Nuestra Humanidad: Toward a Latina Theological Anthropology

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Nuestra Humanidad: Toward a Latina Theological Anthropology

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To answer the questions “What does it mean to be human?” and, more specifically, “What does it mean to be created in the image of God?” from a U.S. Hispanic/Latina perspective is to directly engage the contexts of Hispanics in the United States. Plurality characterizes this reality. United States Latina/os are a diverse population, not only in their race and countries of origin, but also in their class and ethnic identification. Therefore, a static definition of what it means to be a Latina/o is difficult to elaborate, and consequently portrays a false and often lacking synthesis of the fluid and varied realities of Latino/a peoples. United States Hispanic theology has often used the terms mestizaje/mulanetz to foreground this biological, racial, historical, and cultural mixing that speaks of who we are and how we came to be as peoples.1

In this essay I explore Latina sources and methods that inform a Latina theological anthropology. My task is three-fold. I begin with an overview of some sources and methodological themes that currently inform present day Latina theology. Second, I demonstrate how Argentine-born philosopher Maria Lugones offers some critical insights that contribute to a philosophical foundation for Latina theological projects. Last, I consider the person and the scholarship of Sor Juana

1 As I find the terms Latina/o, Latina/a, Hispanic, and U.S. Hispanic to be used in scholarship and in my own daily usage, I will be using the terms interchangeably throughout this work. I tend to prefer the term Latina/o over Latina/a in order to privilege the presence and voices of Latinas, who are often ignored in the common use of Latino to determine a collective group of Latina/os.

Inés de la Cruz as a historical resource for contemporary systematic theology, especially compatible with the current growing body of Latina and Latino theologies. I have chosen to alter the chronological order of my sources, beginning with the twentieth century and then traveling back in time to Sor Juana. This methodological choice is intentional. Sor Juana has yet to be a resource or conversation partner for contemporary Latina theology. Beginning with Sor Juana, I find, would imply a certain continuity or established engagement of her work by contemporary scholars. This is in fact not the case. A major thrust in this paper is in fact to emphasize the need for contemporary Latina theology to address historical sources and historical theology. Such an effort would deepen the theological contribution of Latina scholars in the areas of both systematic and historical theology.

For this particular project I have chosen to limit my main sources to the scholarship of Latinas. The hermeneutical privilege I give to Latina voices is a methodological characteristic that decidedly marks Latina theology. Also, I have found scholarship that critically engages and analyzes Latina theology is scarce. A vital aspect of our theological contributions must be the growth and development of our thought en conjunto. Last and more practically, this essay is limited by both time and space. While it will be necessary to engage the findings of my work within the larger Christian theological tradition, such an endeavor is larger than the scope of this piece.

Latina Feminist/Mujerista Theologies

My examination of Latina theological voices will be brief, and consequently falls in danger of misrepresentation and unintentional generalizations. My objective is not to present the entire theological projects of those cited, but instead to highlight the various method and themes found in Latina theologies that contribute toward a Latina theological anthropology. The weight of this section is an assessment of the two most widely recognized and cited Latina theologians, María Pilar Aquino and Ada María Isasi-Díaz. Since these two figures have not only published extensively, but also offer very distinct theological contributions, I have opted to emphasize their work. There is a danger in this, however, for due to prominence of Aquino and Isasi-Díaz's scholarship, the theological contributions of other Latina theologians are often overlooked. This simplifies the complexity and the plurality of Latinas' theological production. I therefore include a brief account of Daisy Machado's work. Though she is a Church historian, I hold that Machado's work, especially on nepantla and the borderlands, offers a significant contribution for Latina theological anthropology.

Maria Pilar Aquino's groundbreaking book, Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America, is an exploration of the historical marginalization of Latin American women from both systematic theology and the Church. Building on the work of Latin American theologians, Aquino examines the features of theology done by women in Latin America, with special emphasis on women's experiences of oppression and liberation. A theology emerging from such a context, Aquino emphasizes, cannot be removed from the concrete reality of suffering, struggle, and liberation. Aquino sees her work as "an attempt to grasp the re-creating work of the Spirit that activates the strength, word, memory, and liberating struggles of women." While building on the work of liberation theologians, Aquino is critical of the exclusion of the historical and spiritual struggles of women within that discourse. The inclusion of women's voices will reveal the androcentrism of liberation theology, and involve women in the production of knowledge, calling liberation theology to expand its hermeneutics, epistemology, and social analysis. "This is not just a change of language, but also a change in liberation theology's epistemological horizon."

There are three areas I wish to briefly highlight in Aquino's book, for they offer significant contributions to a Latina theological anthropology. The first is her use of lo cotidiano, or daily life. The inclusion of daily life as crucial to theology contests a dichotomous understanding of the public and private that seeks to segregate lo cotidiano into the irrelevant sphere of private life. Aquino writes, "Although it is often regarded as autonomous, daily life is in fact at the center of history, invading all aspects of life." Daily life is seen both as an analytic category and point of departure for Aquino's work. A second feature I wish to highlight is the primacy of desire in Aquino's work. Citing the work of María Clara Bingemer, Aquino emphasizes that the primacy of desire must be incorporated into theology, for purely rational concepts are insufficient in accounting for experience. This affects both the method and form of theology. "The language of poetry, play, and symbol becomes an appropriate way of expressing the understanding and

1 Gómez Loyola is the only Latina theologian who has written on Sor Juana as a theological interlocutor for Latino/a theology. See Gloria Loya, "Considering the Sources/Fuentes for a Hispanic Feminist Theology," Theology Today 54:4 (January 1998) 400–8.
wisdom of the faith, because it is the means of expressing the human person’s deepest and most genuine aspirations and desires." The primacy of desire refutes what Aquino and Bingemer name as the reductionistic primacy of rationality in systematic theology. A primacy of desire seeks to uncover the spirituality of oppressed peoples, while also expanding the sources and language of theology.

