

Captivity, Life and Death at the Nation's Edge: Two Christian Visions of the U.S. Immigrant Detention Regime

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Abstract

Contemporary U.S. border enforcement involves more than the exclusion of immigrants. It also involves the extraction of profits from those held captive at the border line. Recast as “bodies” to fill “bed space” in dealings between ICE and private prisons, detained people experience multiple levels of suspension: between nations, between legal statuses, and between states of life and death. The testimonies of two Christian leaders who have ministered to those in detention reveal contrasting visions of life, death, and salvation that alternately occlude and shed light on the material realities of immigrant detention. For Timothy O’Dell, former national Director of Chaplaincy for CoreCivic, incarceration is a transformative experience that can prompt individuals to seek salvation in the hereafter. For Diana Ramos, an asylum-seeker who ministered to her peers while held at CoreCivic’s Eloy Detention Center, the harrowing realities of detention catalyzed moments of this-worldly healing, fueled by imagery of liberation.

Keywords: U.S.-Mexico border; immigration detention; incarceration; coloniality; chaplaincy

Introduction

Diana Ramos knew that there was a price upon her: \$64 a day, to be exact. That is the amount U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement paid Arizona’s privately-run Eloy Detention Center each day that she was held within the facility’s walls (Corrections Corporation of America, 2014: 48). An asylum seeker from El Salvador, Diana was detained at Eloy for over four years. During that time, she became viscerally aware that Eloy’s managing company, CoreCivic,² was garnering profits by cutting the costs of meals, medical care, and psychological services to people in detention.³ She spoke of being served food so spoiled it made her nauseous, of being issued clothes that had been laundered with mops reeking of chemicals. She watched peers struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts, only to be told to “drink more water,” to stay hydrated. Yet Ramos had persisted with her asylum case until her release in 2015. “Imagine, fifty months!” she later reflected. “How much can you imagine they’ve earned off me? It’s a business. A big business.”

Until a recent rise in expedited deportations during the covid-19 pandemic, immigrant detention was a growth industry in the United States. In the mid-1990s, approximately 5,000 immigrants were held in detention facilities each day. By 2017, that number had risen to over 39,000, and by 2019, over 50,000 (Detention Watch Network, n.d. a). Underlying this growth was a federal quota, lasting until 2017, requiring that at least 34,000 beds be reserved for immigrants in detention facilities at a given time (Detention Watch Network, n.d. b). This “bed mandate” was driven, in part, by lobbying from

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² Known at the time of my research as Corrections Corporation of America, the company rebranded to CoreCivic in October of 2017. For simplicity I have opted to refer to the company by its current name.

³ Following the lead of Puente Movement, AZ, I avoid using the word “detainee” due to the dehumanizing connotations of the term (Puente Movement, 2019).



private prison companies, including CoreCivic (Cohen, 2015). At the time of Ramos's release, income from contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement constituted nearly a quarter of CoreCivic's revenue (Corrections Corporation of America, 2016). While immigrant detention is officially a form of civil containment, designed to ensure that people are present for court proceedings, in practice the experience is no less punitive than other forms of incarceration.

Ramos had been sitting on the stark, steel-framed bunk bed that she shared with a cellmate when she experienced one in a series of visions that would dramatically transform her time in the facility. She had been gazing down at the mattress when suddenly: "I saw that the stars were there, in my bed. And I remembered the promise that was made to Abraham, that he was going to be the father of the nations." She cried out in gratitude. In an instant, the bunk—that unit in the ongoing negotiation of bodies and "bed space" that characterizes the detention business—had become a portal to the infinite.

The vision came during a period of intensive fasting and prayer. A few weeks before, a woman had approached Diana and asked her to serve as the unofficial faith leader in their unit. Ramos had accepted the challenge. Immersing herself in private Bible study, she was visited by additional visions. There was the rose that dazzled her with its colorful petals, "deep purple at the edges and in the center, bright violet—but oh, how it shone!" and the tree brimming with fresh leaves and ripe yellow sapote fruits native to El Salvador. Some of her most stunning visions occurred in the recreation yard where Diana began leading worship and healing services for up to 80 women at a time.

I met Ramos in the fall of 2015, months after her release. The following spring, I travelled to the headquarters of CoreCivic in Nashville to meet with Timothy O'Dell, who served as the company's national Director of Chaplaincy at that time. In this capacity, O'Dell oversaw faith-based programs within all of CoreCivic's operations, including prisons and ICE-contracted facilities. I initially expected a dry public-relations speech about the administrative challenges of balancing religious freedom with security. But as O'Dell ushered me into a conference room, his formality gave way to unrestrained testimony about eternal realities and absolute truths. In O'Dell's view, the essence of chaplains' work involves serving as "brokers of hope" for men and women behind bars. While he noted that it is not a chaplain's job to "convince everybody to become Christians," O'Dell conveyed that in his assessment, the most powerful hope is that which results when sinners repent and seek eternal salvation. Although chaplains acquire first-hand awareness of the hardships of incarceration, their role is not to reform the institution but rather to leverage those hardships in ways that might shift prisoners' sights to life beyond death.

