

Blood in the Soil:  
Liberating Space, Identity and Farm Workers in the United States

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**Abstract:** This paper assesses the state of our Union, from the perspective of the farm workers in the United States. After providing a community analysis outlining the state of farm workers, the paper explores a new theoretical framework investigating space, identity, and work as possible concepts to discuss liberation from an oppressive Union. This paper argues that the social abandonment of the land and the poverty of the workers necessitates that the Union and the academy begin working to restore relationships with exploited land and people. This is a Christian, liberative practical theological assessment of our Union.

**Keywords:** farm workers, liberation theology, work, identity

From the perspective of my parents' union, I come from a long line of wealthy, middle-class, white Protestant Americans on my mother's side, and Chicano Catholic farm and manual labor working-class poor on my father's side. One could reason that how I understand difference, or my own dis-union, is one of race, ethnicity or even religion. However, sweating and bleeding in the construction trade and as a field laborer, I learned that the embodied and material difference between humans is not race, nationality or religious difference – despite people's insistence on this as the basis of oppression. Instead, the ache in my back and the smell and taste of sweat and blood from physically demanding, poorly compensated work illuminates the fact that our most basic needs—food and shelter—are made available to us by the labor of the economically marginalized. This paper assesses

the “state of our Union” from the perspective of the farm workers who put food on our table, with the knowledge that it is presented to those who do not necessarily, as I no longer do, work with the poor in the fields.<sup>1</sup> Given that readers, generally speaking, likely do not work in the fields with the poor, this essay seeks to call attention to issues of space, class identity, and work as sites in need of liberation.<sup>2</sup>

This liberation project will hold as its locus the lives of farm laborers, who represent all those who exist on the margins of our society. In order for liberation to be realized, the marginalized workers, the land, the owners, and consumers must be lead into partnership, into the fields to work shoulder to shoulder for the common good.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of coherency, this liberation project consists of three steps. First, I will provide a community analysis outlining the state of farm workers in the United States. Second, I will offer a new theoretical framework around three aspects of this liberation project: space, identity, and work. Finally, I will suggest how the Union, the Academy, and the Church can move forward in this Christian, liberative, practical theological assessment of our Union.

The *Economist* published an article entitled “Migrant Farm Workers: Field of

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am using the term Union to reflect the Union of my parents, but it will be used throughout the paper to serve as the Union as the United States, and the Union between peoples, regardless of racial, ethnic and national distinctions. Poverty crosses borders. The paper also is a play on the word field. As I am speaking to academics, I would hope that our fields become the fields of the farm workers.

<sup>2</sup> See the hermeneutic circle of Juan Luis Segundo’s four-part methodology for liberating theology in *Liberation of Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1976), 9-10. Briefly, the method begins with experience that causes one to question the reality, followed by application of one’s suspicion to dominant ideologies and systems. Then, one’s suspicion is turned towards theology and biblical interpretation, which in turn leads to a new hermeneutic for interpreting the sacred scriptures. This is also reminiscent of methodologies put forth by practical theologians, such the feel-see-judge-act model as espoused by such thinkers as Allen Figueroa Deck, “A Latino Practical Theology: Mapping the Road Ahead,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 275-297, and also Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* trans. Paul Burns (New York: Orbis, 2008), 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th Anniversary, (New York: Continuum, 2000).

Tears,” which followed the life of the Vegas, a family who traveled from Oaxaca, Mexico to the United States. During the family’s first few attempts to cross the border, U.S. border agents tied them up, took them to a cold jail and made them sleep on the bare floor for nights. Once enough migrant workers had been arrested to fill a bus, they were driven back across the border to Mexico, only to be captured again by bandits. Held at gunpoint, their food was stolen and they were stripped naked. Because the Vegas speak an indigenous language, they were voiceless on both sides of the border.

Despite these setbacks, they made it to Oxnard, California, where strawberries abound. Arriving out of season, the Vegas could not work so they dwelled as strangers in a foreign land, taking refuge on the streets or in a doghouse. It was a life better than watching their son die because of a “flood that carried rubbish, dead animals and disease through canals of Oaxaca.” After their first few paychecks, the Vegas moved north and continued to pick “la fruta del diablo,” the devil’s fruit.