The locus of theological anthropology is the third and last area of Our Cry for Life I wish to foreground. A foundational tenet in Aquino’s work is the indebtedness of theology to anthropology. Using a feminist hermeneutic, Aquino strives to overcome the dualistic and androcentric anthropologies of Augustine and Aquinas, seeking an anthropology that does not deny the full humanity of women. Building on the work of Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, she instead offers an egalitarian anthropology that rejects a paradigm of domination and subordination. This is a human-centered and unitarian anthropology, situating both men and women at the center of history, overcoming a gendered dualistic framework. Over against an idealist anthropology, Aquino outlines a realist position that takes history and its struggles seriously. Lastly, this is multi-dimensional anthropology that accounts for the diversity of humanity.

In her essay “The Collective ‘Discovery’ of Our Own Power,” Aquino offers a clear hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval that highlights both the historical marginalization of Latinas and methodological gestures for recovering their voices. The methodological principle dominating this essay is the “uncovery” and consequent “recovery” of the suppressed traditions of Latina Americans, where the paradigm of oppression is found in the Spanish Conquest of the Americas.

The great European invasions did not discover but rather covered whole peoples, religions, and cultures and explicitly tried to take away from the natives the sources of their own historical memory and their own power. ... We seek to uncover the truth and bring to light our collective will to choose a different path."

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Ibid., 82.


Ibid., 82.

Ibid., 241-2.

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This is a subversive principle, challenging traditional interpretations of the Conquest.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s mujerista theology offers a theological contribution emerging from an ethical context. Her method is characterized by meta-ethnography, and her work very much emerges from analysis from a small, particular group of Latinas with which she is in conversation.13 From her earliest collaborative work with Yolanda Tarrango, Isasi-Díaz has emphasized the activist orientation of her work, thus blurring the distinction between ethics and systematic theology.14 In her second book, En la Lucha/In the Struggle, Isasi-Díaz moves to define her work as explicitly named mujerista. As defined by Isasi-Díaz, “A mujerista is a Latina woman who makes a preferential option for herself and her Hispanic sisters, understanding that our struggle for liberation has to take into account how racism/ethnic prejudice, economic oppression, and sexism work together and reinforce each other.”15 Mujerista theology understands ethics as social ethics, and this is based on the centrality of community in Latino/a culture. The emphasis on the communal, social dimension leads Isasi-Díaz to assert, “Mujeristas denounce the split between the personal and the political as a false dichotomy used often to oppress Hispanic Women.”16

Turning to Isasi-Díaz’s explicit work in the area of theological anthropology, in her essay “Elements of a Mujerista Anthropology,” she holds three phrases as critical to elaborating mujerista anthropology: la lucha, permitame hablar, and la comunidad/familia. These are not the only sources, nor are they necessarily exclusive to Latinas. However, these phrases offer a valid starting point for an anthropological exploration of Latinas.17 To speak of these three phrases is to offer an arena for Latinas’ theological contributions: Latinas’ daily lives (lo cotidiano), their contributive voices, and their relational conception of selfhood. Lo cotidiano, in Isasi-Díaz’s work, is both a source and a framework for mujerista theology. “Besides its descriptive and hermeneutical task, mujerista theology appropriates lo cotidiano as an epistemological

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13 See Isasi-Díaz, En la Lucha, ch. 3.


15 Isasi-Díaz, En la Lucha, 4.

16 Ibid., 5.

17 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Elements of a Mujerista Anthropology,” Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) 129. These phrases are translated: “the struggle,” “allow me to speak,” and “the community/family.”

18 Ibid., 129.
framework of our theological enterprise.”

Clamirig lo cotidiano thus has epistemological implications for theology, by foregrounding Latinas’ ways of understanding. Also, the emphasis on lo cotidiano in Isasi-Díaz’s work is a direct rejection of the public-private dichotomy. In her mujerista theology I find Isasi-Díaz’s emphasis on the communal dimension of Latina anthropology also fruitful. “Familia/comunidad for Latina/os does not subsume the person but rather emphasizes that the person is constituted by this entity and that the individual person and the community have a dialogic relationship through which the person reflects the familia/comunidad.”

The emphasis on family and community also reinforces the above-mentioned challenge to the public-private dichotomy.

A theme pervasive in Isasi-Díaz’s work is mestizaje/mulaztez, and more frequently articulated, difference. In her more recent writings, Isasi-Díaz stresses the need for us to examine difference in a non-essentialist way. In this section one finds the beginnings of a philosophical framework for her understanding of difference.

This means that differences are not necessarily contradictory nor do they necessarily exclude each other. In most differences there are still elements of sameness or at least likeness. It is precisely those elements of sameness or likeness that make dialogue possible, for no matter how small they are, they make empathy and a common search possible. These points of sameness or likeness make it possible for us to overcome the feeling of being threatened by what we perceive as different.

In this rather lengthy quote, Isasi-Díaz touches on some key points I would like to highlight. First of all, difference here is seen as neither negative nor ultimate. Often we recoil from that which is different. Isasi-Díaz, however, asks us to enter within differences in order to dialogue. To dialogue is to open oneself up to others’ opinions, to new possibilities. It is to realize that there exist similarities even within differences. Dialogue also means to acknowledge the context, limitations, and relativity of one’s position.

Church historian Daisy Machado is the last Latina theologian that I examine in this section, and she is also the only Protestant voice.

Machado has addressed difference and plurality in her scholarship, and it is to this piece that I turn. For Machado, the borderlands is a category for examining Latina Church history and identity.

The Borderlands are a geographical reality that one can find on a map, but they are also a lot more than that. The U.S. Borderlands are that place where Latinas and Latinos live, struggle, love, fight, and strive to define who they are in the midst of a society that has for centuries kept them an invisible mass, a footnote in the homogenizing historical process of an entire nation.

The border is a liminal space, where Latino/as simultaneously participate in and are marginalized by dominant North American society. By expanding her notion of the border beyond a geographic understanding, the border becomes a hermeneutical lens for viewing the fluidity of Latina/o identity.

