School at that point in time. This starkly gendered divide, however, initially simply seemed "normal" to me. Most of my theological education in Europe matched this state of things; I had never taken a theology class taught by a woman. It took the clear divide along racialized identities to make me see and question, for the first time, the even more powerful divide along gender lines in this school. As a European woman, not surprisingly, I ended up profiting from the starkness of this divide, at least at that point in time. I was hired--although there was no position to be filled and there had been no search--as a woman with a Ph.D. who was considered "safe" to teach in this divinity school.

But I had begun to face feminism and would be safe for not much longer. The intellectual labor was quite intense, since as soon as I dared to embrace "women" as a category of theological reflection, the category itself morphed into the much more complex notion of gender. It took a while to acknowledge what now seems so obvious, namely that the category "gender" attends to all gendered identities and sexualities--men, eunuchs, lesbians, hermaphrodites, syneisactics, transgendered people--precisely in their gendered particularity. Through the shifting feminist theoretical terrain that brought me to this recognition, I found a wealth of insight that has profoundly enriched my work and my faith. The connection between women mystics and eucharistic devotion in the thirteenth century is only one of many such insights.

At this point, the initial readers of my narrative—Kathy and Mary, in particular—began to complain that the "I" that had been telling her story was being suffocated by a Teresa who theorizes but no longer is able to tell stories. There is a temptation to respond to the complaint by theorizing that loss. The now diasporic European has lost her ancestral story-telling powers. Or, the scholar theologian succumbs to the inevitable professional deformation. Or, middle age is devoid of the colorful stories that shape the first half of life. Or, some of the real life stories are now woven into passionate scholarly explorations, and re-appear "theorized."

The latter possibility could take flesh in the following narrative. A theoretical terrain that has profoundly enriched my work and my faith is the terrain of theorizing culture and cultural identities. As all of us who circulate globally (especially the "global professoriate"[8]) know well, our cultural identities are notoriously slippery and messy. We all eat versions of "borscht with chili," as the Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa has described her own cultural hybridity--or closer to my own diasporic German version, I eat my Thanksgiving turkey with *Knödel* and *Rotkraut*.[9] Such interpretive strategies owe their force to theories of culture that privilege multiple and contesting practices of identity and of borders as decisive sites of the production of meaning. These interpretive strategies have taught me much about reconceiving my own scholarly discipline (theology), Christian identity, and lastly, feminist theological work.

I have been intrigued especially by the possibilities of reading one of my sub-fields, ecclesiology (i.e. theological reflection on the nature of the church), through the lenses provided by such theoretical grids. In my book *Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in Global Context,* I suggest the notion of "borderlands" as a lens for understanding (Christian) feminist communities and the particular rituals they generate. *Dissident Daughters* draws together fourteen narratives of feminist communities who create and celebrate women-

identified liturgies, and thus highlights how women have claimed new ways of being church, mostly at the margins of established ecclesial life.[10] In these ecclesial borderlands, the boundaries of ecclesial identity have become distinctly blurred. The oxymoronic wording is intentional here. For while traditional ecclesiologies must find such blurring of ecclesial boundaries deeply problematic, theological reflection attentive to recent theories of culture will, from the outset, assume Christian identity to be unstable, composite, and relational to wider cultural materials. "Church" or "ecclesial" traditions can then be seen not as fixed categories but as shifting, flexible bodies, multiply positioned across coordinates such as geopolitics, gender, race, and class. Oddly enough, with all the theorizing of transgression, subversion, and border politics that went into *Dissident Daughters*, I decided to go to Mass the day the book was completed. I took the manuscript with me, and asked the priest to bless the manuscript before sending it off. That accomplished, I went to buy a bouquet of white tulips and a bottle of champagne to celebrate (but that evening, thinking back to morning Mass, I also knew I had to begin writing a different book[11]).