How many others live on the margins of our Union? The United States Department of Agriculture briefing, “Rural Labor and Education: Farm Labor,” notes that those farm workers born in the United States or Puerto Rico account for twenty-nine percent of the total farm working population. Around sixty-eight percent of the (just over) one million total farm workers in the United States were

born in Mexico,<sup>4</sup> while ninety-seven percent of farm managers and owners identify as white.<sup>5</sup> It would be very simple to stop the analysis here and investigate the meaning of national and racial identities as it pertains to farm workers in the United States. However, farm workers like the Vegas (or my own family) do not migrate to work in the United States because they want to be “white” or American. The USDA briefing reflects this sentiment, beginning not with the racial or national identification of farm workers, but rather by noting that hired farm workers continue to be one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Closer to home, National Agricultural Statistics Service reports that in 2010 the production of “raw” goods –the actual fruits and vegetables before processing– in California was valued at over \$3.5 Billion.<sup>7</sup> A report released in November of 2011 suggests the documented workers in California’s agricultural market earned on average \$10.20 an hour, working close to forty-five hours a week. Of the estimated 193,000 workers, 157,000 expected to be employed 150 days or more.<sup>8</sup> These statistics do not take into account those people who do not have documentation, which in some estimates might add close to another 100,000 workers to the fray.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Rural Labor and Education: Farm Labor” briefing updated on July 11, 2011. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/LaborAndEducation/FarmLabor.htm#Data> (accessed February 22, 2012)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, “2010 State Agriculture Overview,” [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Ag\\_Overview/AgOverview\\_CA.pdf](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Ag_Overview/AgOverview_CA.pdf) (accessed March 22, 2012); See also “Census of Agriculture, Volume 1, Geographic Area Series,” for a more complete explanation of how these statistics are gathered.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), “Farm Labor Report,” <http://usda01.library.cornell.edu/usda/current/FarmLabo/FarmLabo-11-17-2011.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2012)

The report also notes that California, while providing almost twenty-two percent of the agricultural production to the United States, ranks near the bottom in terms of living wage.<sup>9</sup> This communal analysis grows more troubling when gender is taken into account. Women are some of the most economically disadvantaged farm workers in the Union. A report by the United States Department of Labor found that gender was a discriminating factor in annual personal income. Women farm workers earned between \$2,500 and \$5,000 a year, while men earned \$5,000 to \$7,500.<sup>10</sup> The farm working poor have a face, and it is not the pretty labels on the bags of produce or even the familiar face of Cesar Chavez. It is the hidden face of economically disadvantaged women.<sup>11</sup>

One other important piece of information for our analysis is what is understood by the term “farm.” The USDA defines a farm as “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year.”<sup>12</sup> As of 2007 in Monterey County, the salad bowl capital of the world and my childhood home, there were 1,199 documented working farms averaging about \$5.1 million in land and asset value (not including

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “Income and Poverty,” *The National Agricultural Workers Survey*, updated January 11, 2010. <http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report/ch3.cfm> (accessed January 15, 2012)

<sup>11</sup> When I wrote this particular sentence I thought of my great Aunt, who worked her entire life in the fields. Her face is the face of liberation and if I refuse to recognize her impact, even here, then I fail to articulate the role my family plays in this historical liberation project. As liberative scholars, there is no greater work than honoring one’s ancestors. Aunt Carolina Zaragoza, presente.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Census of Agriculture: Summary and State Data 2007,” [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_2\\_County\\_Level/California/caintro.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_2_County_Level/California/caintro.pdf) (accessed March 18, 2012)

the projected production value of the farm).<sup>13</sup> What is telling about this definition is that it is only concerned with the farm as a place of commerce; it does not take into account the people or the land. Our communal analysis, from the narrative of the Vegas to farm labor statistics in the United States, leads us to one clear fact: the state of our Union is one of economic marginalization and violence against the poor. Those blood-stained berries purchased from the grocery store reflect the failure of our Union to offer freedom from poverty. The question we must ask is this: Can we imagine a community where we live in new relation with farm workers and the land?<sup>14</sup>

For this particular liberative and practical theory, three issues are critical to placing those who work the land and the land itself at the heart of our new community: space, identity, and work. How the community identifies space dictates the in-groups and the out-groups. This delineation is also known as the border. When borders are enforced, violence necessarily follows.<sup>15</sup> Thus, re-examining how one looks at space—nationhood, institution affiliation, religious identification, private property, etc.—will allow for new spaces where human-human relationships and human-creation relationships are not only valued but nurtured. Addressing

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<sup>13</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, "Census of Agriculture: Summary and State Data 2007," [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1,\\_Chapter\\_2\\_County\\_Level/California/st06\\_2\\_001\\_001.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/California/st06_2_001_001.pdf) (accessed March 18, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Drucilla Barker and Susan Feiner, *Liberating Economics: Feminist Perspectives on Family, Work and Globalization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 2

<sup>15</sup> "The U.S. -Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them." Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 25: "The U.S. -Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them."