Building on the work of essayist Pat Mora, Machado introduces the category of nepantla, the Nahual word for “place in the middle,” into her theological writings. Machado writes, “Mora tries to put into words what it is like to live in that ‘place in the middle,’ that place so familiar to millions of Latinos and Latinas who live there.” It is in nepantla that Latina/os live, labor, and search for identity. Nepantla speaks to the both/and, in-between-ness, difference and mestizaje/mulaztez of Latino/as. Like the borderlands, nepantla emphasizes the elasticity of Latina/o identity.

Before moving to the work of María Lugones, let us momentarily pause to assess the landscape of our above-cited Latina theologians. Both Aquino and Isasi-Díaz emphasize lo cotidiano in their writing, specifically in light of a need to refute the privatization of women’s lives and as an epistemological category. Unlike Machado, Aquino and Isasi-Díaz also are explicitly elaborating a feminist theology, in conversation with Anglo North American and Latin American liberation theologies. Isasi-Díaz is the only one of the three using the name mujerista in her work. Isasi-Díaz’/s writings on mestizaje/mulaztez, difference, and

Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Mujerista Theology: A Challenge to Traditional Theology,” Mujerista Theology, 68.


15 This unintentional emphasis on Roman Catholic theological contributions is due, in part, to the extremely small number of Protestant Latinas currently engaged in theological scholarship.


17 Machado is not the sole Latino/a theologian using the notion of nepantla, though she is the sole Latina who has published work on this theme. See Rudy Busto, “The Predicament of Nepantla: Chicana/o Religions in the 21st Century,” Perspectives 1 (Fall 1998) 7–21.

18 Ibid., 63.

community, Machado’s on the borderlands and *neputila*, both highlight the plurality and fluidity of Latino/a identity. With regards to this essay, two features of Aquino’s work figure prominently. First, in her work on the primacy of desire we find an aesthetic impulse, one that resonates with a recovery of Sor Juana’s theological contribution. Second, as perhaps the most “systematic” of the three, Aquino addresses the *loco* of theological anthropology, concept of God, ecclesiology, Mariology, pneumatology, and theological method in *Our Cry for Life*. Her work is thus more explicitly in conversation with the larger body of systematic theology.

*A Latina Philosophical Contribution*

In his recently published monograph, *La Cosecha: Harrowing Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology* (1972–1998), Eduardo Fernández concludes with various future directions he sees for Latina/o theology.37 One such direction is the need for Latino/a theology to address the philosophical realities underlying its assertions, for it can fall into the danger of lacking theoretical depth.38 Interestingly enough, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, in her foreword to Fernández’s book, refutes this claim. She writes, “Hispanic/Latino theology’s insistence on the importance of our people’s lived experience and *lo cotidiano* is not indicative of any lack of theological depth but rather contributes to the reformulation of what constitutes a theory.”39 I am in agreement with both Fernández and Isasi-Díaz’s assertions. With Isasi-Díaz, I find a transformation of both our understanding and use of theory within Latino/a theology. However, echoing Fernández’s concern, it has not been explicitly and sufficiently elaborated. This is not to diminish the existing scholarship.40 However, more work needs to be done.

With this in mind, we turn to the work of María Lugones. While María Lugones is not the sole Latina engaging the issues of difference and plurality, I find her work to be especially engaging for Latina theologians. Writing as a bicultural woman, we shall see that many of María Lugones’s insights both resonate and affirm the insights of Latina theologians. Her work provides a philosophical foundation for the work of Latina theologians. In her writing, Lugones treats the themes of difference, subjectivity, rationality, and fluidity. While Ada María Isasi-Díaz is the sole theologian mentioned above that has been directly influenced by Lugones’s work, I find Lugones to be an insightful interlocutor for Latina theology. The two areas that I examine in this section are Lugones’s concept of subjectivity and her notion of worldtraveling.

I am giving up the claim that the subject is unified. Instead I am understanding each person as many. In giving up the unified self, I am guided by the experience of bicultural people who are also victims of ethnocentric racism in a society that has one of those cultures as subordinate and the other as dominant.41

Lugones begins her essay “Structure/ Antistructure and Agency Under Oppression” by criticizing oppression theory for identifying the oppressed in a situation in which liberation is seen as practically impossible. This is based on the identity of the oppressed solely as oppressed. To understand the oppressed in this manner is to reduce the entirety of their existence to a state of oppression. The oppressed need to transcend their state of oppression in the very construction of their identity. Lugones’s vital point is demonstrating the erasure of agency if we are to simplify peoples based solely on one aspect of their identities. For Latina theologians, this is a reminder to not solely reduce the experiences and contexts of Latinas to one of suffering and marginalization. Lugones also reminds us to remember the complexity of the current U.S. Latino/a population, which varies in race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity.

As an alternative to the unified subject, Lugones offers what she calls the limen as an alternative understanding of subjectivity.

The limen is the place where one becomes most fully aware of one’s multiplicity. My sense is that one of the factors that makes oppression inescapable in many theories that portray oppression as inescapable is the inability to form liberatory syllogisms in the world of the oppressor, given the logic of oppression. It is also my sense that the limen is a place where one can form liberatory syllogisms. . . . So, the connection between the practical syllogism, ontological plurality, and liberatory oppression theory resides in the fact that the oppressed know themselves in

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38Ibid., 170.
39Isasi-Díaz, foreword, in ibid., xiii.
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"Structure,
Lugones,
Cornell
University
Press,
1990)
4587—9.

Lugones sees the concept of liminality, read through the scholarship of Victor Turner, as a liberatory space. It is a space that lacks structure and hierarchy. The limen, as the space (in the metaphorical sense) where one experiences oneself as multiple and in-between or both/and, threatens a hegemonic, unitary metaphysical system. In dis-unifying the traditional Western subject Lugones is challenging not only traditional subjectivity, but also its consequent anthropology. Here we find echoes of Machado’s writings on repantila and the borderlands, as well as Isasi-Díaz’s discussions of difference.

