‘One Is Not Born a Latina, One Becomes One’: The Construction of the Latina Feminist Theologian in Latino/a Theology

Michelle A. González
Loyola Marymount University

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Latina/o Studies Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
"One Is Not Born a Latina, One Becomes One": The Construction of the Latina Feminist Theologian in Latino/a Theology

Michelle A. González
Loyola Marymount University

Essentialism, whether in relationship to gender, culture, and/or other identity categories, has been for some time a subject that has permeated the disciplines of cultural studies, feminist theory, philosophy, ethnic studies, and theology.1 Whether one can authentically speak of categories such as “woman” and “Latino/as” without effacing the uniqueness that distinguishes the individuals that make up these categories, is the subject of debate. In a similar vein, the growing inter-disciplinary nature of the academy means that the lines that once sharply separated various

fields have become increasingly porous, forcing many to challenge and consequently reconstruct academic disciplines.

For Latino/a theology the challenge to essentialism is increasingly pressing. As a theology that claims to emerge from the perspective of Latino/a peoples in the United States, incorporating their insights and religious expressions, Latino/a theology is particularly susceptible to a constructivist attack on identity. Who are the Latino/as this theology represents? Is the construction of Latino/a identity found within this theology exclusivist, representing only a fraction of the actual population in the United States? What is the understanding of Latinas found within Latino/a theological discourse? This essay examines the construction of discourse within Latino/a theology, in particular the terms "Latina," "feminist," and "theologian." Beginning with the challenge to cultural essentialism, I then proceed to the category of gender and the role of feminism within Latino/a theologies. In the third section I explore the implications of a constructivist critique on the nature of the Latino/a theologian. I conclude with some suggestions for advancing this necessary conversation.

As the number Latino/a theologians grows and their publications multiply, the subject matter and interlocutors of this theology also increase and diversify. Two trends deserve special attention, and they strongly inform this essay. First, while conversations with critical theory and philosophy are not new to Latino/a theology, there has been a steady shift from a sociological to a more philosophical and theoretical method. The increasingly inter-disciplinary nature of Latino/a theol-

2 While emphasizing the importance of context and culture, Latino/a theologians claim to offer an accurate portrayal of Latino/a peoples. Even though we emphasize contextuality, however, do we at times gloss over concrete differences amongst our peoples?

3 Whether Latino/a theologians like it or not, within the dominant academy we represent the Latino/a population.

ology is a welcome development that will only continue to advance and expand Hispanic theological projects. Often, however, when turning to theoretical and philosophical sources, the first impulse is to turn to European and Euro-American writings, primarily male. This leads to the second trend I see: Latino/a and Black theologians are increasingly recognizing the need for more explicit dialogue between the two groups as essential to their theological tasks. Recent collaborations between Black and Latino/a theologians are examples of their growing collaborations. There has not been, however, sufficient examination of the role of Black and Latino/a philosophical and theoretical sources and their implications for Latino/a theology. Therefore, this essay is situated within the spirit of these two trends and explores the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity, with its implication for the discourse and method of Latino/a theology.

**Latino/a**

My examination of the construction of Latino/a identity is shaped by three questions: Can we speak of Latino/a identity? What are the political implications of claiming a Latino/a identity? And lastly, is Latino/a identity a racial, ethnic, and/or cultural construct? Various Latino/a and Black philosophers, critics, and sociologists inform my remarks. After presenting the questions and concerns laid out by these thinkers, I turn to the implications of their challenges for Latino/a theologians. Thus philosophical and/or sociological answers to the above questions will serve as a hermeneutical lens to examine Latino/a theology.

Can we speak of Latino/a identity? According to philosopher Jorge Gracia we can, yet only in a limited sense. In his recent book *Hispanic / Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective*, Gracia examines the nature of Latino/a / Hispanic identity, as the title clearly states, through a philosophical lens. His major concern is exploring terms such as “Latino/a” and “Hispanic” and discerning their pragmatic and philosophical viability. Early in his text he highlights five significant objections to the term “Hispanic”: the term is confusing, with no clear properties that refer to those who constitute this category; the term is too narrow and privileges certain aspects of Hispanic identity; Hispanic is an inappropriate term to designate Latino/as with no Iberian or Spanish ancestry;...

---

5The joint sessions at the 2002 Catholic Theological Society of America meeting in New Orleans between Blacks and Latino/as are examples of this. Also, see Fernandez and Segovia, eds., *A Dream Unfinished*; Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin, *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic / Latino/a Theology in Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 2002).
the term privileges Spaniards over Latin Americans and Latino/as; and lastly, Hispanic has negative connotations.6 In a similar vein, “Latino/a” is inappropriate for several reasons: it is also too narrow; the term monopolizes the term “Latin” for Hispanics and Latin Americans; paradoxically, Latino/a is also critiqued for being too broad a name; lastly, it is an imposed expression, given the French origin of the name Latin America.7 Based on historical, sociological, and philosophical analyses, Gracia challenges the very validity and possibility of the categories of “Latino/a” and “Hispanic.”

In response to the deconstruction of the category “Latino/a,” Gracia offers three criteria to judge the use of ethnic names: if the naming emerges from within the group in question; if the terms are positive; and if the category is not rigidly conceptualized.8 Discarding various theories of Latino/a identity, Gracia articulates his own philosophical construction of it, concluding that Latino/as must be understood historically, in terms of social relations. He writes, “What ties them together, and separates them from others, is history and the particular events of that history rather than the consciousness of that history; a unique web of changing historical relations supplies their unity.”9 Gracia’s construction is heavily influenced by the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his notion of family resemblances, a philosophical category based on the similarities that exist among members of a family. “Family resemblances” is a term that describes the network of commonalities that exist within a group. For Gracia, this is an especially useful analytic tool for Latino/as. “There may not be any common properties to all of us, but nonetheless we belong to the same group because we are historically related. . . . Wittgenstein’s metaphor of family resemblance is particularly appropriate in this case, for the history of Hispanics is a history of a group of people, a community united by historical events.”10 Families, however, cannot be reduced solely to those with genetic ties. Marriage, Gracia reminds us, is a contractual agreement, not a biological tie. The complexity, mixture, and diversity of families parallel the complexity of Latino/a communities. Differences and unique experiences do not render the term meaningless, for

---

6Gracia, Hispanic / Latino Identity, 6–17.
7Gracia, Hispanic / Latino Identity, 17–21. The term Latin America originates from the colonial period, when the French came up with the term Amérique Latine to distinguish French, Spanish, and Portuguese territories from English territories (Gracia, Hispanic / Latino Identity, 4).
8Gracia, Hispanic / Latino Identity, 47.
9Gracia, Hispanic / Latino Identity, 50.
10Gracia, Hispanic / Latino Identity, 50.
it is the history of Latino/a communities and not the particular consciousness of that history which grounds Latino/a identity.