Ramos's Pentecostalism and O'Dell's nondenominational faith represent two contemporary faces of Christianity in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. An analysis of these individuals' lived theologies has much insight to offer on how Christianity intersects with current debates over migration, exclusion, and belonging at the border line. Both Ramos and O'Dell have come to regard incarceration as a life-crisis, an all-encompassing challenge to the body, mind, and soul that can catalyze spiritual change. At the same time, their faiths are like opposite sides of a moebius strip, generating contrasting interpretations of life, death, and what it means to be human within the immigrant detention industry. In what follows, I analyze how O'Dell and Ramos draw upon their respective Christianities as they alternately enable, justify, survive, and resist the institution of for-profit detention. I examine the professional chaplain's faith that renders the horrors of detention thinkable, and I examine the faith of the lay pastor who called upon the power of God to nourish and strengthen her peers amidst those very horrors.



The crux of the difference between Ramos and O'Dell's perspectives, I argue, has to do with how each wrestle with the commoditization of human life that lies at the heart of the industry. Private immigrant detention is, as Ramos put it, a "big business." Yet it is also characterized by what Conlon and Hiemstra refer to as "intimate economies of immigrant detention"—myriad, ongoing exchanges between such entities as food service companies, transportation providers, and the communication firms that charge exorbitant rates to those seeking to connect with their families (2017: 4). No longer merely a source of expendable labor, immigrants have become commodities within the complex web of economic relationships that constitutes the detention business. While detained men and women might work "voluntarily" for \$1 a day, their ultimate profitability lies as "bodies" that are managed and transferred to maximize "bed space" in an intricate dance between ICE, municipal governments, and the private sector.⁴

I argue that for Ramos, prophetess and healer of those behind bars, the deprivations of detention served as a springboard for the emergence of life-giving spiritual visions. Identifying with the biblical figure of Moses, Ramos leveraged those visions to heal and inspire her peers with hopes of this-worldly liberation. Meanwhile, for O'Dell, the moral mouthpiece of the multi-billion-dollar company that held Ramos captive, imprisonment is a harrowing journey through which individuals ideally access the hope of eternal salvation. While professional chaplains might play a guiding role, the soul's transformation is mostly an individual affair, and the healing of the body is of little consequence. Undergirding the differences between these two faith visions is a brutal practice of human commoditization that enriches those who run CoreCivic while exposing those within its institutions' walls to the heightened possibility of death.

If we keep our focus limited to the recent phenomenon of for-profit detention, however, we miss a crucial dimension of the story. We must also consider Ramos and O'Dell's perspectives against the broader historical backdrop of Christianity's long entanglement with coloniality, incarceration, and the making and unmaking of persons at the borders of the United States. The dynamic of extractive captivity we are witnessing at Eloy and other immigrant detention facilities today is not new. Rather, the construction of borders in North America has long been intertwined with efforts to control and extract value from human beings who are suspended between states of exclusion and belonging. As Natsu Taylor Saito reminds us, the roots of U.S. immigrant detention can be traced to settler colonialism: to the reservations that served as prison camps during Indian Removal, to Fugitive Slave Laws and other legislative efforts to restrict the movement of African Americans, and to the internment camps for Japanese Americans during WWII (2021: 37-42). Immigrant detention is, in short, "a form of exclusion originating in and inseparable from the forced inclusions of colonial appropriation and exploitation" (34).

As colonial institutions have restricted the mobility of communities of color, they have also inscribed lines of separation between those deemed human and those deemed less than human. De Sousa Santos describes this separation as an "abyssal line" dividing social realms where people enjoy recourse to legal rights from realms of chaos where exposure to violence is the norm (2007: 48). Ramon Grosfoguel, similarly, asserts that a "global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human" continues in the current day although the era of formal colonization has largely drawn to a close (2016: 10). The line of the human can be detected today in sites like Guantánamo as well as "in the *ghettos*, in the sweatshops, in the prisons, [and] in the new forms of slavery" that persist across the globe (de Sousa Santos, 2007: 53). Dating back to sixteenth-century European

⁴ In my first-hand observations and email exchanges, ICE officials have referred to the numbers of men and women processed at their facilities each week with the term "bodies" rather than "people."

debates on whether the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas were “truly men,” Christianity has played a pivotal role in defining the line of the human (Paul III, 1537).

Keeping questions of coloniality in view deepens our investigation in several ways. First, this approach challenges us to regard the border not simply as a place of exclusion but also as a dynamic zone where who is human, and what it means to be human in the first place, has long been contested and transformed. The approach challenges us to consider how varieties of U.S. Christianity like O’Dell’s have worked not only to expel “others” at the nation’s edge, but also to discipline and extract value from those suspended at the boundaries of belonging. Keeping the dimension of coloniality in view also offers a richer perspective onto Ramos’s religious leadership, a leadership that nourishes life within the death-space of detention, stirring new possibilities, “new registers of life and relation,” to the fore (Mbembe, 2019: 29).