space, Ivan Petrella notes that in order for liberation to occur, there are “zones of social abandonment” that need to be investigated.<sup>16</sup> The sites of social abandonment are the neighborhoods, *barrios*, where the farm workers live, as they are often spaces of great poverty.<sup>17</sup> Latin American liberation theologies have long considered the rural, farm working poor to be some of the most marginalized people in the world today.<sup>18</sup> However, those marginalized in the U.S. are not the rural and urban poor located in the texts of Latin American liberation theologies, but rather the urban poor who work the rural land.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, farmland is also a zone of social abandonment. It is not abandoned in the sense that no one is working the land, but it is abandoned because the majority of food purchasing people today do not encounter the land. They do not feel the morning chill or muddle through the slushy

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<sup>16</sup> Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 8

<sup>17</sup> According to City Data, the detailed profile for my hometown and zip code of East Salinas, California, 93905, is not only an agricultural/farm working community, but also of the estimated population of 46,217 of who at least 43,830 identify as Hispanic or Latino and 91% speak Spanish at home. Also, the foreign born population is estimated at 19,833 or 51% of the total population. Regardless, there are at least 26.9% people living below the poverty level and another 19.5% is living below 50% of the poverty level. Again, one could choose ethnic and nationality as the reason for poverty, but that would not necessarily change the relationship to the work that people in this place of degradation experience every day. Only through living and working with the people can one begin to imagine liberation from these levels of poverty. The liberative work begins in the fields and then enters the Academy, politics and other social institutions. “93905,” <http://www.city-data.com/zip/93905.html> (accessed February 18, 2012). For more comprehensive statistics, see the U.S. Census Bureau, which provides 2000 and 2010 data for larger regional areas at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

<sup>18</sup> C.f. Camillo Torres, *Revolutionary Writings* trans. Linda Day and Robert Olsen (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969). Torres writing as a Colombian Priest outlined many of the problems located in this article. Specifically, he notes the need for agrarian land reform, the liberation of the poor and the role of the Church and academy. However, his analysis is not wholly applicable because he is necessarily negotiating the tension between a rural poor and the larger Colombian society. Given his attention to urbanization and strong Marxist leanings, Torres, while helpful for understanding how liberation theology might be applicable for the farm working poor, his Colombian context and the United States context are very different.

<sup>19</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau only about 20% of people live in non-Urban areas. See the U.S. Census Bureau, “Growth in Urban Population Outpaces Rest of Nation, Census Bureau Reports 2010” <http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb12-50.html> (accessed on March 27, 2012). See United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), “Farm Labor Report,” <http://usda01.library.cornell.edu/usda/current/FarmLabo/FarmLabo-11-17-2011.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2012).

soil at 4:30 a.m. with the workers. They do not smell the mix of sweat, manure and dirt. Their hands are not callused from working with farm tools and they do not feel the pain of accidentally cutting one's own body when harvesting or weeding with sharp tools.

David Hollenbach opens up the border between the space of affluence and these sites of poverty in order to reexamine what it means to live in a space that values the common good.<sup>20</sup> Recognizing the world's plurality, he suggests that any common good theory must move beyond tolerance –the dominant attitude even among those who are hospitable to farm workers and others– to one that seeks dialogue and the value of human rights. If one were to apply these values to space, it would mean two things.<sup>21</sup> First, the USDA definition of a farm must necessarily be re-imagined to include the wholeness of what a farm as a space provides: family, work, creativity, and community.<sup>22</sup> Second, if one begins to see the connection to space and land as open and fluid, a new theoretical position towards land ownership must be imagined. John Hart articulates this position best, claiming one must imagine and participate in “a relational community in which commons goods (the natural goods provided in the Earth commons) become common goods (goods shared by all community members as needed), to provide for the needs and

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<sup>20</sup> David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and the Christian Ethic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18

<sup>21</sup> And these other members would be people who might not participate in the farm directly but are in relation to it by drawing on its goods – the vast amount of United States living public. See also [United States Department of Agriculture, \*Census of Agriculture 2007 Vol. 1 Part 51 \(Issued February 2009, updated 2009\)\*](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_2_County_Level/California/st06_2_001_001.pdf) [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_2\\_County\\_Level/California/st06\\_2\\_001\\_001.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_2_County_Level/California/st06_2_001_001.pdf) (accessed April 4, 2012)

<sup>22</sup> And these other members would be people who might not participate in the farm directly but are in relation to it by drawing on its goods – the vast amount of United States living public.