Turning to the writings of Latino/a theologians, one finds that historical events and the interconnections that result from them play a significant role in the construction of the Latinos and Latinas who are the subjects and objects of this theology. This is seen, for example, through the widespread use of sociology and history as a methodological starting point for Latino/a theologians. A significant number of Latino/a theologians begin their books and articles with a chapter or section defining Latino/as through an overview of their historical and contemporary realities within the United States. Whether it is Roberto Goizueta's *Caminemos con Jesús*, Eduardo Fernandez's *La Cosecha*, Alejandro Garcia-Rivera's *Community of the Beautiful*, or Justo Gonzalez's *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, to name a few, the reader is confronted in the first pages of each monograph with a chapter defining the Latino/a community, both historical and contemporary.

This first step, which I am not critiquing per se, is integral to Latino/a theology's method. By situating themselves as racial-ethnic theologians, Latino/a theologians must explain the very communities they belong to and represent. Often these chapters highlight the complexity and diversity of Latino/a communities. Later chapters of these monographs often emphasize particular expressions or devotions within certain communities. All these methodological features are crucial in maintaining the particularity and diversity of Latino/a communities. Starting by naming one's identity is fundamental to articulating a theology from a marginalized perspective. Such self-naming by the oppressed constitutes an act of empowerment by which one claims one's racial/ethnic identity as one's own.

Such acts of self-definition, are, however, subjected to an overarching homogenization found within these same works. One only has to look at their titles: *Caminemos con Jesús: A Latino/a Theology of Accompaniment, Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective, Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, and *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*. Within the writings of many Latino/a theologians, the use of broad terms to describe Latino/a theology, Latino/a culture, Latino/a popular religion, and Latino/a experiences undermines the very particularity and distinctiveness of the various Latino/a communities.\(^\text{11}\) From earlier "classics" such as González's *Mañana*

---

\(^\text{11}\) I myself am guilty of this in my own research and writing. Andrés Guerrero's *A Chicano Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) stands out as a notable exception, as do several of Virgilio Elizondo's books. See, for example, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983).
to Díaz’s recent *On Being Human*, this practice is common to many Latino/a theologians. There is a tension, therefore, between claiming the diversity of Latino/as while at times discursively negating it.

Coupled with this simultaneous affirmation and negation of the diversity of Latino/a communities is the manner in which sources are taken from particular Latino/a groups and applied to the broader Latino/a community. Within Latina feminist theology, the particularity of a writer’s national context and its indigenous sources may be imposed on the broader discourse of Latina theology. Nancy Pineda’s recent article, for example, “Notes Toward a Chicana Feminist Epistemology (and Why It Is Important for Latina Feminist Theologies),” deftly urges Latina feminist theologians to pay attention to epistemology and feminist theory. Her article privileges the contributions of Chicana feminist theorists whose work informs her own epistemology. The significance of these sources and their role in Pineda’s theological reflections is clear in one who is a Chicana herself. Pineda does not, however, address why specifically Chicana feminism should be privileged in the broader discourse of Latina feminist theory and theology or how Chicanas’ writings (which are quite steeped in the particularity of Mexican and Mexican-American culture and history) relate to the broader context and histories of Latinas. Similarly, María Pilar Aquino uses the term “Latina / Chicana” to designate the feminist theoretical construction that underlies her own Latina feminist theology. Accurately noting the fruitful and influential presence of Chicanas within Latina feminist circles, Aquino never clarifies why Chicanas should be the privileged interlocutors for the broader field of Latina feminist thought. Does she believe that there do not exist influential feminists from other Latina groups? Clearly, this is not the case, as Aquino uses the category “Latina/Chicana.” What is unclear, however, is why all these other particular voices are subsumed into the category of “Latina.”

The privileging of certain Latino/a communities over others has concrete ramifications for the role of Latin/a theological discourse in the academy and the broader society. This leads to the second question, the political implications of claiming a broader Latino/a identity instead of a cultural identity defined by one’s original nationality or national heritage. This practice, as many Latino/a authors indicate, is in fact more prevalent than self-identifying as a Latino/a. So, for example,

---


I myself identify more readily as a Cuban American than as a Latina. Nevertheless, many Latino/a theologians continue to present their work as Latino/a theology (versus Cuban-American or Puerto Rican theology).

Of interest here are the implications of embracing the category of Latino/a within the socio-political arena of the United States and the academic discourse of theology. The political benefits of using the term “Latino/a” are manifold and known to many. Such naming increases visibility and allows for extensive coalition-building among Latino/as of various origins. Here, I only wish to ask us to ponder a potential pit fall in the use of this term. Cuban-American philosopher Ofelia Schutte is helpful in discussing the question of identifying herself as a Latina versus a Cuban-American. Schutte notes that “Latina” signifies one’s status as a minority in the United States, while “Cuban American” refers to one’s homeland and/or heritage. She writes, “As these terms apply to my life, ‘Latina’ is a signifier of the demand for inclusion; ‘cubana’ is a signifier of the demand for freedom.”14 “Latino/a” thus becomes a term that highlights one’s context as a minority and makes that status the primary referent of one’s political identity. This does not lead Schutte, however, to discard the term. Instead, Schutte embraces the category in spite of its negative political and commercial function. “What it leads me to do is to adopt the principle of recognizing the internal differences among women, Hispanics, Cuban Americans, or what have you. This principle allows one to identify as a member of a group without being coerced into compliance with the group’s image of its normative type.”15 For Schutte, as for Gracia, the foundation of the ability to claim Hispanic identity without necessarily sharing all the attributes of other Latino/as lies in the shared cultural history of Latino/as. Again, we find a more fluid definition of Latino/a identity. However, when one takes the category “Hispanic” as descriptive of a socio-political minority, the boundaries become much more rigid.