In examining the role of religion within immigrant detention, I build upon scholarship that has highlighted the role of faith in fostering hope and resilience among cross-border migrants and asylum-seekers. In her groundbreaking work on Mexican and Central American migrants to the United States, Hagan (2012) reveals how religions are intertwined with multiple aspects of the undocumented journey, informing people’s decisions to migrate and providing them with the spiritual and practical resources necessary to endure. Scholars of transnationalism, including most notably Levitt (2004; 2007) have argued that religions simultaneously root immigrants in new locales while fostering vital connections to their places of origin. More recently, Cuéllar (2020) has exposed and challenged the sacralized interpretation of public safety that legitimizes state-sanctioned violence within U.S. detention centers, and Snyder (2015; 2017) has shed light on the mystical dimensions of faith among those who endure immigrant detention and those who advocate for them. My goal is to bring the vital contributions of these scholars of religion into conversation with those who also challenge us to consider the deeper colonial roots of incarceration and border violence in the United States (Hernández, K. 2017; Hernández, R. 2019).

In what follows, I describe the daily reality of life within Eloy, drawing from several interviews conducted with Diana Ramos. I supplement Ramos’s account with interviews with two other individuals who were detained at Eloy as well as an interview with a man who was held in a different CoreCivic-operated facility in Arizona. Turning to my interview with O’Dell, I analyze how O’Dell and Ramos each explain incarceration through their respective faiths, offering remarks on what changes when we consider these two individuals’ perspectives against the broader historical context of coloniality in the United States. Interviews with Ramos and the other formerly detained people are supplemented by collective impressions gleaned from my experiences as a community volunteer providing travel assistance to hundreds of individuals released from immigrant detention in Arizona between 2013 and 2020.

Between life and death at Eloy

Diana Ramos first fled El Salvador due to domestic violence. She was living with her two high-school aged daughters in Phoenix when Arizona’s punitive immigration law, S.B. 1070, passed in 2010. The law facilitated heightened collaboration between police and immigration officials, contributing to a climate of fear among immigrants. Noticing that many of the city’s undocumented individuals felt unsafe taking conventional taxis, Ramos opened an alternative ride service. She was apprehended by ICE in January of 2011 under the accusation that she had been engaged in human smuggling. Ramos was eventually placed in Eloy Detention Center, a medium-security facility then housing 1500 men and women, about an hour southeast of Phoenix. Ramos’s requests to be released on bond failed due



to the judges' assessment that she posed a flight risk (Thompson, 2015). At four years and two months, Ramos's stay at Eloy became one of the longest in the institution's history. A lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union eventually facilitated her release, culminating in a successful asylum case.

When asked what comes to mind when she hears the term "Eloy," Diana responded, "When I hear [that word] . . . it gives me like—panic. Fear." Ramos is fully aware that CoreCivic garnered profits for each day she spent behind bars. "They try to detain people for longer times, because it means more money for them," she explains. "They received a payment for the time I was there. Every day, they're paid. Every day." At times Ramos and her companions were served "rotten food, food that you can't eat." Other times, they were given chicken that was "purple on the inside; raw." She explained, "one can get really skinny in that place, from not eating." Ramos earned a dollar a day for a six-hour shift in the facility's kitchen. The maximum one could earn in one week was five dollars. Calculating her options, Ramos would purchase packets of Maruchan soup at forty-two cents apiece to stave off hunger. Gabi, who was held at Eloy in 2014, recalls that she initially lacked money to purchase commissary items. She dedicated herself to weaving paper crafts to sell to other women in her pod. This became her way, Gabi states, "to survive."

More than mere calories, food marks the point where the institution becomes flesh and blood, where the loss of control experienced in one's daily life is acutely felt (Goddaris, 2006: 285). Institutional meals enter detained people's bodies, transforming them from within. In my capacity as a community volunteer, some individuals indicated that they were unable to finish the bowls of simple chicken soup we had served following their release from Eloy. Their stomachs had shrunk, these guests explained, during their time in the institution. Other guests mentioned having gained weight after consuming the refined starches that their bodies were unaccustomed to.

Matters of hygiene were no better. Ramos recalls rationing her toothpaste. The slim soaps were insufficient; there were times when she had no choice but to bathe or brush her teeth with water alone. Upon arrival, women were given "underwear that was entirely filthy, really black." While Ramos tried to avoid asking for a new set of clothes, eventually she had no choice, "but [they] gave me clothes that were dirty." It was the same "with the sheets, the bedclothes." Clothing was thrown together with cleaning products, producing allergic reactions. "I got sick from an infection, from putting on dirty clothes . . . So, regarding hygiene, it was really bad in that place." These adversities also extended to medical care. Ramos describes medical staff failing to provide medicine after becoming aware of urgent health conditions. Juan Miguel Cornejo, who was also detained at Eloy, recalls that individuals with serious illnesses were sometimes ignored or simply provided with "bottles of water." The ACLU of Arizona, similarly, reports that water is often prescribed as a cure-all for physical health complaints among those detained (ACLU, 2011).