common good of all. A planet that is home to such a relational community will begin to become realized when people and peoples exercise a preferential option for the poor.”<sup>23</sup> Of course, the creation of this new relationship to space will most likely be like a daunting task for those who cling to market structures, whose connection to food is the supermarket, whose primary citizenship is found in those products of modernity: nationhood, academic and career status, portfolio building, credit rating.<sup>24</sup>

For those citizens of the common good, the *nueva comunidad*, imagining a new people whose primary identity is something completely separate from the need for national, ethnic, or racial purity is integral to liberation.<sup>25</sup> The importance of shifting the site of oppression from national, ethnic, and racial identities –as painfully real these oppressions are and continue to be– is that many claims to racial, ethnic, or national purity have undergirding pejorative and exclusive sub-categories that neither reflect one’s story nor one’s relationship to a community (this is especially true for the poor).<sup>26</sup> Returning to Petrella, he notes that class

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<sup>23</sup> John Hart, “The Poor of the Planet and The Planet of the Poor: Ecological Ethics and Economic Liberation,” *University of St John Law Journal* vol. 5:1 (2008), 155

<sup>24</sup> This list could be much longer, but given that the particular audience is affluent, educated and current/future educators, I am referencing the context in which the paper was presented: middle to upper class graduate students who aspire to go into teaching. One question after the paper was presented was quite telling of this context and it began something like this: “I am concerned about smashing my laptop...what I do is work and we need people to look at the theoretical, that is work, so why would I need to smash my laptop to work for liberation?” My answer is we absolutely need people to investigate systems of oppression. However, even my cursory investigation here affords a certain class status to even be able to research. While parts were written after a day’s work in the packing sheds of Salinas, by in large, I was able to construct most of it without feeling the pains of hunger, without the pain of physically demanding labor and I was able to make more money in half a semester than I did my entire time working in the sheds. If liberative theory was actually written and built in the fields, then perhaps the Union could move forward in liberating people from poverty.

<sup>25</sup> By Supermarket, I am referring to the grocery store or the ‘big box’ stores where one can purchase their food without ever seeing the land, space, where that food came from.

<sup>26</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (New York: Orbis, 1983), 21

oppression should come before issues of national, racial, and ethnic oppression. What Petrella and others recognize is that while ethnic, racial, and national identity may be important for certain political rights in this particular Union, it is class or economic depravity that moves or stagnates historical liberation.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that poverty is not compounded based on other social markers. Such is the case with women, who as noted before make less than half the annual income of men in farm work. However, the objective of this liberative project is not to achieve equal pay for farm women, which would only be \$7,500 annually. Instead, this liberative project denounces the economic depravity suffered by all workers and requires a radical reimagining of Union that denounces the occurrence of such poverty.<sup>28</sup>

For academic theologians, recognizing poverty is a call to unearth a liberation theology that has been domesticated and assimilated by the middle class across these social identifiers. Following Petrella, all of these racial and ethnic theologies fail to liberate or stop the spread of poverty.<sup>29</sup> The poor are poor before all other social markers and their bodies feel this pain. Petrella also suggests that those committed to the transformation of a Union with the poor need to recover a sense of rebellion. If the land of social abandonment is going to be a place of

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<sup>27</sup> For 'readers' of liberation theology, this is not new. Gustavo Gutiérrez made it clear that "the term poverty designates in the first place material poverty, that is, the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name." Quote from Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation 15th Anniversary Edition* trans. by Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis, 1988), 164.

<sup>28</sup> C.f. Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Class, Sex and the Theologian: Reflections on the Liberationist Movement in Latin America," in *Another Possible World*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid, Ivan Petrella and Luiz Carlos Susin (London: SCM Press, 2007), 23-38. Also, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 71. Here Isasi-Diaz notes the discrepancies noted by the Human Development Report which notes that women do 67 of each 100 hours of work in the world, but control only 9.4% of the world's income and that of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty, over 70% are women. See the Human Development Report, *The Revolution for Gender Equality*, 1995. [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr\\_1995\\_en\\_overview.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1995_en_overview.pdf) (accessed March 15, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology*, 86

liberation, and if transforming the liberation conversation from national, ethnic, and racial liberations to class liberation is going to be *the* liberative task, then theologians and academics need to rebel or work against an oppressive system.