The term “minority” is becoming increasingly problematic, as more and more “minority” populations are becoming majorities in churches and cities across the United States. In academic circles, there is a growing awareness that to designate a body of literature as “minority” is to deem it marginal. Additionally, as African American critic Barbara Christian thoughtfully remarks, to designate scholarship “minority” is to borrow “from the reigning theory of the day and is untrue to the literatures being produced by our writers, for many of our literatures

(certainly Afro-American literature) are central, not minor." In other words, Latino/a theology is not, I trust, "minority" discourse to Latino/a communities, but is in fact central. The term "minority," as Christian contends, is situated within a Western dualism that sees the non-Western as minor and attempts to argue that Western discourse is major for all peoples. Christian's insights pose a challenge to Latino/a scholars who, in naming themselves and their work "Latino/a," risk falling prey to the marginalization that results from inserting oneself into the rhetoric of minority discourse. "For many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as someone's other." The various Latino/a faith and communities that are the subjects and objects of Latino/a theology are not minority populations within this discourse. They are at the center of the theological task. To see things otherwise is to reinforce the isolation of the very communities Latino/a theologians struggle to serve. At the same time, Latino/a theologians are writing for a predominantly White, European, or Euro-American audience. These are the people who hold political and financial power in academic institutions and publishing houses. If these are the people to whom we are writing, we must reflect long and hard on how this affects the manner in which we write about the people for whom we are writing.

Without denying the political implications of the term "Latino/a," the question remains whether Latino/as constitute merely a political collective, or, as Gracia and Schutte indicate, a cultural or historical category. Sociologist Felix M. Padilla holds that Latino/a ethnicity is in fact a consciousness distinct from one's national identity. "Latino ethnic-conscious behavior, rather, is collectively generated behavior which transcends the individual national and cultural identities of the various Spanish-speaking units and emerges as a distinct and separate group identification and consciousness." Latino/a ethnic identity is ultimately tied to politics, leading Padilla to label it a political ethnicity. This identity results not only from the inter-relationship initiated by various Latino/a groups but also in response to the dominant sociopolitical structure of the United States. Citing the intersection of solidarity, politics, folklore, and religion, anthropologist Enrique I. Trueba affirms Padilla's claim: "All this seems to point to a new ethnic and political reality for Latinos [sic] in the United States. The formation of a new identity is clearly associated with successful political action and

the recognition of political, social, and economic importance of Latinos [sic] in this country. . . . We are witnessing the formation of a new ethnic identity that transcends any previous ethnic definitions." I tend to agree with Trueba’s emphasis on the ethnic and political dimensions of Latino/a consciousness. On one level, it is a political gesture to identify oneself as Latino/a, for it situates Latino/as within the national context of the United States as a large collective of peoples. However, given the increasing growth and cultural influence of Latino/a peoples, there appears to be a new ethno-cultural category of Latino/as, which is distinct from a “Hispanic” person’s association with others from their nation of origin.

Theologians who write, teach, and publish under the banner of Latino/a theology must realize that this is not merely a category for the collectivity of Latino/a cultures, but a political gesture with multifaceted dimensions, both positive and negative. On the positive side, given the extremely small community of Latino/a theologians even today, our gathering under the common heading of “Hispanic” or “Latino/a” increases our visibility and prominence within the academy. This enables coalition-building and collaboration among ourselves to ensure that the voices of the masses that we represent to the elite academy are heard with greater frequency. However, in such coalitions we are often forced to negate the very particularities and complexity of our communities.

For the past few pages, I have used the terms “ethnicity” and “culture” interchangeably, for both terms are used by scholars to describe what is meant by the category of Latino/as. However, given the prominence of race in the broader identity politics of the United States, the actual nature of the socio-political category “Latino/a” and its function must be further explored. In other words, is Latino/a identity racial, cultural, and/or ethnic? Latino/as, as many authors have noted, do not fit into the rigid construction of race operating in the United States. Latino/a “race” is not discernible, due to the variety of races that constitute Latino/a peoples. For philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff, echoing her colleagues, what unites Latino/as is culture. This has led some Latino/a scholars and activists to identify Latino/as as an ethnic group instead of a racial one. Yet Alcoff questions the effectiveness of this move. “African-American,” for example, a term designated to emphasize the cultural identity of peoples of African descent, in contrast to the racial category of Black, remains a racial designator in dominant U.S. discourse. Thus a cultural category can be transformed into an

exclusive racial designator. In the United States a racialized group cannot embrace an ethnic identity that is free of racial connotations. Alcoff notes, "The concept of ethnicity is closely associated with the concept of race, emerging at the same moment in global history, as this meaning indicates. . . . For many people in the United States, 'ethnic' connotes not only nonwhite but also the typical negative associations of nonwhite racial identity." In other words, ethnic comes to equal nonwhite. Alcoff thus concludes that ethnicity is not a helpful category for designating Latino/a as choosing culture instead as the unifying thread. One must note, however, that while Latino/as can insist upon the cultural ties that unite them and the racial complexity that constitutes them, in the dominant discourse "Latino/a" may well remain a racial category designating people of color.

The category of culture, however, as the unifying element that links Latino/a peoples can also be problematic in that it negates the complexity of Latino/a communities, erasing the racism, sexism, and classism that characterizes all communities. Furthermore, it negates the diversity of the histories of Latino/a peoples and makes the experience of Spanish colonialism the thread that unites Latino/as. Suzanne Oboler questions the viability of homogenizing the millions of Latino/as living in the United States on the basis of the history of Spanish colonial rule. Not only does this negate the complexities of Latino/a communities in the United States, but, as Oboler asks, is the category of "Hispanic," "[r]ooted in an accurate perception of the diversity of Latin American populations in their own countries of origin?" Oboler maintains stronger suspicions than the authors cited above regarding the potential totalizing tendencies of the term "Latino/a."