Mental health concerns were met with similar disregard, likely contributing to Eloy's notoriously high suicide rate. The Marshall Project notes that between 2005 and 2016, a staggering five out of the seven suicides that occurred among people in ICE detention facilities nationwide took place at Eloy (Bishop and Echávarri, 2016). One reported suicide was the high-profile case of José de Jesús Deniz-Sahagun, whose 2015 death prompted Juan Miguel Cornejo to lead a hunger strike within Eloy. Deniz-Sahagun was purportedly found with a sock lodged in throat. Although he had been on suicide watch prior to his death, Juan Miguel and others suspected foul play, as they had heard Deniz-Sahagun's cries as he was beaten in solitary confinement hours prior. Two years earlier, in 2013, a pair of suicides had sent shock waves throughout the facility. In April of that year, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Guatemala was found hanging in her cell. Within three days, a forty-year-old

Guatemalan man was found hanging by shoelaces from his bunk (Jula and González, 2015). The impact of these deaths reverberated throughout the facility. “It’s a desperate place,” states Ramos, whose time at Eloy coincided with the two deaths. “Everyone yells, cries, wants to throw themselves from the second floor.” Javier,⁵ who was held at a CoreCivic-operated detention facility in the nearby city of Florence, remarked, “When I was there, we found out that two people had committed suicide. . . I didn’t see them, but all of us knew that two people had taken their own lives.”

Taken together, the words of Ramos and others evoke something more harrowing than discomfort caused by poor living conditions and substandard meals. Their words evoke a sense of being suspended, not only between nations, but also between states of life and death. They also suggest a sense of suspension in time. In Gabi’s description, the greatest challenge was “enduring so much time enclosed, without being able to go out; sometimes we could not even see the daylight because they wouldn’t allow us to leave the cell for the entire day.” Among asylum seekers in the United States, symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress have indeed been found to be significantly correlated with length of time in detention (Keller et al., 2003: 1721). Javier provided a gripping image: unlike conventional prisoners, who have an eventual release date in sight, those pursuing immigration cases “don’t try to keep a calendar, to say, ‘one day less, one day less,’... because there, we don’t know what day they are going to deport us. Or we don’t know what day immigration wants to let you go.” As deportation carries a possible death sentence, and as fatalities from suicide and medical neglect cast a shadow through detention center halls, Javier expressed, “it is like, we enter that place, but we don’t know how we’re going to leave it. We don’t know if we’re going to come out alive.”

The chaplain’s theology of redemptive suffering

Across the continent in his Nashville office, Timothy O’Dell also knows what it is like to be suspended between life and death. Born a mere “two pounds, so many ounces,” the former chaplaincy director states that he “should not have survived” the 1940s, western Kentucky world of his birth. The brother who came before him had perished, as did the sister who came after. An awareness of the precariousness of earthly life, along with the absolute certainty of the final judgment, animates his words. “We’re all human beings on the journey, facing the same inevitable end,” he explained in an interview. “The question is, are we ready for that inevitability?” Decades later, O’Dell would find himself in the grip of death once more. While recovering from surgery after a heart attack, his heart stopped. It was at that moment, he says, that he knew his faith was real. “As I’m hearing the paddles charge up and listening to all these things going on, I was overwhelmed with peace . . . That was of immeasurable worth. Worth more than anything else. ’Cause I know death is no longer my master.”

O’Dell served as Director of Chaplaincy for CoreCivic from 2009 through 2019. In the years prior, he worked as a state trooper, assistant warden, and warden of three correctional institutions throughout the South and Midwest. First ordained in the Southern Baptist church, and later in an independent fellowship, O’Dell jokingly claims fluency in “English and hillbilly—but my first language is hillbilly.” At the time of our interview, O’Dell supervised the spiritual wellbeing of up to 89,700 people within the 85 correctional, detention, and residential facilities that were owned, leased, or managed by CoreCivic across the United States that year (CoreCivic, 2017: 5).

⁵ pseudonym



In O'Dell's words, the essence of the chaplain's work involves offering people hope in the face of whatever "life crisis" they might be facing. That crisis could be the death of a loved one or the low point faced after a lifetime of poor choices. Often, however, the most poignant crisis is the experience of incarceration itself. To better understand his view, I draw from our 2016 interview as well as a handbook for correctional chaplains that O'Dell authored in 2012. I supplement these accounts with observations from Lennie Spitale (2002), a formerly incarcerated prison ministry author whose work O'Dell references, at times verbatim, throughout his handbook.

First, O'Dell notes, incarceration entails a sudden loss of control over the minutia of one's daily life. He states, "Think about it for a moment. You're cut off from family; you're cut off from the things you're accustomed to . . . You don't get to choose what you wear; you don't get to choose what you eat. . . you can lay at the bed or stare at the wall, but all your choices are taken away."⁶ Prisons are places "devoid of love," where "loneliness is an ever-present and tangible reality" (O'Dell 2012: 37). Likewise, Spitale describes incarceration is marked by a "relentless sea of harshness," lacking the comfort of human touch (2002: 88). When they first hear the gates lock behind them, O'Dell writes, "many offenders identify with the words of Dante . . ., 'All hope abandon ye who enter here'" (O'Dell, 2012: 39). In the months that follow, inmates face the relentless weight of time, "more confining than the steel, concrete, and razor wire" (37). In Spitale's words, "the prisoner is at war with time. He can fight it, he can attempt to fool it, he can wrestle, play, pray, and waste it all together, but he cannot defeat it" (Spitale, 2002: 15).