What is this rebellious work? It begins by liberating work from limiting definitions of “wage,” “piece-work” (being paid per flat of strawberries in the case of the Vegas), and “minimum wage.” To farm workers, working the land is merely one of these definitions, but it is hardly work that is becoming of a community that seeks to build new relationships and community on the land with their *nueva* *comunidad*. Wendell Berry—author, poet, activist, and farmer—addresses the particular agricultural fallacy that hand labor is bad. He claims “probably any farm work is miserable, whether done by hand or by machine, if it is economically desperate—if it does not secure the worker in some stable, decent, rewarding connection to the land worked.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, as conscientized individuals following Paolo Freire, the community is prompted to ask simple questions to restore the dignity of farm work.<sup>31</sup> Who owns the field? How big is it? Is the work stable, decent, and rewarding? Is the work done in the company of family and neighbors? Through the eyes of the farm workers, the answers to these questions are simple. Someone else owns the land. The land is large, endless, requiring the contorting of my body over uniform crop rows. I am paid low wages and work tireless hours. The work never changes. Those around me may be my family, but according to the Union we are not friends or neighbors in this land. Instead, we are simply temporary laborers—labor

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<sup>30</sup> Wendell Berry, “*Six Agricultural Fallacies*,” in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 132

<sup>31</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 85

output in a market equation. Surrounded by food, my body aches in hunger. How can work be good in such a space? Can one imagine the connections to the farm working poor?

Imagining solidarity with the impoverished farm worker is not something new in the Christian tradition. St. John of Chrysostom, writing around 389 CE, warns us of our failure to imagine communal connections to farm workers:

Consider how an ear of corn is produced ... the farmer needs the blacksmith ... (who) needs the carpenter to make a frame ... He needs the leather worker ... Since we depend on one another for our very survival, why do we ever try to exploit and cheat one another? Nothing could be more stupid and irrational than to try and get the better of someone else; people who cheat and exploit others are cheating and exploiting themselves.<sup>32</sup>

Considering not only how the agricultural products get to the table, but the lives of those who are cultivating it, lends itself to a new economic vision, one that places the working poor at the heart of our communal consideration. According to Clodovis Boff and George Pixley, St. Paul achieved this solidarity on a small scale. In Acts 18: 2-4, Paul went to see a man and a woman, Aquila and Pricilla, “and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” Not only does the reader see Paul undermining singular identity (Jews and Greeks), but the reader also finds Paul undermining class distinctions.<sup>33</sup> The reader knows Paul’s mission is

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<sup>32</sup> St John of Chrysostom, *On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom*, compiled by Robert Van de Weyer (Liguori: Liguori/Triumph Press, 1996), 17

<sup>33</sup> Clodovis Boff and George Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor* (New York: Orbis, 1986), 88

spreading the Good News, but what one comes to know through this selection is that such work was left for the Sabbath; he labored with the people during week. What I am suggesting here is that while it is one thing to say that undocumented farm workers should be allowed citizenship rights in the U.S., or that churches should open their doors as an act of hospitality, it is quite another that we identify so strongly with the farm workers –that we hunch over the strawberry rows, shoulder-to-shoulder, learning their names, hearing their narratives, harvesting together in community.

The Vegas and the millions of those like them across the world –the hungry, the naked, the strangers among us– necessitate a new common good theory, a new ethos of living, a nueva comunidad, a new Union. In order to truly achieve liberation from class violence, scholars must reinterpret the proverbial Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 text, “they will beat their swords into plowshares,” to mean, “we will beat our laptops into harvesting knives.’ And how do we do this? Through work.

The liberative project outlined above is not supposed to be a holistic economic theory or a completely new alternative to our Union. Rather, it is a liberative practical theological assessment of our Union. From my personal experience of the pains of working shoulder to shoulder with the farm working poor, my assessment of our dis-union reads that there is blood in the soil; la fruta del diablo oppresses everyone. Sacredness needs to be returned to the land. Regardless of how one defines “Union,” the oppressive system of agribusiness, the Church’s slow response to the field working poor, and the academy’s preferential option for identity politics serve merely as a distraction from the economic

conditions of the farm working poor, perpetuating the oppression of both the land and those who work it.<sup>34</sup> This paper was prepared for the conference entitled “A More Perfect Union: Religious Assessments of the American Experiment,” which noted in its description that “from the very inception of our democracy our history has revealed the necessity of this pursuit as people have been denied full participation on the grounds of race, gender, creed, culture, and sexual orientation. This historically ubiquitous element of exclusion underscores the need to perpetually cultivate a more perfect Union.” Indeed, this historically ubiquitous element of exclusion underscores the need for conversation around class and poverty in the project of cultivating a more perfect Union. It also serves as a reminder of the academy’s dis-union with the poor. Fieldwork for scholars looking for liberation from an oppressive Union begins in the fields. A scholar will participate in the liberation struggle not when the ink has dried, but rather when one’s blood and sweat have been offered to the people and the land.

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<sup>34</sup> Claremont Lincoln University Student Conference, *A More Perfect Union: Religious Assessments of the American Experiment*, April 19-21, 2012

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