The question of race is of special importance for Latinas. Given that many Latina academicians have embraced the category "women of color," the existence of white Latinas challenges the assumption that all Latinas are in fact "of color." Arguing for a more critical use of the expression "women of color," Ofelia Schutte proposes an understanding of the category that is neither founded on the binary of white and nonwhite nor reduces "women of color" to "nonwhite women." "The caution here would be not to collapse all ethnic or cultural categories into racial categories (as when a cultural category, 'Latina,' is collapsed into the racial category 'nonwhite')." The viability of the category "women

20 Linda Martín Alcoff, "Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?," in Hispanics / Latinos in the United States, 37.
of color" and the function of race within that construction is a fruitful point of dialogue for feminists that gather under this label.

The problems that arise when defining oneself as Latino/a and/or Hispanic is not new to Latino/a theology. In Caminemos con Jesús, for example, Roberto S. Goizueta explores the weaknesses of using "Hispanic" or "Latino/a," especially in light of the common practice of identifying oneself by one's country of origin. "Hispanic," for Goizueta is a linguistic category. This linguistic basis, however, is not limited to language. "Language is not simply an instrument for communicating human experience; it is, to some extent, that experience itself. Language forms and defines us as much as we form and define it."23 "Latino/a" for Goizueta emphasizes the cultural mixture of peoples of Latin American descent. Both "Latino/a" and "Hispanic" are in fact cultural in Goizueta's eyes. Both terms also have political implications which depend on one's history and nation of origin. Given the cultural foundation of Latino/a identity emphasized by the sociologists, philosophers, and critics mentioned above, the sociological and historical methodologies employed by many Latino/a theologians seem well founded. In emphasizing such themes as mestizaje and mulatez, Latino/a theologians have always strongly objected to the view of Latino/ as a monolithic race.

Two questions remain. The first concerns the political implications of the category "Latino/as." For many, "Latino/a" is seen purely as a political construct, an almost coalitional social construction. For others, such as Padilla, "Latino/a" in fact represents a new ethnic reality, one that resonates with descriptions of mestizo/a peoples, who in their mixture of Spanish, African, and indigenous heritages create a new reality, a new people.24 Latino/a theologians must decide where they stand on this issue in an attempt to resolve the tension between pan-Latino/a identity and particular Latino/a communities within Latino/a theological discourse. A second question, and one linked to the first, concerns the role of Latino/a theology within minority discourse in the United States and its connection to a pan-Latino/a identity. Also important for consideration are the homogenization of Latino/a theological reflection and the manner in which Latino/as are received by the theological academy.

In highlighting these questions, I am not arguing for the effacement of the category of "Latino/a." A pan-Latino/a identity is after all part of our intellectual and philosophical history. One only need to remember,

---

23 Goizueta, Caminemos Con Jesús, 12.
24 See Virgilio Elizondo, Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994); Goizueta, Caminemos Con Jesús, especially chapter one.
for example, the writings of great nineteenth-century Cuban writer, José Martí, who argued for a pan-Latin American understanding of América. Also, when a marginalized people within the United States such as Latino/as name themselves, they both empower themselves and subvert a dominant society that seeks to erase the particularity of Latino/a culture and identity. As Ada María Isasi-Díaz notes, “To be able to name oneself is one of the most powerful acts a human person can do. A name is not just a word by which one is identified. A name also provides the conceptual framework, the mental constructs that are used in thinking, understanding, and relating to a person.”

Feminist

Over fifty years ago Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” With this statement, Beauvoir raised the question of gender essentialism in feminist theory, a matter hotly debated even today. The question of whether there are characteristics that essentially constitute the nature of a woman, or if we can even speak of a woman’s essential nature, is not only discussed within women’s studies, gender studies, and feminist theory, but also has permeated other disciplines within the academy. Primarily led by feminist scholars influenced by postmodern theory and cultural studies, many thinkers emphasize the construction of gender identity and the socio-political consequences of gender essentialism.

A quick glance at recent publications in the field of feminist theology reveals that gender essentialism has been severely critiqued for over a decade. Unfortunately, this literature has been for the most part ignored by Latino/a theologians. As a result, we enter the conversation rather late. In his overview of Latino/a theology, Orlando Espín highlights the growing impact of Latina feminist contributions to Latino/a theology. “However,” Espín notes,

Perspectives: Occasional Papers

[note: discussion on the need for and challenges of integrating feminist concerns and issues into Latino/a theology, with a focus on the contributions of women and the marginalization of their voices.]

Due to a lack of attention to the concerns and insights of feminist thinkers, Latinos have, for the most part, marginalized women’s contributions to feminist critiques and/or pertaining solely to women’s concerns. Thus nearly all theology written by women is uncritically deemed “feminist,” and the term “feminist” itself remains inadequately defined within Latino/a theology.

A few examples are in order. In their recent introduction to Latino/a theology, Edwin Aponte and Miguel de la Torre create four categories of thinkers representing Hispanic theology: Catholics, Protestants, Latina Women, and New Ecumenism. The theological contributions of Latinas are only mentioned under the category of “Latina Women.” While emphasizing the “invaluable contribution” of women, the authors end up marginalizing the voices of women as “women’s theologies.” Their contributions are limited to the domain of the feminine. In addition to using the ambiguous category of “women’s theologies,” earlier in the text De la Torre and Aponte falsely categorize Ana María Pineda as an “important voice in feminist theology.”

To my knowledge, Pineda does not see her theological contribution as feminist. The place of women within the other categories is unclear. Indeed, one must ask what “women” means. In the feminist classic Inessential Woman Elizabeth Spelman reminds us of the ambiguous role of the category of “woman” within feminist theory: it can be used to dominate and marginalize, as well as negate differences among those it seeks to name. She writes, “Thus the phrase ‘as a woman’ is the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism. Whatever else one does, or tries to do, when one is thinking of a woman ‘as a woman,’ one is performing a feat of abstraction as sophisticated as the one Plato asks us to perform in thinking of a person not as her body but as her soul. What is it to think of a woman ‘as a woman’?”