At first glance, O'Dell's characterization of life behind bars resonates with the accounts of those who have been detained by CoreCivic. O'Dell does not deny that incarceration is fraught with desperation. And yet, his reading of the carceral journey diverges from the first-hand stories we have explored above in a crucial way. His words are tinged with a profound distrust of human nature. O'Dell asserts that, just as missionaries embark to serve in a foreign land, correctional chaplains have chosen to "serve in an alien environment" that is "more akin to the battlefield than the hospital" (2012: 38, 14). Prisoners, he maintains, have a culture of their own. They "don't think the way you think. This is a critical fact" (38). Citing Spitale, O'Dell writes that inmates often view themselves as "lone combatants engaged in a guerrilla-type conflict" (O'Dell, 2012: 37). Since "living with fear is the rule of the day," incarcerated people default to a "jungle warfare" mentality (37). Within the so-called "alien" world of the prison, the hope that chaplains instill in their charges is crucial, O'Dell insists—for "barring hope, people become dangerous."

Note the allusion to the colonial missionary endeavor, remapped onto domestic carceral space. It is important to note, however, that O'Dell's wariness is grounded in something more pervasive than a mere distrust of foreign and criminal "others." Within the broader religious cosmos from which O'Dell draws, all of humanity is morally suspect, for all people have inherited our biblical ancestors' original sin. This fundamental trait unites those who happen to be living within prisons to those outside. If, as O'Dell puts it, "we are all sinners. We have all fallen short of God's will," then we must all face the necessity of salvation. For O'Dell, prisons can be one medium by which God produces that essential transformation. At the same time, through the mystery of divine providence, God also uses the hardships of incarceration to reach an audience outside prison walls.

To drive home his point, O'Dell referenced in our interview the stories of "persecuted saints," Christians martyrs through the ages who were tortured and incarcerated for refusing to renounce their faith. He offered, for example, the story of the 2nd century martyr, Polycarp:

⁶ Interview with O'Dell, 2016

They put him in a cage, with oil and burning lye . . . He sang hymns of praise to God throughout the blazing. And long after they thought he should not have any breath, he continued to sing praises . . . Now. That's a testimony that nobody in that arena could then deny. . . . He probably led more people to the saving knowledge of Christ in death than he ever could in his lifetime.

Like O'Dell, Spitale adheres to the doctrine of original sin. Recounting his own time behind bars, Spitale writes, "to be caged, to be trapped like an animal, was an agony that is hard to describe" (2002: 5). He continues, "'what,' one may ask, 'are *men* doing in cages?'. . . . Something is wrong. How can men and women made in the image of God be reduced to such a state?" (5). These words might appear like the impassioned prelude to an abolitionist cry. Yet within Spitale's perspective, the practice of encaging human beings is not an injustice to be transformed but merely one of the myriad effects of original sin. Not only did our ancestors' sin damage all souls: it also impacted all of creation. If prisons and detention centers are degrading, this is merely one of the many, cosmogonic effects of the Fall. We may have "compassion" for the "poor children of Adam" who are locked in cages, but it is not up to us to set them free (95).

The origins of O'Dell's approach to ministry are rooted, in part, in the early history of U.S. Protestant prison reform. From the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, reformers in Europe and the United States sought to replace corporal punishment with rehabilitative strategies intended to reshape inmates' inner spiritual lives (Foucault, 1995: 16). Their experiments with silent labor and solitary confinement helped produce modern-day penitentiaries, first envisioned as spaces where convicts might experience metaphorical death and rebirth in Christ (Smith, 2009: 6). Throughout the nineteenth century, as prisons in the United States grew more crowded, the penitentiary was eventually recast as a "furnace of affliction," a site of harsh yet necessary suffering through which God purified criminal souls (Graber, 2011: 59-60). This religious vision intertwined with the emergence of a secular model in which, as Caleb Smith has argued, men and women were rendered civilly "dead" in prison in preparation for symbolic rebirth into society (2009: 6). As Jennifer Graber argues, the "theology of redemptive suffering" that took hold in Christian prison ministry circles throughout the nineteenth century has resurfaced within prominent evangelical prison ministries today (182).

The Christian trope of redemptive suffering is alive and well within Tim O'Dell's faith, allowing him to pivot from compassionate reflection on incarcerated people's plight to macabre musings on the tortures inflicted on Christian martyrs through the ages. Lest we deem O'Dell an outlier, preliminary investigations reveal that Richard Glau, national director of faith-based services for the United States' other leading private prison company, Geo Group, is a devout lay leader within a Reformed Presbyterian church whose doctrine adheres to a fiercely Calvinist reading of original sin (Christ Presbyterian Church, n.d.). A graduate and former employee of Whitfield Theological Seminary, Glau has published sermons infused with references to the total depravity of human nature and the importance of obeying divine law (Glau, 2017a, 2017b).

It is little wonder that a theology centered on the redemptive power of suffering, a theology rooted in a deeply suspicious view of human beings' basic nature, has become intertwined with the rise of for-profit incarceration. As O'Dell highlights the impact of death in confronting human beings with eternal truths, his theology obscures the political, economic, and material ties that bind those within CoreCivic's facilities to those without. As O'Dell frames incarceration as a life crisis, akin to birth, coming of age, or death, he neglects to mention that mass incarceration is a manufactured crisis. Legislators shape the policies that have given the United States the highest rate of incarceration in the world. Lobbying by corrections companies helped drive the federal immigrant detention bed



quota that spanned the better part of the last decade. Yet in O'Dell's framing, prisons are a "foreign land" inhabited by members of an "alien culture" whose only substantial tie to those on the outside is their shared identity as sinners. Even if he wished to, O'Dell glosses, "I can't change the laws of the land." Human beings make laws "for political and social reasons," he notes, "over which I have no control at all."