In “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” Lugones examines the connections between separation and purity. In a society where unity and purity are idealized, the liminality of mestiza/mulata peoples is seen as impure. To affirm them is therefore an act of subversion. “As I uncover a connection between impurity and resistance, my Latina imagination moves from resistance to mestizaje. I think of mestizaje as an example of and a metaphor for both impurity and resistance.” In the homogeneity of dominant culture, only the invisible, dominant culture is acceptable. Minority peoples are thus visible in their deviance from the norm. This unified reality implies the construction of a subject who has the vista of this unity. This in turn creates an ahistorical, abstract subject, with a one-dimensional privileged perspective. “If we assume that the world of people and things is unified, then we can conceive of a

18 Ibid., 504–5.
19 Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974) 237: “Thus, for me, liminality represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions, outsider-hood refers to actions and relationships which do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it, while lowermost status refers to the lowest rung in a system of social stratification in which unequal rewards are accorded to functionally differentiated positions.” In Turner’s work, liminality denotes the threshold or middle period of rites. A liminar is one who is in between. For Turner, it is the space where community emerges. Also, the limen is a space that exists because of the very structures that surround it. The Latino/a, however, in Turner’s analysis, would not be considered a liminar, for the liminar is in a transitory state of betwixt-ness, while ethnically mixed peoples are in a perpetual state of ambiguity. It is at this point that he and Lugones diverge, for she directly applies liminality to the experience of victims of ethnocentrism, whose realities are characterized as moving in different worlds constantly.

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vantage point from which its unity can be grasped.” This abstract, ideal subject must be unified and pure (able to see the unity within the multiplicity) and has historically been seen as male. The purity of this subject is demonstrated in his ability to step outside and transcend the multiplicity. For this purpose, he must reject his particularity and embodiment, and instead become a “postcultural” or “culturally transparent” individual.

Dis-unity, liminality, plurality, and heterogeneity are Lugones’s alternative vision of the self/subject. The second major concept in her work that I would like to examine is her notion of world traveling. Worlds vary in size and construction. For Lugones,

A “world” has to be presently inhabited by flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. It may also be inhabited by some imaginary people. It may be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants of this “world” met in some other “world” and now have in this “world” in imagination.

Worlds are the different realities/contexts in which we live and shape our identity. One can be in more than one “world” at the same time, belong to different worlds, travel between worlds. “World traveling,” therefore, is our movement between the various contexts that we enter into or have imposed upon our lives.

In an interesting twist, Lugones acknowledges that as an alternative ontology, her proposal is and should be challenging.

In describing a “world” I mean to be offering a description of experience, something that is true to experience even if it is ontologically problematic. Though I would think that any account of identity that could not be true to this experience of outsiders to the mainstream would be faulty even if ontologically unproblematic.

Lugones joins various peoples on the margins trying to express in their scholarship that the dominant way of understanding the world is not necessarily the best way or the only way. For those who have suffered injustices based on traditional dominant worldviews, it is in fact the wrong way. Obviously, therefore, an ontology from the underside,
as Lugones proposes, will be difficult to ears shaped and schooled by dominant discourses.

For U.S. minorities, this notion of world traveling, I contend, rings true. We constantly spend our lives living in the world of the dominant culture, while the insiders of the mainstream can avoid our worlds quite easily. As bi-cultural and poly-cultural peoples, Latina/os offer a view of the self that is polymorphous, constantly adjusting to the various worlds we enter and inhabit. "I am both and that I am different persons in 'different' worlds and can remember myself in both as I am in the other. I am a plurality of selves."

The way in which we experience ourselves within a world depends on our position of value or power within that world.

This notion of world, however, is not only descriptive; "world" traveling is Lugones's suggestion for a way of being in the world.

The reason I think that traveling to someone's "world" is a way of identifying with them is because by traveling to their "world" we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have traveled to each other's "worlds" are we fully subjects to each other.

Lugones is suggesting, like Isasi-Díaz, a very relational way of being with each other. We need to know each other in our proper contexts. We need to enter "worlds" foreign to us and enter spaces where the "other" is subject. In my treatment of the third component of this essay, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, I invite us to enter a world and a voice that I have "dis-covered" recently, along with others, as a vital theological resource. My examination of Sor Juana will consist of two parts: I begin with an overview of her life; I follow this with a brief examination of her most theological text, the allegorical drama El Divino Narciso (The Divine Narcissus), raising pertinent themes for a Latina theological anthropology.

Una Voz de Nepantla

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century nun from New Spain, may not have aided in the founding of a philosophical or theological system, but her voice speaks of the birth of a people. She offers us a different way of viewing things. I am not alone in my contention. Gloría Loya, in her essay on sources for a Hispanic feminist theology, writes, "She is a source/fuente for theology because through her work she examined and expressed her religious concerns and theological understandings."

Long praised for her literary genius, it is only recently that Sor Juana the theologian has been a subject of study. Beatriz Melano Couch writes, "Scholars who have studied Sor Juana speak of her greatness as a literary figure, philosopher, and woman of science. My study of her works has brought me to the conclusion that she was also a theologian: indeed, the first woman theologian in all the Americas."

George Tavard, in his book on Sor Juana, describes her work as the first Mexican theology.

In 1651 a young girl named Inés de Asbaje y Santillana was born in the town of Napatla, Mexico. It is ironic and telling that Inés entered this world in this "land in the middle," for it is in nepantla that she spent most of her life, struggling within the tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes of her culture, her Church, and her vocation. Around the age of thirteen Sor Juana went to live in the court of the viceroy of Mexico as a lady-in-waiting. A few years later, Sor Juana took the veil in the order of St. Jerome. Sor Juana's time in the convent was focused primarily on study and writing. In this time she produced a vast corpus, primarily poetry and drama written for commission. Sor Juana's work was widely circulated and publicly read both in Spain and colonial Mexico. Three volumes of her work were published in Spain, one posthumously. In 1690, Sor Juana's theological critique of a prominent Jesuit's sermon was circulated without her authorization, under the title Carta atenagórica. She wrote her response to this publication, Respuesta a Sor Filotea, the following year. Two years after the writing of the respuesta, Sor Juana renounced her public life. Two years later, Sor Juana died in the convent.