A more appropriate example of feminist ecclesial border politics close to home might be the evening Kathy, Mary, Susan, and I spent together when Susan decided to join the local Catholic parish of which I am a part. The parish was attractive to Susan because of its social justice ministry. Coming from a Southern Protestant background, however, Susan needed space on the fringes of this parish ("Catholic light," as opposed to "heavy" as one of my students calls it) rather than officially joining the Catholic Church at that point in time. We decided to throw a party to welcome Susan, in our own way, into "Catholic light." The division of labor was "natural": Kathy cooked one of her fabulous dinners (she is the only one with that particular gift among us), I wrote a prayer of welcome, Mary brought the wine, and Susan herself. The parish priests never knew of this reception into the Catholic fold ("light").

Claiming the borders, however, is not only an ecclesial way of living; the scholarly terrain also is full of borderlands that need to be claimed and then transgressed. One such border is the iron wall between intellectual production and what might be called "the desire for God." A beautifully scripted prayer in a late medieval prayer book housed in Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library puts this desire into six words: "O mein got…kum zu mir" ("O my God, come to me"). Even if one did not need to argue anymore, first, for "religion"--for lack of a better word--as an important category of analysis and, second, for a dynamic, non-reified, and nuanced understanding of religious traditions, theological labor cannot remain satisfied with such scholarly postures alone. When I came across this prayer in the late medieval manuscript <u>Gebete der Passion</u> on a wintry morning in the Reading Room of the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, I quietly slipped off my shoes. My hands, in white protective gloves, seemed to hold a tiny, exquisite burning bush. I am not satisfied with "religion" as a scholarly category and an object purely of my inquiry and theorizing. The beautiful manuscript <u>Gebete der Passion</u> evokes more than just aesthetic pleasure and scholarly curiosity (is the illustration of a woman, kneeling in a church with an open prayer book, an image of the patron for whom this book was made?). The prayers in this late medieval prayer book seem no different from my own: "O mein got…kum zu mir." And the Reading Room of the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library opens up to a "beyond," as I fuse myself with the woman who held this little book and prayed with it, five hundred years earlier. The reason for the possibility of

such moments of "the beyond in the midst of life"[12] is simple--but hard to articulate under the knowledge protocols of academia, since it can only be spoken of in terms of testimony.

Can one trace the movements of the Spirit under the knowledge protocols of academia? My own subject position as a theologian tempts me to answer in the affirmative, but an distinct uneasiness remains. Nowhere has the recognition of this uneasiness been clearer to me than in the autobiographical narrative I chose to write for our group. Initially, it had seemed such a simple task. I knew how to write; I had quickly decided to begin with my baptism; all I needed to do after the first paragraph was to tell the story from 1956 to 2003; the only problem would be how to condense such a fabulously rich and fascinating life as mine into twenty pages. And so I began to write. Months later, Nelson would say: "Dr. Berger wrote that narrative, but where is Teresa?," and Muz would ask who the editor was, writing through me. As much as I had wanted to write a narrative of my life as a "weaver of light" who knows no other existence than one co-constituted by the Divine, the narrator of my story remained very much the theologian-scholar. It was the scholar with a doctorate in theology and in liturgical studies who decided to let her narrative begin with her baptism--who else could come up with something like that? And what but the continuing dominance of traditional theological categories in our lives might account for the fact that both Mary and I—the two professional theologians in the group--managed to occlude any trace of domesticity, sexuality, and the reproductive and quotidian labors of our lives in our stories? In that sense, ours are elitist narratives, more so than the social status of our respective families of origin necessitates, and much more so than our feminist theory allows.

Needless to say, this shadow of academia becomes deeply problematic when attempting to write life as one of abandon and of yielding, even if to a God who is "beyond **in the midst of life**" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Academic discourse does police the poetics of religious witness, because this discourse is "an institutionalized set of practices that exist at the institutional level as 'Truth,' and they transcend and control the knowledge that any individual researcher produces."[13] The narrative I wrote seems to be ample proof of **that** discursive control, much less proof of my yielding to a divine presence.