While it is important to examine O'Dell's theology within the context of the history of Protestant prison reform in the United States, there another dimension to the story. As Caleb Smith reminds us, nineteenth-century prison reformers did not operate in a political and historical vacuum. Rather, they operated against the backdrop of ongoing chattel slavery in the American South and the forced relocation of Native Americans under Jackson's brutal policy of Indian Removal and beyond (2009: 18). Efforts by reformers to forge new persons within the penitentiary rested upon the enduring power of the state to torture, displace, and extinguish human lives. For each person who was metaphorically reborn within the prison, countless others outside prison walls were killed or cast indefinitely below the line of the human. Today, immigrant detention centers are infused with the legacy of that colonial past. Neither targeted for immediate expulsion nor framed as citizens ripe for reformation, those detained are held in a state of suspension between life and death as profits are extracted from their being. As the testimonies of Diana, Gabi, Juan Miguel, and Javier suggest, people in detention—like those below de Sousa Santos's abyssal line—are exposed to a logic of appropriation and violence, a logic that "only recognizes the law of things, of both human and nonhuman things" (de Sousa Santos, 2007: 52).

We might expect O'Dell and his colleagues to look to immigrant detention centers as a captive mission field. Yet immigrants are an afterthought within the chaplain's words. O'Dell admits that, due to the large number of facilities under his watch, his contact with CoreCivic's immigration facilities has been limited. And, because he only speaks "English and hillbilly," he notes that he has been unable to forge close relationships with those in immigration detention as he has with members of the general prison population. He states, however, that the common thread connecting non-citizens in detention to other prisoners is that all tend to make "bad decisions." Those seeking a better life in the United States might be desperate, or they might be misinformed. In the end, however, "escapist behavior is always escapist behavior." Regarding asylum seekers from Central America who were held in CoreCivic's notorious family residential facilities at the time of our interview, O'Dell replied that their situation was, "in many respects, so sad." Yet he maintained that there was no way to know how much of asylum seekers' plight is legitimate and how much was "opportunistic. I just don't know," he said, "and I don't think any of us do And frankly, the information we get out of Central America and South America is less than authoritative most of the time."

Ramos's ministry of healing and liberation

When Diana Ramos first fled El Salvador in 1996, the country had scarcely emerged from a brutal civil war impacted by decades of military and economic influence by the United States. While domestic violence was the immediate cause of her departure, Ramos's options in El Salvador were severely limited by the economic and societal effects of the country's tumultuous past. Ramos was familiar with evangelical Protestantism but notes that she was not particularly devout prior to her time at Eloy. In detention, she encountered a vibrant ecosystem of evangelical services organized by and for detained women, outside of the official cycle of religious programming.

Officially, Eloy employs a single chaplain tasked with managing the religious affairs of well over a thousand people at a time. Online employment listings suggest that the position has high turnover.

Despite undertaking a maze of emails and permissions requests, I did not succeed in securing an interview with one of Eloy's chaplains. Their roles are mostly administrative: chaplains manage religious diets, oversee protocol related to situations of serious illness and death, and recruit outside volunteers who lead a weekly roster of worship services in a variety of faiths. These volunteers must follow strict guidelines. They may not hug or touch those the minister to. They cannot write letters to or maintain contact with those in detention outside of the brief one-hour worship services they facilitate. Given these constraints, some clergy choose to work under the radar by entering Eloy during regular visitation hours. In this capacity, they express, they can address people's spiritual, emotional, and legal needs more holistically.⁷ Given the gaps in spiritual care at Eloy, detained men and women have also taken it upon themselves to lead evangelical worship services in the open air during scheduled recreation periods. Gathering in dirt-floored yards encircled by chain-link fences, these impromptu faith leaders preach, sing, clap hands, and pray in a style that is richly informed by Pentecostalism, the dominant form of Protestantism in many of the worshippers' home countries across Central America and other parts of Latin America. With its emphasis on localized, grassroots leadership and a rich intermingling between the spiritual and material realms through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the faith has swiftly adapted to the context of detention.

Shortly after arriving at Eloy, Ramos recalls that she would often sit in the common area watching television while a peer led Bible studies in the evenings. One day, the woman who led the group approached her. The woman had been having a special feeling, she explained, that God had chosen Diana to follow in her footsteps once her own time at Eloy came to an end. Despite her lack of experience, Diana accepted the invitation. Her first sermon to the group would center on Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness. The topic was rooted in embodied practice, as the women's worship group had been conducting a three-day fast at the time. Much as Jesus' fast had preceded his years of teaching and healing the masses, Ramos's sermon on the topic would mark her transition to the role of worship leader.

Ramos found the work so fulfilling that she ceased working in the kitchen and dedicated herself full-time to a life of the spirit. "Imagine, studying the Bible all day, moving only in the moment you're about to eat. It's a great source of nourishment. And I went along growing in such a beautiful way." Daily fasting, scripture study, and prayer soon gave rise to the rich visions – of the flower, of the trees ripe with fruit, of the night sky full of stars – described in the opening words of this article.