The allegorical drama El Divino Narciso is considered Sor Juana's most theological work. Weaving classical mythology, medieval theology, and scriptural passages, this play is the culmination of Sor Juana's dramatic and theological genius. An allegorical drama is a play performed during the feast of Corpus Christi. Often, Greek mythology was used in Spanish dramas in the "Siglo de Oro" (sixteenth through seventeenth centuries). The plays were used as catechisms to educate Catholics and fortify their beliefs. The allegorical drama was specifically to "praise and glorify" the Eucharist. They always ended with the

Loya, "Considering the Sources," 495-6.

triumph of the Eucharist over the misery of life. Sor Juana authored three allegorical dramas or autos-sacramentales. All of Sor Juana’s allegorical dramas are preceded by loas. As defined by Octavio Paz in his monumental study of the life and work of Sor Juana, a loa is “a brief theatrical piece played as prologue to a principal play.” In describing these loas Pamela Kirk, in her recent book on Sor Juana, writes:

All three of the one-act plays with which Sor Juana prefaces her sacramental dramas are designed to point up the limits of the “discussion of the schools” in theological debate and to plead gracefully for drama as a more appropriate form for the communication of theological truths than rational discourse because of the very nature of “divine things.”

As Kirk highlights, through the very form or expression of this work Sor Juana offers a critical contribution to theological method, forcing us today to question what one considers theology. In Sor Juana’s era, religious drama was considered theological. Thus Sor Juana was doing theology in her dramatic pieces. Through the play, Sor Juana develops anthropological, christological, soteriological, and Marian insights.

*El Divino Narciso* is inspired by the tale of Echo and Narcissus. While the mythological story of Echo and Narcissus is foundational in Sor Juana’s play, it also has several other layers which demonstrate the complexity of her plot. As Octavio Paz notes:

In addition to Ovid and countless poems on the theme, Sor Juana was directly inspired by a mythological play of Calderón’s, *Eco y Narciso*. . . . She also adapted from the Vulgate several fragments from the Song of Songs and others from Jeremiah, as well as the passage from the gospel of Matthew relating Jesus’ temptation on the mountain (458-11). The final

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verses are a translation of a hymn written by Thomas Aquinas. There are also echoes of Garciíaso, St. John of the Cross, and Lope. . . . The auto converts Ovid’s fable into an allegory of the passion of Christ and the institution of the Eucharist.  

While in an essay this brief one cannot enter into the complexities of the plots of both the allegorical drama and its loa, through my theological analysis of the work I hope to lift key moments in both. There are two themes I examine. I begin with the relationship between natural and revealed religion, as seen in both the loa and main drama, which sheds light upon Sor Juana’s position on indigenous peoples. Second, I consider the anthropological implications of this text, seen primarily in the auto.

Christian theology distinguishes between natural and revealed religion. Natural religions are those that contain knowledge of God and have practices without supernatural elements; in other words, religion without revelation. On the other hand, revealed religion contains the revelation of God. In *El Divino Narciso* and its loa, Sor Juana gives her perspective on the discussion of the relationship between natural and revealed religions in the Americas. Her dramatic representation argues that there are pre-Christian elements in indigenous religions.

The four main characters of the loa are Occident and America, who are indigenous, and Zeal and Religion, who are Spanish. Zeal is attempting to convert the indigenous with the military and the sword, while Religion is opting for a more intellectual approach. A first her of Sor Juana’s analysis is given with a sacramental comparison of indigenous and Christian religions. Sor Juana highlights parallels between human sacrifice and Christ as the sacrificial lamb (lines 29-36), an indigenous precursor to the rite of confession (lines 59-70), and baptism (lines 384-7). Through her establishment of similarities between the two religions, Sor Juana enters into murky waters. One must ask that if the rituals somehow prefigure Christianity, then do the beliefs behind these religious practices do so as well?

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel has noted that the loa is a space where the indigenous are given a voice. In an interesting twist on its catechetical

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*Paz, Sor Juana, 351.

*All citations for El Divino Narciso are from volume 3 of Sor Juana’s *Obras Completas*. I will be citing passages by line numbers solely, in order to facilitate referencing in case one has a different edition. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Autos y Loas*, vol. 3 of *Obras Completas*, edited, prologue, and notes by Alfonso Méndez Plancarte (México: Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura; Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995). For a complete English translation of *El Divino Narciso*, see Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Divine Narcissus*/*El Divino Narciso*, ed. and trans. Patricia Peters and Renée Domezier (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).
or kerygmatic purposes, by giving the indigenous a voice in a narrative of the Conquest, the loa ends up “evangelizing” the people of Madrid (for whom the play was performed) about indigenous practices.31 Pamela Kirk also highlights this theme. The internal plot of the loa revolves around the instruction of the indigenous concerning Catholic doctrine. However, the loa in fact is a means of demonstrating to the Spanish audience the dignity and complexity of indigenous peoples, their history and customs.32

This theme is carried into the main drama (or auto, to use the term from Spanish literary studies). From its inception the relationship between natural and revealed religions is affirmed. Through the sibling relationship between Synagogue and Gentile, two sisters who open the play, Sor Juana expounds a view where natural and revealed religions are seen as holding a familial tie. With parallel structures, the loa proposes the mythology of the indigenous world as a Christian resource, while the auto proposes (acceptable) Greek mythology. "Pero al restablecer el paralelismo entre la estructura de la loa y el auto sacramental, parecía que Sor Juana intenta equipar el mundo de creencias indioamericanas a la mitología griega como fuente fidedigna para obtener un conocimiento verdadero sobre la religión cristiana metropolitana."33

Sor Juana’s notion that God inspires non-Christians with aspects of the Christian faith is found in the Church Fathers. As Sor Juana scholar Mauricio Beuchot highlights, Clement of Alexandria held that the Holy Spirit inspired such “pagan” authors as Plato and Aristotle.34 This is therefore not an idea that is foreign to Christian theology. What is novel is Sor Juana’s inclusion of indigenous American religions. As Margo Glantz notes: “Su gran novedad reside no en el uso de la analogía que relaciona al cristianismo con otras religiones, simil sistemático y casi canónico de Calderón; reside en el hecho insólito de agregar a la religión prehispánica como otro antecedente.”35 To draw parallels between natural and revealed religions is not new to Christian thought; to include the indigenous of the Americas in this paradigm is.