In short, an essentialized understanding of women’s

---


29 de la Torre and Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*, 112.

nature and writings is reflected in the tendency to segregate women's contributions.

Another challenge to an essentialized grouping of women is posed by the theology of Loida Martell-Ortero, who in her theology of *mujeres evangélicas* expresses reservations about both Latina feminist and *mujerista* theologies, because of their Roman Catholic emphasis and what she sees as their secular origins. Martell-Ortero articulates as an alternative her theology *evangélica*, whose sources are found in the faith and practices of Protestant Latina women. She thus rejects the blind categorization of all Latinas' voices as "feminist." In addition, the reduction of all women's theologies to feminist theology is a manner, whether intentional or not, of marginalizing their contributions to feminist studies which have not been, historically, a central concern for Latino/a theologians. Gender remains a secondary category of analysis within Latino/a theology. Similarly, in his recent monograph *La Cosecha: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology (1972–1998)*, Eduardo Fernández also discursively marginalizes the work of Latinas. While Fernández is to be commended for his call to take seriously the lives and scholarship of Latinas, his decision to treat the women and men theologians separately in his analysis contributes to an understanding of feminist discourse as marginal. These monographs are not unique. In fact, they represent an all-too-common discursive practice within Latino/a theology.

Related to this issue is the failure to acknowledge and address the divisions that exist among Latina theologians. While we Latino/a theologians are quite comfortable speaking of "Latino/a theology," we seldom refer to the fact that within this category there are distinct and conflicting voices. I am speaking, of course, of the distinction between *mujerista* and Latina feminist theology, embodied particularly in the works of Ada María Isasi-Díaz and María Pilar Aquino. As a recent edited volume entitled *Religion, Feminism, and Justice: A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* demonstrates, there is a clear line between those who embrace the term *mujerista* and those who name their theology "Latina feminist." As the editors of the volume state in the introduction, "We acknowledge the important work and contributions of Ada María Isasi-Díaz in developing what she has defined as *mujerista* theology. However, we have opted to name ourselves Latina feminists." The

---

33 María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, "Introduction," in *Religion and Justice*, xiv.
exclusion of Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s voice from this project obscures the distinctions among Latina theologians that claim a feminist hermeneutic.

In her groundbreaking text *En la Lucha / In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Isasi-Díaz elaborates an early definition of mujerista. “A mujerista is a Latina who makes a preferential option for herself and her Hispanic sisters, understanding that our struggle for liberation has to take into consideration how racism/ethnic prejudice, economic oppression, and sexism work together and reinforce each other.”34 Rejecting the term *feminist hispana*, she argues that for many Latinas, feminism is viewed as an Anglo creation that marginalizes Latino/a concerns. Isasi-Díaz also highlights the painful history and marginalization of Latinas within the White, Euro-American feminist community.35 These factors contribute to her rejection of “feminist” as an appropriate term to designate Latinas concerned about sexist oppression.

In response, Aquino argues that feminism is in fact indigenous to Latin Americans. Ignoring this reality erases the struggles of women against sexism and patriarchy. To those who call themselves mujeristas, Aquino writes, “With these views, not only do they show their ignorance regarding the feminist tradition within Latin American communities, but they also attempt to remove from us our authority to name ourselves according to our own historical roots.”36 Aquino thus rejects the term *mujerista* because in her view it erases the history of feminism within Latin America. In addition, Aquino notes, “[t]here are no mujerista sociopolitical and ecclesial subjects or movements in the United States or in Latin America.”37 At the same time, in my view it seems fair to ask if a Latina feminist theological movement exists outside of the academy.

I cannot speak for Isasi-Díaz or Aquino regarding their own views of their theological differences. I can, however, note that the tension between their theological contributions has largely been ignored by other Latino/a theologians. It seems to me that this refusal to seriously engage the theological tension between arguably the two most prominent Latina theologians in the United States turns their theological contributions into feminist side-projects that do not affect the core of Latino/a theology.38 The division between these two scholars is more than a

---

35 Isasi-Díaz, “*Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own*,” 410.
38 In addition, this tension is too often reduced to personal relationships, thus belittling the intellectual significance of their work.
quibble over names. Yet even names matter as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us: “Language is not just performative; it is political.” In any case, beyond the use of the term *mujerista*, there has not been to date a dialogue that examines the methodological and theological differences between *mujerista* and Latina feminist theologians in order to uncover points of contention beyond.

Latina theologians may perhaps learn a lesson from their womanist and black feminist colleagues who struggle with similar issues. A comparable tension exists among Black women who employ a feminist hermeneutic. As presented by womanist scholar Stephanie Mitchem, the dialogue between black feminists and womanists concerns the construction of black women’s identity. The use of terms often depends on one’s academic discipline or field of study. Underlying this discussion is the question, “Is it legitimate for black women to claim feminism for themselves?” The term “feminism,” long associated with white women, as I noted above, often stirs memories of racism within the feminist movement. Using the term “womanist,” on the other hand, can be interpreted as ceding the term “feminist” to white women, thus denying any history of feminism within the black community. Citing Patricia Hill Collin’s critique of womanism’s construction of a universalized notion of black womanhood, Mitchem highlights the essentialist implications of womanism. The dialogue between black feminists and womanists continues, and perhaps their example of open dialogue can help Latinas find strategies for addressing the question of naming. True, Latinas face a slightly different situation. The decision to adopt the term “womanism” or “black feminism” is often governed by one’s discipline. Therefore, “womanism” is the predominant term used within theology and ethics while “black feminism” prevails in theory and cultural studies. The question is more burning for Latinas, for it confronts us within our small theological circles. The importance of naming cannot be underestimated. As emphasized by Collins, this issue can at times be seen as an internal conversation and a solely academic issue. However, she notes, “Naming practices reflect a concern with crafting a Black women’s standpoint that is sensitive to differences among Black

---

women yet grounded in solidarity.” 43 Perhaps, as Collins implies, the most fruitful strategy would be to accept a diversity of names that honors the distinctiveness of various Latina voices.