At this juncture, we might note the similarity between Ramos's spiritual transformation at Eloy and O'Dell's reading of incarceration as a crisis that can prompt Christian salvation. Ramos's words, however, brim with an entirely different set of imagery. In O'Dell's account, the bodily deprivations of incarceration are indicative of the fallen nature of earthly life. Incarceration is a necessary evil, the byproduct of original sin. Within our flawed world, contemplation of death marks a point of reckoning at which one's priorities might shift toward the eternal plane. "The point is not when we're going to die, nor how we're going to die, but that we are going to die," O'Dell asserts. Knowing that one is spiritually prepared for that ultimate encounter with God offers a peace so profound that, "by the world's definition, [it] makes no sense." In short, death's utility in prompting salvation eclipses the value of life in this world. To hearken back to the chaplain's words on Polycarp, the martyr "probably led more people to the saving knowledge of Christ in death than he ever could in his lifetime."

⁷ These observations are based on qualitative interviews with five faith leaders and lay religious practitioners who have chosen to minister to women in detention at Eloy in this way. These individuals include pastors in the Presbyterian Church, USA and pastors of a Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church based in Mesa, AZ.



In Ramos's account of incarceration, the preciousness of life, holistically conceived, rises to the forefront. Ramos does not turn a blind eye to the material dimensions of private detention. Rather, she leans into the bodily deprivations she experiences and channels them in ways that strengthen her healing and teaching in the here and now. Faced with horrid food, she undertakes spiritual fasts that generate nourishing visions. These visions are drawn from the stuff of life. They are verdant and fertile; they bloom. The pink and purple flower glistens with color; the tree spills forth with fruit native to a place that she has called home. The night sky, superimposed over the cell bunk, glistens with stars. Ramos interprets the stars as evoking God's promise to Abraham. "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore," the verses affirm, "Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (NIV Genesis 22: 17-19).

Note within the Genesis verse God's affirmation of the preservation of kinship lines. The verse evokes Ramos's role as a parent seeking to ensure a safe and abundant life for her daughters, and their future descendants, in a new land.⁸ Ramos relates that God presented her with spiritual visions not for her sake alone, but because she had been tasked with rendering the divine palpable to others. Images of the Exodus permeate her tales, as Diana compares her role to that of Moses. "It wasn't the whole group that Moses managed to lead out of Egypt," she reflects, referring metaphorically to her worshippers, "but some seventy or ninety people. . . I think that God was the one who brought me to that place, to nourish so many people."

Early in her ministry, Ramos had been praying during the worship service in the recreation yard when she witnessed her most compelling vision thus far. She had been fasting for some days and had felt humbled, her senses sharpened to receive divine guidance. Suddenly Ramos saw before her "a trash bin. It was a small bin, like the kind where you step on the pedal to open the lid. Garbage was being thrown in from this side, from that side." Eyes closed, Ramos continued praying. The worship songs came to an end and the sisters introduced the woman who would give the sermon. "And the message [of the sermon] was exactly the vision that I was having!" The speaker began to testify about how "we need to get rid of all garbage, everything that hinders us." As the woman spoke, the small bin of Ramos's vision transformed into a large one. Sweating and trembling, Ramos shared the image aloud. The preacher snapped her fingers and told the worshippers to form a line. One by one, the women approached Diana to cast their burdens into the garbage can that only her eyes could see. "So many women broke down there," she recalls. "They arrived in front of me and I was trembling, I was praying, I could not see who was who, but they were all crying, throwing everything away." The Holy Spirit, Ramos reflects, was "flowing in that place."

In the days that followed, worshippers approached Diana to tell her of emotional burdens that had been released and physical pains that been healed on the spot. The event marked a moment of conversion for one woman who had previously identified as Catholic. Ramos's back ached for several days after. "Those are the burdens that the others were carrying," a companion told her, "but you are strong, and you can hold them." After three days, Diana's pain dissolved. Soon after, an additional vision came to Ramos, this time evoking a promise of liberation. On that occasion, she saw Jesus walking from behind. He was reaching into basket and casting handfuls of sand over the worshippers. "And I said, 'sisters, get ready, because blessings from our Lord are coming over us.'"⁹ Shortly

⁸ Ramos's efforts were buttressed by members of a Phoenix-based Pentecostal church whose pastors provided a home for Ramos's daughters during her four years at Eloy.

⁹ Here once again Ramos alludes to God's promise to Abraham, in which God evoked the vastness of "sand on the seashore" to describe the enormity of His promised blessings (GEN 22:17, NIV)

afterward, Ramos recounts that some of the women in her group began to be released from Eloy as a shift in policy made it possible for relatives in the United States to post bond. “They started to release people from that place on one thousand dollars bond. Fifteen hundred dollars bond. . . . But it wasn’t my turn yet.”

As Ramos’s leadership progressed, the guards occasionally attempted to restrict her by breaking the worshippers into smaller groups. Yet Ramos persisted, continuing to gather up to ninety women at a time. Noticing her gift for instilling hope in others, the facility’s officials even began to rely upon Ramos as a suicide counselor. “So many women with so much necessity, with so much hunger for the word of God,” Ramos recounts. “Sometimes when there were people who wanted to kill themselves, who wanted to take pills. . . . the officials sent them to me, so I would speak to them about my faith.”

