

---

# Borderland Ethics *Sin Fronteras*: Borderland Ethics Without Borders, Neighbor-Love in Liminal Spaces

---

Javier Alanís

*Executive Director and Associate Professor of Theology, Culture, and Mission  
Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest*

I am from *la frontera*, the borderland between the U.S. and Mexico. I was born just a few short miles from the Iron Slats, the symbol of the Wall that now separates our two neighbor nations and two neighbor cities of Hidalgo near McAllen and Reynosa, Mexico. During one evening of the Christmas holidays my siblings and I drove to Hidalgo to see the Christmas lights that adorn the homes on the U.S. side of the border. We could see the night lights of the border city of Reynosa *en el otro lado*, on the other side of the Rio Grande River.<sup>1</sup>

## The historical landscape

To engage in ethical deliberation in this part of the world, I would first like to offer a description of the border that Chicana feminist and poet Gloria Anzaldua offers in her book *Borderlands, La Frontera, The New Mestiza*, a book she penned in 1987. Anzaldua grew up in south Texas not far from where I grew up. She was no stranger to being considered an undocumented person in her own land. She penned the following words:

The U.S.–Mexican border is *una herida abierta* (an open wound) 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. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* (the ones crossed over) live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” [Some] in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess

---

**A** border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.

---

documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians, or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power ... Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.”<sup>2</sup>

Anzaldua's words sound abrasive and unkind to our ears. I hope that she was able to find healing of her personal wounds before she passed in 2004. I have known and ministered with and among people like Anzaldua which is the reason I assign this book to the students that I co-teach every January at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest. She helps us to prepare them for the reality of native peoples and the undocumented experience of many in our borderlands.

Anzaldua was a woman who lived the harsh reality of racial and gender-other violence that is not atypical in the borderlands of the U. S. Transnational, cultural, and gender-other violence is often the bitter fruit of that open wound that she writes about. She captures the spirit of the Chicano Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s that sought the same kind of justice for native peoples as the African-American civil rights movement did for African-Americans.

People of the borderlands had their own “Juan Crow” laws and

---

1. This article is based on a lecture delivered at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago on February 22, 2019.

---

2. Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 25–26.

experienced otherness dating back to the U.S. war of aggression with Mexico of 1846-1848.<sup>3</sup> During one legislative stroke of the pen in the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848, a treaty that the U.S. never fully honored, Mexico lost one half of its national territory. In one instant the border crossed the native peoples of the land. A popular refrain states: “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us!” Even today Texas has an amusement park that was known as Six Flags over Texas for there have been six empire, republic, Confederate state, national, and indigenous claims of sovereignty over this border space! It is for this reason that the people of God of the borderlands need documents, *papeles* we call them in Spanish, to legitimize our identity at the border checkpoints.<sup>4</sup> The border between the U.S. and Mexico remains highly contested territory. In 1846 President Polk initiated the war of aggression against Mexico for the right to claim the border space, a war that never seems to end. Today we see and experience the war as the open wound created by the iron slats that tear through the sacred soil of our ancestors, a rich soil that has given agricultural life to two nations and is watered by a shared river that nourishes countless species of environmental life.

I was born in this borderland. My Lutheran Christian identity has been forged and shaped in this crucible we call *La Frontera*, a word that captures the frontier aspect of an expansionist and violent history. This space is where I was baptized in 1954 by an immigrant pastor from Denmark. Pastor Holger Nielsen came to this country with his widowed mother and seven siblings. Like many immigrants from Europe, they passed through Ellis island on their way to a farm in Iowa. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants and the church reflects this immigrant history. The church of the border reminds us daily of our immigrant past and present as we serve the ever-constant wave of immigrants who arrive at our southern border. I was confirmed at St. John Lutheran Church in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, some twenty miles from the U.S.–Mexico border wall. I affirm my baptismal identity in that church with every visit. I was ordained for service in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in that parish. I was installed as professor at the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest (LSPS) in that hallowed sanctuary that was founded by German immigrants seeking a better life in this country, and by Mexican immigrants who fled the Mexican civil war some 100 years ago.<sup>5</sup> I have been teaching at LSPS for eighteen years and have accompanied students to the border each year. Every year we learn something new about our baptismal identity and theological claims in that contested landscape.

3. Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 16, 51, 97–98, 284.

4. The border checkpoints are located within ninety miles from the U.S.–Mexico border and throughout the 1900-mile border with Mexico.

5. See T. Michael Mackey, ed., *The Roots and Dynamics of Lutheran Hispanic Ministry in Texas*, (LSPS: 1989).

We are, after all, a nation of immigrants and the church reflects this immigrant history.