Linked to the debate over naming is the problem of the compression of Latina theological voices into two—and only two—camps. I am in no way contesting the pioneering contributions of Isasi-Díaz and Aquino to theology. I am however, noting that their important voices have eclipsed the complexity of Latina theology (an outcome not of their making). You are either a mujerista or you are not. So, for example, the soon-to-be published Manual de Teología Hispánica has an entry for Mujerista Theology and an entry for Latina Feminist Theology. Discursively, therefore, you are either a mujerista or you are not, and in any case if you are a Latina, you are a feminist. While I commend and thank María Pilar Aquino, Daisy Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez for editing the recent volume on Latina feminist theology and for inviting a group of younger scholars to contribute to this project, I am very concerned about the explicit framing of this book as non-mujerista theology. It is clear to me now, more than ever, that we need to open the doors of dialogue among all Latinas, for the manifold divisions among us can only enrich our theological projects.

The failure of Latino/a theologians to seriously engage the work of feminist theologians as a central concern is only one dimension of this gender trouble. An occasional footnote does not suffice. We Latino/as grow hoarse begging Euro-American scholars to learn our intellectual history, yet among Latino/as there is a certain ignorance concerning the history and complexity of feminist thought. I am not denying the important role Latinas have played in the history and construction of Latino/a theology. As Allan Figueroa Deck highlights in his 1992 introduction to Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States, a characteristic of Latino/a theology is “the unusually prominent role that women have had in this emergent theology.” 44 The presence of these women is indisputable. I am, however, suggesting that Latino theologians have not taken feminist theology as a whole seriously and incorporated gender as a central category of analysis. 45 We must ask why. The work of

43 Collins, Fighting Words, 60.

45 At the 2002 meeting of the Academic of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States, where I presented an abbreviated version of this paper, my claim was
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is helpful on this point. In her critique of the exclusion of feminist discourse from rhetorical biblical criticism, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that this may be understood in light of the "feminine gendering" of rhetoric and religion in modern western discourses. "Religion and theology as well as rhetoric have been coded as the 'feminine other' of the masculine 'hard' sciences. . . . Such a 'feminine' coding of both biblical studies and rhetorical studies engenders 'masculine' insecurity in biblical studies, which is compensated for by excluding actual wo/men from leadership of the clergy and the academy."46 Could a similar insecurity be operating here? Furthermore, since Latinos are considered men of color, they are marginalized within the theological academy. Addressing gender concerns would add yet another layer to their marginalization.

In addition, Latino/a theologians must reflect on the manner in which Latinas are rhetorically constructed within Latino/a theology. They are most often portrayed as poor, associated with Marian devotions and popular religion. They are seen as mothers and grandmothers, not young women. They are the carriers of religion and culture. This is not to deny the centrality of poor, grassroots Latinas for theologians among us who identify profoundly with liberation theologies. This is also not to denounce popular religious practices as genuine. However, in limiting our construction of Latinas to certain often-repeated categories and characteristics, as theologians we are restricting the nature and number of women Latino/a theology is actually engaging and describing. Such a theology cannot claim to speak to the fullness and complexity of Latina experience, nor consider itself an authentic Latino/a voice. Similarly, to limit Latinas to the oppressed and the marginalized is to categorize them within a framework that strips them of any ability to transform their state of oppression.47

Theologian

We come now to the third and final area I would like to discuss: the construction of the theologian within Latino/a theology. There are two dimensions of this construction I wish to explore: the notion of the popular theologian and the danger of the "theoretical" in contempor—

46 Schüssler Fiorenza, Rhetoric and Ethic, 98.
rary theology. Here, I will be brief. Regarding the popular theologian, my comments are influenced by the theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid, who has examined the construction of the Latin American liberation theologian. While in a different context, I find her insights are helpful for an analysis of Latino/a theology. Althaus-Reid notes that in liberation theology the popular theologian is constructed as a “mirror” of the poor, a reflection of the faith of the poor. “The popular theologian is not a person in diaspora but rather the conceptual product of liberation theology in the diaspora of the theological markets of Europe and the United States.”\textsuperscript{48} The caricature of the popular theologian becomes a conceptual construct that results in the co-optation and consequent powerlessness of liberation theologies in the face of dominant Western discourse. Liberation theologies become “theme parks” that Western theologians can visit while not having to alter the nature and structure of their theology. As theme park theologies, Althaus-Reid contends, liberation theologies become a commodity for Western capitalism. “The centerpiece of theological thinking is constituted by systematic Western theology, and it is done even in opposition. The theme parks, in the case of liberation theology, are divided into subthemes, such as ‘Marxist Theology,’ ‘Evangelical Theology,’ ‘Indigenous Theology,’ ‘Feminist Theology’—and all of them with a central unifying theme ending with ‘and the poor.’”\textsuperscript{49} As theme parks, they can be visited at one’s leisure; one is never forced to take them seriously.

This popular theologian is usually a priest or minister living with and working with the poor whose faith, suffering, and simplicity are acclaimed. “Western academia saw the popular theologian as a benevolent father dealing with ignorant, although sweet and well-disposed, native children. . . . Many Europeans would have liked to have submissive, faithful Christian natives in their parishes, instead of real people.”\textsuperscript{50} Two things are worth noting in Althaus-Reid’s statement. First, and most obvious, is the gendered construction of the Latino theologian. True, women theologians are fewer than men, but if more male theologians would highlight the concerns and questions feminists raise, our awareness of the scholarship already done by women would increase. Secondly, Althaus-Reid sees a paternalistic attitude present in Latin American theologians. The educated elite are to translate the simple, beautiful faith of the people in order to transform the nature of


\textsuperscript{49}Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland,” 42.

\textsuperscript{50}Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland,” 51–52.
the academy and of churches. In her view liberation theologians see the masses as children whose faith is conceived as fervent and unwavering. This demonstrates a simplistic understanding of the faith of the people who are seen as uncritically pious and who do not have the ability to intellectually engage and challenge their own beliefs. “Luckily,” they have theologians to do this. Do Latino/a theologians contribute to this? Are we aware of it? Does the non-Latino/a community embrace this? What better way to continue to view Latino/as as ignorant and backward peoples than accept a construction of them as people unable to intellectualize their faith?