But how can one render visible the divine presence in one's life, especially if the narrative also is to account for one's own formation as a gendered and racialized subject, with all the theoretical labor that goes into that? On the other hand, if I cannot break open, in and with my faith narrative, the scholarly categories I have embraced, what does that say about the power of the divine—over and against the powers of academic knowledge production--in my life? I begin to envy the way Saint Augustine opened his <u>Confessions</u>, interweaving a quotation from the psalms, a meditative prayer, and thirty-one questions on the first four pages! (Saint Augustine, of course, was not baptized until late in life, so he did not face the tempting ease of my own beginning in his <u>Confessions</u>). But reading Augustine's questions again, I recognize that we both are haunted by discursive constraints: "You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any one say enough when speaking of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you" (Augustine, <u>Confessions I:4</u>[14]). An acknowledgement of such discursive constraints, in fact, is inscribed into the Christian tradition in manifold ways, most clearly in those versions of Christian theology that obey a grammar of the <u>via negativa</u> and/or in mystical writings. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-

1153), for example, seemed to confront the same problems I face in trying to name God's presence in my life:

> whence God came to enter my soul, or whither God went on quitting it, by what means God has made entrance or departure, I confess that I know not even to this day; … I have ascended higher than myself, and lo! I have found the Word above me still. My curiosity has led me to descend below myself also, and yet I have found God still at a lower depth. If I have looked without myself, I have found that God is beyond that which is outside of me; and if within, God was at an inner depth still. And thus I have learned the truth of the words I had read: *In God we live and move and have our being* (Acts XVII.28); but blessed is the one in whom God is, who lives for God, and is moved by God.[15]

Could it be precisely this absence of the possibility of naming the divine presence that becomes the marker for God's presence, in the shadow of academia as everywhere else? To put it differently, claiming God as the one who co-constitutes one's life can only be done by marking the divine presence as the ultimately Un-sayable, the utterly Un-representable, the One who ruptures all that can ever be said. Both a theological via negativa and postmodern sensibilities actually have room for thinking such claims, given their respective suspicions about the functioning of human words in relation to what might be considered the "real."[16]

With Dipesh Chakrabarty one can argue that modern cultures of scholarship can, at best, make gods and faith interesting topics of study.[17] Since these forms of scholarship are predicated on a secular, disenchanted universe, however, they cannot but do violence to "the times of gods" and the people who co-inhabit these times with the gods. Despite the occasional scholarly recognition that many people inhabit a world permeated by the divine, the vast majority of intellectual production nowadays assumes a universe emptied of divine presence. Over and against such productions, I search for that which opens up other worlds: worlds that do not know how to be disenchanted, languages that can still whisper the desire for divine presence, and silences that hold memories of redemption. Entering these worlds through the world of intellectual knowledge production takes some ingenuity. Maybe the ingenuity required is akin to travelling to Hogwarts (to invoke a popular contemporary narrative of a "beyond"). Hogwarts, of course, is the School of Wizardry that Harry Potter attends and has to get to each autumn after the summer vacation. Going to Hogwarts requires the ability to recognize platform nine and three-quarters at London's King's Cross station. One gets to platform nine and three-quarters by daring to walk straight through the stone wall between platforms nine and ten: "Not to worry.…All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important."[18] What might look like nothing more than a stone wall at King's Cross station, or a five-hundred-year-old manuscript in a Duke Library Reading Room, might just hold the ultimate challenge to a disenchanted world: there is magic behind platform nine and three-quarters; there can be divine presence behind the words on a page.

I struggle to unearth the critical potential of being a self-avowed practicing Catholic theologian, of standing within a tradition of scholarly inquiry that predates the (post)modern *and* the medieval university, the nation state, modernity/coloniality, capitalism, and other "and-so-forths." No doubt, the heritage of my tradition is ambiguous, as I, as a feminist

theologian, know only too well, but that does not mean that this position cannot also bear critical potential. My position not only leads me to question our representation of the world as disenchanted; it also makes me cautious about other intellectual constructions predicated on secularist paradigms. My position also leads me to be vigilant with the world a university such as Duke invites me to inhabit. One example might be the ease with which we can talk about almost anything, from our sexual orientations to tax evasions--but mention faith practices! Such religious practices, though, are fundamental to how millions and millions of human beings live, survive, and face death gracefully. Why are they so marginal in our intellectual worlds, even under the logic of postmodernity with its supposed "implosion of the secular" (Graham Ward)?