### Liminality defined

With this backdrop in mind, allow me to explain what I mean by borderland ethics *sin fronteras*, (ethics without borders) and neighbor-love in liminal spaces. But first we need to define liminality. Liminality is:

- A transitional or initial stage of a process or threshold.
- A threshold for sacred encounter: Encuentro – The place of epiphanies ... of new awareness... of new consciousness ... or *concientización* to quote Pablo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.<sup>6</sup>
- The definition of the Christian way of being in the world as Luther defined it in his doctrine of the **two kingdoms or realms**;<sup>7</sup> the Christian lives in an eschatological liminal space awaiting a promised future reign that has already been inaugurated by the birth, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus the Christ.
- A state of being or a state of living in tension and ambiguity as a way of being in the world. It is a both/and existential reality.
- Often experienced at a geo-political or cultural border-crossing *frontera* where one stands on both sides of the border space at the same time. **It is experienced as a Sacred Third Space between cultures and nations.** (What Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as a Third Country).
- A holy space of Spirit-encounter between people created in the image and likeness of the divine (*Imago Dei*) **who mirror the image of the sacred “other” in that liminal *encuentro* and Spirit threshold.**

So you see standing before you:

- A baptized Lutheran,
- Who lives in liminal space as a way of being in the world,
- Who is called to serve in ministry between two nations and two cultures,
- Who reads the Bible through hybrid eyes as a Latino Mestizo Lutheran who embodies a multiplicity of European, Asian, African, Jewish, and Indigenous DNA (thanks to Ancestry.com).

6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). See also John Elias, *Paulo Freire: Pedagogue of Liberation* (Malabar, Fla.: Kreiger Publishing Co., 1994), Chapter 2.

7. Martin Luther, “An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants,” *Luther’s Works*, 46:69.

As a Latino Lutheran whose parents and grandparents crossed the border near the city of Reynosa, Mexico, 100 years ago, I read the Bible and engage ethical deliberation through liminal lens. What I mean is this: I bring the following experience to my reading of Scripture, to my ethical deliberation, and to my theological claim as a baptized child of God of the *frontera*:

- Cultural lens as a Latino Lutheran on the cultural margins of the church,
- The forced exile of my family.
- The experience of diaspora of a Mexican immigrant community who fled civil war.
- The experience of displacement (*ni de aquí ni de allá* we say in Spanish; we do not belong over here in the U.S. and we do not belong over there in Mexico); the news media continually reminds my community that people who share my ancestry, linguistic claims, and experience of oral history of exile and displacement are suspect and not welcome in this country, especially if they come from Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America.
- Cultural marginality in the larger U.S. mythic narrative of divine right of creation; we recall that Manifest Destiny was an imperialist policy of expansion used to justify the forced displacement of native peoples from their ancestral lands for geo-political and economic control.
- A shifting cultural ambiguity: Who I am as a cultural being with a particular social location is influenced by the larger public meta-narratives of the nation and by the naming by others. My theological claim in this space is that **I am *Imago Dei*** (*image of God*) within contested history and within contested territorial claims in a border Third Space that is oppressively militarized and defended by executive order. This Third Space contains within it historical, geo-political, religious, ethical, and linguistic claims that continue to be contested and influence the various narratives of the body-politic and church.<sup>8</sup> The contested claims of the Third Space also influence congregational and institutional life.

What I have just described influences how many pastoral agents “see” and experience the public Third Spaces of the borderlands. My particular social location and theological inheritance influence the optics of the landscape and the response of faith that I affirm through my baptismal covenant and call of the church.

### Ethical and theological reflection

For the past eighteen years I have taught Lutheran ethics at LSPS. My syllabus contains this initial question: What ought I to do? That is, what is my duty to my neighbor within the context of the Third Space borderlands? Another way of asking the question:

8. Javier Alanís, *Dignity for the Foreigner: A Study of the Imago Dei from a Lutheran Hispanic/Latino Perspective* (PhD diss., The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 2002).

**B**aptismal grace knows no boundaries and makes no distinctions among peoples. My ethical duty to love and serve my neighbor naturally crosses borders and boundaries in a seamless web of life-giving grace. This grace compels me to practice a transnational ethical duty to see the image and likeness of God in the other.