31 Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Saberes Americanos: Subalternidad y epistemología en los escritos de Sor Juana (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 1999) 181.
32 Kirk, Sor Juana, 50.
33 Martínez-San Miguel, Saberes Americanos, 182.

Nuestra Humanidad: Toward a Latina Theological Anthropology

The story proper of El Divino Narciso begins with Echo in love with Narcissus, following him around the forest. Yet it is an impure love, full of self-gratification and selfishness. Jealous of any other potential lovers for Narcissus, her goal is to prevent an encounter of Narcissus and Human Nature. Echo, accompanied by Self-love and Pride, is convinced that if Narcissus sees an unsullied image of humanity, he will fall in love with her. This would lead to him saving humanity. In the play, salvation is defined as Narcissus seeing his Beauty in Human Nature, and consequently falling in love with her. This in turn would lead to his Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

Echo’s intention is to muddy all the waters where Narcissus seeks his image in order to prevent him from seeing Human Nature in his reflection. Human nature is in its fallen state, yet retains its resemblance to the Divine. The imago dei continues to exist within us, though it is sullied by our self-love and arrogance. Echo, as a character operating with these motivations, can be seen as representative of those impulses within humanity that cloud our imago dei. As an “unholy” trinity, Echo, Pride, and Self-love are in polar opposition to the imago dei in humanity. I find that Sor Juana’s vision of the imago dei can be constructed in contrast to Echo and her cohorts. Unlike a humanity that is accompanied by Grace, Echo is accompanied by those egocentric impulses that cloud our openness to God and to each other. Sor Juana is thus proposing a relational understanding of our imago dei. If Narcissus looks in the water and sees the reflection of Human Nature within it, he will fall in love with his companion, his likeness. This is not an option for Echo, whose companions stand out against Human Nature.

There are two operative theological themes that are significant to lift at this juncture, for they underlie the entirety of the play. Mauricio Beuchot, in his theological analysis of Sor Juana’s three autos sacramentales, highlights one of these themes: Sor Juana’s engagement in the perennial discussion surrounding the One and the Many.36 Beuchot notes that in transforming the myth of Narcissus into an account of the incarnation and the Eucharist, Sor Juana enters into this Scholastic debate.37 The Narcissus of mythology falls in love with himself as an individual. The new Narcissus, as the Son of God, falls in love with himself as a member of the human race and, consequently, falls in love with humanity. It is through the encounter with the individual character of Human Nature that Narcissus falls in love with humanity in its entirety.

36 Beuchot, “Los autos de Sor Juana.”
37 Ibid., 362-3.
The second theme significant to highlight is the role of theological aesthetics in Sor Juana’s play. As the embodiment of divine Beauty, Narcissus is Beauty, not a mere reflection of Beauty. In a similar vein, as created in the image of God, Human Nature also embodies this Beauty. Echo’s fear that Narcissus will see Beauty in the face of an unsullied Human Nature, a fear that is realized in the play, is based on the Beauty of humanity. Humanity’s Beauty, however, is only complete with the grace of God. It is only with the gift of God’s grace that humanity’s Beauty fully comes forth.

Grace shows Human Nature a spring unclouded by Echo, a fountain that is pure and clean. This fountain is representative of the Virgin Mary. Human Nature and Grace hide and await Narcissus. Grace tells Human Nature to make sure her face is seen in the water so that Narcissus will see himself in her and fall in love. He approaches the fountain and within it sees his reflection in the water. “Narcissus sees Nature and Grace together, or, better, he sees Nature through Grace, as their reflected images now form only one beauty in the Virgin Mary.”91 Narcissus falls in love with his image, Human Nature purified in the Divine Spring with the help of Grace. In other words, it is in recognizing that his Beauty is shared with humanity that the incarnation occurs. Sor Juana bases her christology, and consequently anthropology, on this theme. Our *imago dei* is Beauty. We share in divine hermosura.

Various authors have commented on the role of Mary as the fountain in the play. As Marie Cécile Bénassy-Berling notes, “Si l’on veut faire le bilan, on trouve donc un triple allégorie: la fontaine représente à la fois la passion, le bapteme et l’Immaculée Conception et la liaison entre les trios ne pas arbitraire.”92 As Bénassy-Berling highlights, there is a three-fold understanding of the fountain. On one level, it is where Christ’s Passion occurs. The fountain is thus the location of Christ’s redemptive death. On another level, there is the theme of baptism. Before the Eucharist appears in the play, Human Nature must be baptized in the waters of the fountain. As Grace sings, “Oh, siempre cristalina, clara y Hermosa Fuente: tente, tente; reparen mi rúina tus ondas presurosas” (lines 1173–77). This description of the fountain highlights a parallel with the Roman Catholic sacrament of baptism as removing humanity’s original sin. The fountain must repair the ruin of humanity.

The last level of symbolism is an understanding of the fountain as the Virgin Mary. The fountain is described as the pure, immaculate, and sacred. “Oh, Fuente divina, oh Pozo de las vivificas aguas, pues desde el primer instante estuviste preservada de la original ponzona, de la trascendental mancha, que infeste los demás Ríos: vuelve tú la imagen clara de la baldad de Narciso, que en ti solo se retrata con perfección Su belleza, sin borrar su semejanza!” (lines 1137–48) This passage refers to the fountain as the Immaculately Conceived Mary. Unlike the rest of humanity, she is without sin. One could ask, at this juncture, if there is an intentional relationship between the three interpretations of the fountain and their theological weight. As Bénassy-Berling stated above, this is not an arbitrary association. Instead, it is an intentional emphasis on the feminine as a locus for redemptive action. This contention directly refutes the operating construction of woman-hood operating in Sor Juana’s philosophical and theological world.