It is time to draw this narrative of Teresa to a close, even if such closure seems uncalled for by my life itself. I have no idea, after all, whether this is half of my life, or most of it, or something in between. Facing finitude, and confronting the hour of our death is a task for which, at least in my experience, scholarly postures provide little that is helpful. It is a task, on the other hand, for which the vision of a God-sustained universe holds rich resources. And so I end my essay with a prayer I wrote some years ago when a dear friend came face to face with his own finitude. I have made this prayer my own:

Graceful God
Weaver of the Web of Life
Mystery at the Heart of the Universe
Holy Wisdom, Vibrant Spirit:

I have entered
the space of my own dying,
the holy ground of facing finitude:
my own.
I stand before you with empty hands.

The world of appearances
is fading away.
The performances of authority
and the power of my own life
are loosing their defining edge.
I can sense the web of my life being unmade.
I stand before you with empty hands.

I pray:
as I face my own dying
as I walk on this holy ground
toward the hour of my death,
Become for me, yet again,
Holy Wisdom and Vibrant Spirit
the Mystery at the heart of my own universe
the Weaver of the Web of Life, your life within me.

Grant me the grace to hold still

and to sense your Spirit hovering over the troubled waters of my soul.
Hold me gently in your arms,
when facing my own dying
brings emptiness and agony.
Teach me to yield to my life's unmaking
but also to discern and fight the evils that might surround it.
Sustain me as I try to live
while walking towards my own death.

And when this holy hour of my death comes
as it so surely will
when my life is for ever unmade
in that all-defining moment of my life
let me knowingly yield to you:
Passionate Weaver of the Web of Life
that you might re-weave my broken web
into the fullness of life that is your own.

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[1] The beautiful expression is Kathleen Norris's. See Kathleen Norris, The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work" (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).
[2] Tertullian, Apology 18:4: "One is not born, but rather becomes a Christian."
[3] Teresa of Avila, Book of Her Life 8:7. The translation is from The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976-1985).
[4] Teresa of Avila, Foundations 5:8.
[5] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," in Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion, 3nd ed. (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 119-150.
[6] See Colleen McDannell, "Catholic Domesticity, 1860-1960," in Religion and American Culture: A Reader, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 1995), 293-313.
[7] See the book with this title: Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).
[8] Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," in Public Culture 12, no. 1 (2000): 1-19, 2.
[9] See her much-acclaimed book: Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).
[10] Teresa Berger, ed., Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in Global Context (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
[11] This book is now published as Fragments of Real Presence: Liturgical Traditions in the Hands of Women (New York: Crossroad, 2005).
[12] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "God is beyond the midst of our life," in Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge, enlarged edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), 282.

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[13] Fred W. Burnett, "Historiography," in Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation, ed. A.K.M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 106-112, here 108.

[14] I use the Penguin edition of Augustine's Confessions, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, but have made changes in the translation, in relation to gendered language about humans.

[15] Bernard of Clairvaux, Eighty-Six Sermons on the Song of Solomon, transl. and ed. Samuel J. Eales (London: Elliot Stock, 1895), sermon No. 74. I have made changes to Eales's translation in relation to gendered language about humans and about God.

[16] The term "real" obviously functions as a "hyperreal" in my essay, i.e. as a figure of imagination whose "referents remain somewhat indeterminate." Dipesh Chakrabarty explains his use of the term "Europe" this way in his Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29.

[17] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods," in The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 35-59. See also the fascinating essay by Amy Hollywood, "Gender, Agency, and the Divine in Religious Historiography," in The Journal of Religion 84 (2004): 514-528.

[18] J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1999), 93.