What does love require? For God is love and the love of God in Jesus Christ compels me to love my neighbor as I have been loved and claimed by baptismal grace. This is a claim that I share with all people of faith, whom I encounter on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border. Baptismal grace knows no boundaries and makes no distinctions among peoples. My ethical duty to love and serve my neighbor naturally crosses borders and boundaries in a seamless web of life-giving grace. This grace compels me to practice a transnational ethical duty to see the image and likeness of God in the other and to see that image mirrored back to me in the relational encounter of service, friendship and *acompañamiento*/accompaniment. This service takes the form of advocacy for the human right to exist without violence, whether as native citizens in contested Third Space or as recently arrived immigrants seeking asylum and protection from violence in their countries of origin.<sup>9</sup>

What is often hidden in the migration stories of our global neighbors are the global economic forces that compel them to migrate. The truth is the neighbor who arrives at the southern border is daily maligned, dehumanized, and demonized as “illegal aliens, criminals, and rapists” by the powerful political rhetoric that drives the news media. Language is a source of power and those who wield it carelessly affect the lives of countless displaced peoples. Language is also a symbol by which native and displaced peoples construct their theological identity in response to the violence of power, just as the ancient Hebrews used their language to refute the xenophobia of their oppressor during their exile in Babylon. Language serves to refute the forces that dehumanize the displaced.<sup>10</sup>

9. The United Nations Human Rights Charter of 1948 reaffirmed faith in fundamental human rights and dignity and worth of the human person and committed all member states to promote “universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

10. Alanís, *Dignity for the Foreigner*, 4–10.

Martin Luther has much to say about our obligation to the neighbor throughout his works. In the explanation of the fifth, seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments in both the Small and Large Catechisms, Luther instructs the faithful about their duty to serve and love the neighbor as one would love God.<sup>11</sup> In *The Freedom of a Christian* he writes: “Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.”<sup>12</sup>

In his advice for Christians in general, Luther writes that “the commandments are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom 13:9). He adds: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all [people]” (1 Tim 2:1).<sup>13</sup> Today, we include prayers in worship for all people regardless of their documentation status, gender claims, ethnic identity, and transnational border crossings. We make supplications for those fleeing the violence of their native countries and who seek asylum and refugee protection in this country. We especially pray for those held in cages in our detention centers.

In this militarized *frontera*, love of neighbor requires advocacy for the unnamed asylum seeker that we see daily on our screens. We often meet them at a home for displaced migrants in Austin. We meet them at the border and hear the stories of their perilous migration journeys across continents. As my students and I listen to their stories, I am reminded of the words that we profess in our baptismal liturgy: “Do you promise to proclaim Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?” I have never heard a “I’ll think about it” or “No, I will not!” I believe the church when she affirms her baptismal covenant and genuinely believes that she concurs with the ethic of care for the border-crossing immigrant and asylum seeker when she arrives with her children at the U.S.–Mexico border.

I practice this ethical intention every Sunday in a Word and Sacrament ministry in Austin. I serve as a pastoral agent in an immigrant community at an Episcopal Church, where I have baptized young adult immigrants and blessed them with their first communion. In asking the community of their baptismal intentions, I ask a question from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* that captures the essence of my ministry: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? The people respond: I will, with God’s help.<sup>14</sup> Their response, which is echoed by the community, affirms my own commitment to serve the immigrant Christ who walks with

The dignity of every person is a gift of creation and God’s stamp of approval in the very essence of our being. It is the mark of our goodness captured in that famous scripture of Gen 1:31: “God saw all that God had made it and called it good.”

the people of God in their own wilderness journeys.

In writing my dissertation on the *Imago Dei*, I received a special grace-filled awareness. I learned that the dignity of every person is a gift of creation and God’s stamp of approval in the very essence of our being. It is the mark of our goodness captured in that famous scripture of Gen 1:31: “God saw all that God had made it and called it good.”<sup>15</sup> In the course of my ministry throughout the years I have found that at the very core of human longing is the affirmation of our human dignity. A major ethical intention of my ministry and of those who accompany me is to affirm the dignity of the people of God whose dignity is trampled, abused, and violated by all kinds of political rhetoric and transnational violence, including that of human trafficking. To be created in the image and likeness of God is to be created in the goodness of God and for relationships of care and responsibility with both God and neighbor. To affirm the dignity of native peoples and of the immigrant neighbor is to affirm our own dignity mirrored in the reflection of the other who is *Imago Dei*.<sup>16</sup> To affirm human dignity is to refute the forces that dehumanize the neighbor.

At this point you may be asking: where does observance of the law fit into this ethical framework? Good question. Are we not obligated to obey both the law of God (the Ten Commandments) and the law of civil society for the right ordering of our spiritual and civil governance? Martin Luther had much to say about the two realms. Living as a subject of the Holy Roman Empire, he often referred to Rom 13:1–4 in his appeal to obey the governing authorities as mandated from God.<sup>17</sup> For Luther, to obey this power of divine order was to obey God. For this reason, he did not support the revolt of the peasants and accused them of the grave sin of anarchy that leads to chaos in civil society. However, lest we forget his Reformation movement, he appealed to conscience when he disagreed with the emperor and the pope concerning his reforms of the church that would impact the governing order. Church and empire in his medieval day were inextricably linked and protest within the church catholic was construed as protest of the order of empire. For this reason, Luther was excommunicated and labeled with the ignominious label: Protestant heretic. Today

11. Martin Luther, *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 342–344, 365–411.

12. Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *LW*, 31:367.

13. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 356 [amended for gender inclusive language].

14. *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Episcopal Church*, (Kingsport, Tenn.: Kingsport Press, 1977), 417.

15. Alanís, *Dignity for the Foreigner*, 1–17, 25–53.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Luther, *The Book of Concord*, 355.

we call Martin Luther a prisoner of conscience such as he was at Wartburg Castle.

The ethical concern for the men, women, and children walking in a caravan from Central America to the U.S.–Mexico border is an issue of conscience for people of faith and as strongly held as Luther’s claim to conscience at the Diet of Worms. Many spiritual and civil law-abiding and tax-paying citizens feel that they, like Luther, can do no other but to protest what they perceive as unjust and inhumane treatment of immigrants seeking asylum in this country. They cannot condone the separation of children from their mothers and their detention in cages in for-profit centers that garner millions at the expense of their suffering and the life-long psychological trauma that the separation will cause. They believe that the love and justice of God for these neighbors require intervention, accompaniment, legislative appeals for comprehensive immigration reform, and non-violent protest marches and appeals with those who govern at the state capitol in Austin.

Austin is known as a sanctuary city. Many of its citizens defy state and federal mandates to provide the sanctuary of undocumented persons. They exercise their moral agency in defense of the human right of asylum for our neighbors.<sup>18</sup> Legislators are reminded by the citizens that they have an ethical responsibility to care for the neighbor and to promote the common and global good. Following in the tradition of the African-American and Chicano Civil Rights movements, and conscience-burdened saints like brother Dr. Martin Luther, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer of the Confessing Church in Germany, people of conscience ask critical questions of the governing realm. If the laws of civil society do not promote the common good and in fact injure the neighbor, then the ethical content of the law is questionable and, if necessary, declared unjust by non-violent protest as an act of conscience.

So back to my original question: What does love of neighbor require in the liminal Third Spaces of our ministries? Let me summarize the points that I have raised.

- I believe that the love of God and neighbor requires an ethical duty of care for the neighbor in a way that transcends national borders. Baptismal grace defies human constructs, such as a wall that separates peoples and families from each other in the name of safety, greatness, or national sovereignty. This is what I mean by borderland ethics *sin fronteras*, borderland ethics without borders.
- As an ethical duty of care, the people of God are called to transgress borders of difference and documentation by an ethic of justice concern and advocacy for native and immigrant neighbors who are dehumanized and demonized as “illegal aliens” by the powerful rhetoric of the empire.

18. International and U.S. Federal Law recognizes the right to asylum for individuals specified by the law. Asylum has two basic requirements. First, an asylum applicant must establish that he or she fears persecution in their home country. Second, the applicant must prove he or she would be persecuted on account of one of five protected grounds: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or particular social group.

People of conscience ask critical questions of the governing realm. If the laws of civil society do not promote the common good and in fact injure the neighbor, then the ethical content of the law is questionable and, if necessary, declared unjust by non-violent protest as an act of conscience.

- As baptized citizens of the reign of God, we are called to practice neighbor love by intentionally entering the liminal spaces of our borderlands to “see” with the optic of love and then to respond with agency.
- We are called to enter and inhabit these liminal spaces to serve, accompany, listen, advocate, and befriend the friendless. We are called to be bridge-builders.
- We are called to join hands with people of all faith traditions and goodwill, those of all ethnic and national origins to promote justice for our neighbors.
- We are called to practice hospitality (asylum) without which many cannot exist in a foreign land. Hospitality is a human right and obligation just as it was for our biblical ancestors who sojourned in the wilderness and for whom hospitality was a matter of life or death. Asylum and refugee protection laws are codified and honored by international law.
- We are called to inhabit the intersection of the spiritual and civil realms of governance for the just ordering of society and to live within this tension in a way that promotes critical thinking skills, leading to new awareness, what I call consciousness-raising or *concientización* of the faithful for the sake of love of neighbor.
- We are called to question unjust practices and to practice justice agency for love of neighbor.
- We are called to affirm human dignity in all people created in the image and likeness of God, who inhabit the contested Third Spaces of our callings and ministries.
- We are called to remember that the Reformation movement that began with Martin Luther’s protests in the sixteenth century is a *reforma continua* that continues to inform our theological and ethical deliberations and agency in the context of our history and social locations for the sake of the common and global good.

*Muchas gracias!*