A second matter concerns the role of critical theory within Latino/a theology. Critical theory is all the rage in theological circles. Demonstrating one’s knowledge of critical theory, postcolonial studies, postmodernism, and globalization is the mark of a scholar who has seriously engaged and mastered some very complicated texts. This very essay, in fact, can be seen as an attempt to analyze Latino/a theology theoretically. However, Latino/a theologians must proceed with caution. There is a danger in the turn to theory, especially when too often Western European and Euro-American sources are seen as the zenith of the discipline. Barbara Christian views the surge in theory within the writings of people of color as the victory, once again, of the West. “I have become convinced that there has been a takeover in the literary world by Western philosophers from the old literary elite, the neutral humanists. . . . They have changed literary critical language to suit their own purposes as philosophers, and they have reinvented the meaning of theory.”51 What is considered good theory, Christian contends, is governed by white, Western norms. The commodification of the academy, in areas such as publication, hiring, and promotion encourage the scholar of color to become fluent in these discourses. After all, they are “in” and theoretical texts sell. Perhaps the danger as Christian emphasizes, is the intensification of the “academic” dimension of the scholar of color’s life and work. The primacy of teaching and writing with a specifically theoretical bent come to dominate one’s scholarship.

Christian is not denying the theoretical import of non-Western sources. “For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem to be more to our liking.”52 Instead, Christian is

warning us against considering only certain types of writings to be genuine theory. Inklings of this suspicion in relation to postmodern theory are already found in the writings of Latino/a theologians. Justo González questions post-modern theory for, "[m]uch of what post-modernity proposes as an alternative to modernity is what Third World peoples, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized people have been practicing all along—and been dubbed 'backward' for it."\(^{53}\) Too often, in fact, scholars of color are shocked by the ignorance of the dominant academy regarding the contemporary and historical voices of marginalized groups. This is seen in the curriculum at institutions where people of color are trained, leading to a vicious cycle of ignorance regarding the diversity of the history of thought.\(^{54}\) Echoing González’s sentiments, Ada María Isasi-Díaz notes the political implications of postmodern discourse for people of color. “I believe that the relativism endorsed by postmodernism is an effective way of maintaining present power systems based on race, ethnicity, class, economic status, sex, sexual orientation.”\(^{55}\) While not negating the importance of developing a theoretical stance, Isasi-Díaz argues that liberationists must be wary of the “baggage” that accompanies the incorporation of postmodern philosophies. This privileging of Western discourse also affects the very nature of theology. Liberation theologies that seek to emulate this methodology invariably see Western ways of thinking as normative.\(^{56}\)


\(^{54}\) "Because of the academic world’s general ignorance about the literature of black people and of women, whose work too often has been discredited, it is not surprising that so many of our critics think that the position arguing that literature is critical begins with these New Philosophers. Unfortunately, many of our young critics do not investigate the reasons why that statement—literature is political—is now acceptable when before it was not; nor do we look to our own antecedents for the sophisticated arguments upon which we can build in order to change the tendency of any established Western idea to become hegemonic” (Christian, “The Race for Theory,” 15).


\(^{56}\) This concern was articulated over ten years ago in the writings of Maria Pilar Aquino. “Consequently, like all liberation theology, the theological task that Latina women develop cannot be understood apart from its own historical circumstances, nor can it avoid dialogue with contemporary theological movements. However, as with liberation theologies, this task consciously and critically distances itself from the postulates and aims of the current liberal progressive theological movement that developed in the Western world. This movement blatantly demonstrates its disinterest in the world of the poor and oppressed. Without minimizing the multiplicity of present-day theologies, the various axes of this theological movement are
The popular theologian and the technical theoretician represent, in many ways, the tension that exists between the pastoral and the academic within Latino/a theology. Too often, theologians of a more pastoral persuasion have complained that their work is not taken seriously by other Latino/a academics. On the flip side, Latino/a theologians who rely heavily on theory and philosophy have been accused of abstraction and intellectual elitism. The challenge remains to find a balance between the two and to find strategies for incorporating the voices of Latino/a peoples while simultaneously transforming our view of what is theoretical or philosophical.

Concluding Comments

The question of essentialism underlies this entire essay. While well aware of the objections to a supposed essentialism in the writings of Latino/a theologians, I am not prepared to empty the term “Latino/a” of all meaning in Latino/a theology. The position that I hold, with feminist theologian Serene Jones, might best be called “strategic essentialism.” As Jones defines it regarding gender, “This in-between position applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals (or essences) altogether.”57 I do not affirm an exclusively constructivist understanding of Latino/a culture, feminism, or theology. I am, however, asking Latino/a theologians to focus our hermeneutics of suspicion upon ourselves and to examine carefully the way discourse has historically functioned within Latino/a theology. Form and content are organically united. Therefore, what we say and how we say it are intrinsically interconnected. In addition, the act of naming and the construction of identity have political consequences.

---

I would like to offer four suggestions for further conversation. First, Latino/a theologians need to seriously examine the manner in which our identity functions politically in the academy, in churches, and within the broader society. How are we being co-opted and caricatured? What are our reasons for adopting terms such as “Latino/a” and “Hispanic” in our academic discourse? Latino/a theology can perhaps glean some insights from feminist political philosophy. In her essay, “Gender as Seriality: Thinking About Women as a Social Collective,” Iris Marion Young argues that searching for common characteristics of women’s identity will only lead to essentialist constructions of women.\(^{58}\) However, Young contends, there are valid political motives for conceiving of women as a group. The flaw in most feminist thinking, Young holds, is the desire to construct a systematic theory within feminist discourse. As an alternative Young offers a pragmatic view of theory. “By being ‘pragmatic’ I mean categorizing, explaining, developing accounts and arguments that are tied to specific practical and political problems, where the purpose of this theoretical activity is clearly related to those problems. Pragmatic theorizing is . . . driven by some problem that has ultimate practical importance and is not concerned to give an account of a whole.”\(^{59}\) For Young, the current practical problem is the simultaneous acknowledgement of the dangerous implications of essentialist notions of womanhood in feminist discourse and the need for a political subject for feminism.