Humanity’s corruption by sin, and its ability to recover its original *imago dei*, is a theme of high importance for the Scholastics. The question of nature and grace was a locus of much debate between Dominicans and Jesuits. Sor Juana opts for the answer given by Church tradition: that only through the grace of God can humanity be saved. Human efforts cannot help. This is a very Thomistic understanding of humanity. Aquinas held that it is only through grace that nature is perfected. Grace does not destroy nature, however. In a sense grace brings nature to its fullest realization. The character of Human Nature, as a female figure, clearly transgresses Augustinian and Thomistic understandings as the feminine as secondary to creation. I find it extremely significant that Narcissus falls in love with a female character. Tracing the development of the *imago dei* in Scholastic theology, Kari Elisabeth Berresen has noted that for the most part there existed a spiritual gender neutrality, though because of his “exemplary” sex, man was especially God like.93 Sor Juana, therefore, subverts this paradigm with a female gendered Human Nature.

**Concluding Comments**

In a recent essay on theoetics, Roberto Goizueta writes, “A theology that truly reflects and expresses ‘the Hispanic mind’ will do so not only in content but also in form.”94 Before we can answer the question “What it means to be human” from a Latina perspective, we must enter into a “world” where Latina’s theological and philosophical contributions are articulated. As a way of offering some concluding comments,


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synthesis, and a direction for future scholarship, I offer three areas that I find to emerge from the thought of these thinkers: mestizaje/mulataz-plurality-difference, a relational, “world” traveling way of being, and theological aesthetics. These three themes represent fruitful exploratory points as we move toward a Latina anthropology in systematic theology.

Isassi-Diaz has clearly highlighted the importance of mestizaje/mulataz in mujeres theology. Sor Juana here contributes with her historical defense of the rights of indigenous peoples. She refuses to negate their humanity. Lugones, in discussing her dis-uniﬁed self-existing in various worlds, has also demonstrated that for Latino/as, Western traditional subjectivity is a foreign and false construction. The plurality of the self is a reality for all peoples, not solely Hispanics. However, for Latino/as as mestizaje/mulataz, this is more organic and obvious to our understanding of who we are. In broadening this understanding of self-hood to other peoples, however, mestizaje/mulataz becomes a limited category. I still hold that it is a very signiﬁcant contribution that must remain at the forefront of Latino/a scholarship. I also hold that it represents a vital contribution that Latina/of scholarship can make in this age of (realized) plurality. Nonetheless, I feel we must recognize that the words entail either the mixture of the Spanish and Indian or the African and Indian as a result of la Conquista. While we now discuss another level of mestizaje with North America, at times I feel that in using the same term, the North American gets lost or downplayed. Too often, Latino/a culture is placed in opposition to North American dominant society. This antagonistic paradigm does not allow us to fully examine the inﬂuence and existence of North American society within Latino/a contexts. Eduardo Fernández has recently reminded Latino/a theologians of the need to give serious attention to Latino/a youth. Part of this project must be recognizing that Latino/a youth are being born here in the United States. Also in need of study is the complexity of the relationships with the United States by the various Latino/a nationalities. The Cuban exile community’s extremely pro-United States rhetoric surrounding the Elián González case is a striking example of a Latino/a community that does not necessarily see itself in a hostile relationship with the dominant culture. The United States was portrayed as a land of freedom and opportunity, not a land that marginalizes Latino/a (or at least Cuban and Cuban American) peoples. As a United States-born Latina, I often feel “lost” in mestizaje/mulataz, for I feel it negates or somehow demonizes my being born and educated in the United States. I also fear the full nature of Latina/o identity has become static in these terms.

68 Fernández, La Cochina, 165.

An alternative and philosophically grounded concept may be the use of the term “worlds,” as Lugones proposes. Appealing to the thought of Daisy Machado, I would also propose the concept of nepantla as a category for understanding plurality. I ﬁnd nepantla an appealing description for plurality because it implies plurality without limiting the origin of that plurality. As Orlando O. Espín highlights in a recent essay, nepantla is a relational term. “If we could try an English equivalent, it would be something like: ‘there where abundant dialogue occurs,’ or ‘there where relationships happen,’ or ‘there where we are both-and.’”43 Nepantla is a distinctly Latina/o contribution emerging from our non-European origins.44 The importance of retrieving and embracing the non-European elements of our history and culture is clearly highlighted in Aquino’s scholarship. While nepantla emerges from a Latina/o context, it is not exclusive to describing Latina/o realities.

The relational dimension of nepantla leads us to the second direction I see as fruitful for the articulation of a Latina theological anthropology, the emphasis on relationship accentuated in the work of all those examined in this essay. One example is Sor Juana’s understanding of the imago dei as relational. “World” traveling is an especially helpful way of envisioning this.

Through travelling to other people’s “worlds” we discover that there are “worlds” in which those who are victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classiﬁable.45


44 “Non-indigenous sources ﬁrst document the term nepantla in the mid-sixteenth century by Spanish missionaries. fray diego durán writes: “Once I questionned an Indian regarding certain things. In particular I asked him why he had gone about begging, spending bad nights and worse days, and why, after having gathered so much money with such trouble, he offered a ﬁesta, invited the entire town, and spent everything. Thus I reprehended him for the foolish thing he had done, and he answered, Father, do not be astonished; we are still nepantla.”” In D. durán, Book of the gods and rites and the ancient calendar, trans. and ed. Fernando horcasitas and Doris heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma press, 1971) 410–11. Also see J. Jorge klor de alva, “Spiritual conﬂict and accommodation in New Spain: toward a typology of Aztec Responses to Christianity,” The Inca and Aztec states 1400–1800: Anthropology and history, ed. George A. Collier, Renato I. Rosaldo, and John D. Wirth (New York: academic press, 1982) 353–5. I would like to thank Rudy busto for these references.