As advances in the field of trauma studies suggest, healing can be most effective when it engages the whole person as an embodied being, fully embedded in social relationships. Just as we become traumatized at the hands of humans, we recover by becoming re-attuned to the living rhythms of others (van der Kolk, 2015; Ogden et al., 2006). Amidst the daily traumatization of life in Eloy, compounded upon the many stressors those in detention carry from their countries of origin, Ramos’s vision of the trash bin emerged as an unlikely vehicle for group healing. The symbol is richly multivalent. It speaks of the shared drive to release emotional burdens, to free up energy necessary for survival. It speaks of the collective treatment of those in detention as figurative “trash,” held at the cusp of disposal through deportation yet only once maximum profits are extracted from their bodies. The symbol also speaks of the contradictory nature of detention as a space that is sterile—reeking of cleaning fluids, kept at chilling temperatures—yet shot through with rotting food, stained garments, and filthy bedclothes. Finally, the symbol evokes the creative alchemy that people within Eloy and other detention centers employ to transform garbage into things of value, weaving chip bags into tradable figurines or crafting sanitary pads out of bits of plastic. Whereas O’Dell approaches incarceration as a life-crisis that can push individuals to seek other-worldly salvation, Ramos leaned into the grimness of life behind bars to orchestrate moments of collective change. These moments occurred in women’s hearts and minds but also in their flesh and blood. Ramos’s faith leadership was embodied, communal, and shot through with imagery of liberation from captivity.

Conclusion

We have witnessed in O’Dell and Ramos’s stories two evangelical Christian readings of immigration enforcement and incarceration in the borderlands. Both faith leaders recognize incarceration as an institution that produces desperation and despair. Each have identified, in their respective faiths, an antidote to that despair. O’Dell accepts the hellishness of carceral life as a part of the generally fallen state of the world while striving to instill within prisoners the hope of salvation in the life beyond. Ramos, meanwhile, operates within the space of living death that O’Dell’s employer, CoreCivic, has produced to nourish her peers and restore the vitality necessary for their survival. Her ministry facilitates the release of physical and emotional burdens, helping the women garner strength to persist with their immigration cases. In O’Dell’s approach, the bodily suffering that prisoners endure is justified by a logic redemptive suffering, a logic that is intimately entangled with the history of Christian prison reform in the United States. For Ramos individual redemption is not a concern, for the core problem is not the sinfulness of the flesh but rather the fact that the body and psyche are carrying burdens they should not have to bear. Faced with the deprivations of detention, Ramos performs a creative alchemy that transforms hunger into spiritually inscribed fasts and transforms



starkly regimented days into apertures for collective healing. O'Dell's ministry simultaneously obscures and provides an implicit justification for the human commoditization at the center of for-profit incarceration, while Ramos's ministry holds that commoditization in full light while rigorously affirming and nourishing human life.

The exploitative dimension of for-profit detention that we are witnessing in places like Eloy, I have argued, is best understood not as simply the latest expression of restrictive immigration enforcement in the United States, but rather as an extension of the broader settler colonial process of controlling the mobility of, and extracting value from, those cast below the line of the human. By bringing the dimension of coloniality into view, we are better poised to notice the continuities between immigration detention and mass incarceration more generally, especially as these institutions impact communities of color. A glance at the broader prison landscape in Eloy provides a compelling illustration. The detention center we have explored here is but one of four carceral facilities operated by CoreCivic, all located within a single square mile on the outskirts of the small Arizona city. Among these is Saguaro Correctional Center, which contracts with the Hawaii Department of Public Safety to incarcerate the majority of the state's male prisoners, most of whom are of indigenous descent. This unlikely corner of the Arizona desert thus witnesses the profitable confinement of both colonized U.S. citizens who have been forcibly transported thousands of miles from home, and non-citizens who have fled homelands impacted by the broader repercussions of U.S. imperialism. In future work, I plan to continue examining how religious practices alternately occlude and shed light on these continuities.

I would like to close with a final observation from my interview with O'Dell. While I have argued that O'Dell's approach to prison ministry obscures the material and economic interests that spur the growth of for-profit incarceration, concerns about material realities are not absent from his account. We must simply look for these concerns elsewhere, beyond his overt theological musings. At one moment in our interview, when O'Dell had been discussing a mentee on Death Row, he was moved to tears. After a long pause, O'Dell said softly, "he's the reason I do what I do . . . It's not about immigrants. It's not about criminals. It's about – people." In the next breath, however, he pivoted. "Don't misunderstand me, illegal immigration is a major problem in this country. It's a major problem if for no other reason than the economic burden that we can't bear . . . and my grandchildren are not going to have anything left. My great-grandchildren are probably going to have only one chance at survival in this world." These words evoke the precarity of O'Dell's own birth, as an underweight baby who should not have survived, whose brother and sister perished in infancy. The survival and flourishing of kinship lines is no less a priority, no less precious to O'Dell than it is to Ramos. And yet, O'Dell's words about the future of earthly life are marked by a sense of precarity and scarcity—in sharp contrast to the material, emotional, and spiritual abundance embedded in Ramos's visions of blessings to come.

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