Young contends that a reconceptualization of social collectivity, through Sartre’s notion of seriality as articulated in his \textit{Critique of Dialectical Reason}, offers us a way to view women as a collective without attributing a common or essential identity shared by all women. Young defines a series as, “[a] collective whose members are unified passively by the relation their actions have to material objects and practico-inert histories . . . [T]heir membership is defined not by something they are, but rather by the fact that in their diverse existences and actions they are oriented around the same objects or practico-inert structure.”\(^{60}\) Series differ from groups that are “a collection of persons that recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another.”\(^{61}\) The series “women” is not based on attributes shared by all women. Instead, womanhood is situated in the social realities exterior to one’s

\(^{58}\) Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 12.

\(^{59}\) Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 17.

\(^{60}\) Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 27. “Woman is a serial collective defined neither by any common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in the series have, but rather names a set of structural constraints and relations to practical inert objects that condition action and its meaning” (36).

\(^{61}\) Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 23.
personal identity and which condition women’s lives. In one’s relationship to these social realities gender is constructed. A key dimension in Young’s understanding of identity is choice. One can decide which aspects of one’s serial memberships are central to one’s identity. “No individual woman’s identity, then, will escape the markings of gender, but how gender marks her life is her own.”62 This statement removes the paradox of identity as choice and as imposed and resonates with the experiences of Latino/a communities. At the same time Young’s notion of gender as seriality would seem to undercut Latino/a theology’s emphasis on the cultural and historical unity of Latino/as. Gracia’s notion of family resemblances, I find, offers a more persuasive philosophical framework for understanding the organic unity of Latino/s peoples.

In attempting to name and understand Latino/as in the United States, I propose a heuristic paradigm of two distinct realities functioning within Latino/a identity. The first is the cultural similarities of Latino/as, which if understood as family resemblances present the relationships between and diversity of Latino/a peoples. Also under this category I place Latino/a culture which is a mixture of various elements of all the Hispanic cultures found in the United States. Roberto Goizueta describes this reality in terms of a third mestizaje. “If the confluence of European and indigenous or African cultures marked our first mestizaje, and the confluence of Latin American and U.S. cultures marks our second mestizaje, then we might begin to speak of a third mestizaje taking place between and among Latino cultures in the United States.”63 Second, however, there is the purely constructed and political dimension of Latino/as. Here, Young’s notion of seriality offers a suggestive paradigm for understanding one’s ability to choose—that is construct—a Latino/a identity. The tension that exists between the two represents the unity and diversity, the organic and constructed nature of Latino/a identity. To use Young’s categories, I see Latino/a as both a series and a group. Latino/a theologians need to state explicitly which view, or both, they employ in their theological construction.

My second suggestion is linked to the first and focuses specifically on the academy. Latino/a theologians must begin to examine carefully the manner in which our theologies function within academic discourse. Are there ways in which we separate ourselves from the broader academy? How does our categorization as “minority voices” affect our theological contributions? Fernando F. Segovia emphasizes the problematic relationship between Western and non-Western theologies in

62 Young, “Gender as Seriality,” 33.
63 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 8.
his excellent overview of the relationship between minority studies and Christian studies.

From an academic point of view, the world of Christian studies—regardless of its specialization—is a world that revolves resolutely around the Western tradition and that approaches, if at all, its non-Western expressions as extensions of the West. In both regards, the operative vision of the center regarding non-Western Christianity is one of undercivilization and underdevelopment—standing somewhere between the apex of Western Christianity and the nadir of native religion. Given this vision, the world of ethnic-racial minorities, as indeed the world of non-Western Christians in general, is a world marked perforce by marginalization and fragmentation—a world at the periphery of the center, with a clear sense of its relationship to the center but no sense at all of its relationship to others in the periphery.64

Collaborations between “minority” groups are thus sabotaged by the very paradigm of Western dominance itself. In the concluding comments of his essay, Segovia offers strategies for overcoming these obstacles, opening up a dialogue among minorities, and undermining Western hegemony. For Latino/a theologians, the question of the strategic value of the category of minority studies remains open.

A third question concerns feminism. As I mentioned earlier, it is imperative that Latina feminist theologians begin to explore the convergences and differences among their theological projects. This process must also include the voices of those Latina theologians who do not employ a feminist hermeneutic. The goal of this exploration, in my eyes, is not to find some sort of resolution or to homogenize Latina theological expressions. Instead, Latina theologians must find avenues for collaboration and support in spite of their different theological standpoints. What hangs in the balance is the role of feminism within Latino/a theology in general. While Latina feminist theologians cannot force their male colleagues to take feminism seriously, they can challenge their work through the category of gender. Latinas can learn a lesson from womanist theology’s critique of Black liberation theology. We must bring the gender critique to bear on our own scholarship.

If one examines the writings of various Latino/a theologians, one is struck by a fourth concern: the role of “the people” in their writings. The titles of our books tell the story: From the Heart of Our People, The Faith of the People, and We Are A People! But who are the people? While Latino/a theology has various sociological answers to these questions,

there remains ambiguity regarding the Latino/as of Latino/a theology. This has implications for the nature of the Latino/a theological task and the location of Latino/a theology within a broader theological discourse. Methodologically, this also has implications for the function of theory within Latino/a theology with pastoral and praxiological implications.

Concerning the diversity within feminist communities, Elizabeth Spelman writes, "If feminism is essentially about gender, and gender is taken to be neatly separable from race and class, then race and class don't need to be talked about except in some peripheral way. And if race and class are peripheral to women's identities as women, then racism and classism can't be of central concern to feminism."65 Spelman continues by arguing that if we assume that all women are the same, there is no point in learning about how women different from ourselves understand our womanhood. However, if what we have in common as women is viewed in concert with our differences, then examining race and class actually broadens and enriches our understanding of gender. For Latino/a theologians, we cannot assume that all Hispanics are alike, that all Latinas are alike, and that the theology written by men and women of Latin American descent living in the United States can be easily categorized under one rubric. Instead, we must look at the diversity of our communities, theologies, and identities and within that complexity articulate our theological contributions.