45 Lugones, “Playfulness,” 402. Here Lugones is using the work of Marilyn Frye and what she names as “loving perception” (relational, subject-subject dynamic, analogy of friendship) and “arrogant perception” (objectifying, controlling, patriarchal) for ways of relating to others. See Marilyn Frye, The Politics of Reality: Essays in
 Until we risk the comfortable privilege of our familiar contexts and travel each other’s “worlds,” we will never truly see ourselves as subjects. It is also through this traveling that the “other” becomes less “other” and we begin to understand our anthropology as relational. Understanding ourselves as plural will also help us to see our connection to others. If we realize the many worlds we inhabit we will also see that we share much more with others that when we think of ourselves as a unified, simple, uncomplicated self.

The last theme I would like to highlight is theological aesthetics. This is a growing area of Hispanic/Latino theology, found in the works of Roberto S. Goizueta, Alejandro García-Rivera, and Peter Casarella. However, a substantial Latina voice has yet to enter in this arena. The work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is such a voice. While scholarship, especially in the works of George Tavard and Pamela Kirk, have made steps to introduce Sor Juan into systematic theology, they have yet to engage her work specifically in the field of Latin/o/a and Latin American theology. Sor Juana scholarship not only offers a Latina conversation partner within the area of theological aesthetics, but also, consonant with Latina theological method, the un-covery of a vital theological resource. In other words, the historical recovery of Sor Juana’s voice can be seen as an enactment of the above-discussed hermeneutical method of Latina theology. This is a vital move for contemporary Latinas, whose intellectual foremothers have been systematically marginalized and excluded from history.

Also important to highlight is that through the work of Sor Juana’s aesthetics, one can engage the more “traditional” Western European theological categories. While I feel it is necessary to name one’s location, context, and their particularities, I also hold it essential to engage the more mainstream theological conversation. If Latina theology does not critically enter into these arenas, we render ourselves invisible to a larger discussion. This is perhaps a characteristic of the upcoming wave (in which I include myself) of Latin/o/a scholars. While not reducing the work of Aquino and Isasi-Díaz to solely this dimension, they both have substantially lifted the voices and plights of Latinas and Latino/a theologians. Building on their work, Latina theologians must now move to the areas of fundamental and historical theology. Sor Juana scholarship not only gives us entry into this conversation, she demonstrates that such work is indigenous to Latin American and Latino/a theology. Not only that, the very form of her work challenges contemporary theological method. Sor Juana did not write a summa or a systematic theology, but instead poetry and plays. She forces us today to examine the structure of our theologies and ask ourselves: does their form mirror their content?

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his monumental theological aesthetics, labels the third volume of his work Lay Styles. While including clerics in this volume, he characterizes lay theologians as those who have been marginalized from mainstream theology. For him, a lay theologian is “someone who feels misunderstood and shunted aside from the central concerns of the Church precisely because of this concern for beauty.”

Coupled with her marginalized voice as a woman and as a Mexican criolla, it is no wonder the theological voice of Sor Juana has been “covered” substantially. She has been covered yet not forgotten. In addition, Sor Juana studies opens up the field of literature for systematic theologians. As Luis N. Rivera-Pagán has recently noted, “The Latin American existential drama, in all its manifold complexities, has expressed itself fundamentally, and in a magnificent way, in our literature, especially our novels, not in philosophical treatments.” The use of literature taps into the theological imagination of Latino/a peoples. A Latina theology must claim her as a resource, especially one concerned with theological aesthetics.

A theological anthropology that emerges from the context of Latinas offers an exciting and significant voice for modern-day polycentric Christianity. As a people who have historically struggled with and rejoiced in their plurality, U.S. Latinas, Latinos/a offer a historical understanding of how to understand and live with it. In these concluding comments I have highlighted three areas for future study. The first two, with their emphasis on a relational understanding of the self who is diverse and multi-faceted, speak to the philosophical and theological framework in which we must speak of the human. The last, theological aesthetics, calls for a methodological shift of both the sources and norms of theology. These three areas of study are not reduced to Latino/a theological production, for they offer a pivotal contribution to broader theological conversations.


Resumen: Nuestra humanidad: Hacia una antropología teológica latina

Esta ponencia hace el reconocimiento de los recursos corrientes y históricos teológicos y filosóficos que informan el desarrollo de la antropología teológica Latina. Entablo en conversación con tres fuentes. Primero examino las aportaciones a la antropología teológica de los escritos de teólogas Latinas. Segundo, la estructura filosófica viene de los escritos de la filósofa feminista María Lugones, nacida en Argentina. De interés especial es el trabajo de Lugones sobre la subjetividad. La contribución histórica de los escritos teológicos de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz presenta una voz imprescindible culturalmente indígena para Latino/as y Latinoamericanos en los estudios teológicos y otras disciplinas. El ensayo termina con el resumen de temas que me parecen pautas fructíferas para la teología Latina, que incluye la estética teológica, la teología histórica, y la cuestión de la subjetividad.

De este estudio surge una visión del humano como relacional, plural (en el sentido de rechazar la idea del sujeto unido, singular), y en comunidad. La Imago Dei de la humanidad consiste en la participación en la Hermosura de Dios y la comunidad de la creación de Dios. De los escritos de Latinas surge el sujeto constituido por la inter-subjetividad. La antropología teológica que surge del contexto de Latinas ofrece una voz significativa para la teología de hoy. Mediante una visión fundada en sus escrituras y historias, Latinas ofrecen un modelo antropológico alternativo, uno que habla más allá del contexto particular a la audiencia Cristiana más grande. Además, al ocuparse de este locus tradicional de la teología sistemática, Latinas entran en una conversación más ancha.