

5-30-2019

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Recommended Citation

Hidalgo, Jacqueline "La Lucha for Home and La Lucha as Home: Latinx/a/o Theologies and Ecologies," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 21 : No. 1 , Article 1. (2019) :1-21
Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol21/iss1/1>

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La Lucha for Home and La Lucha as Home: Latinx/a/o Theologies and Ecologies¹

Jacqueline Hidalgo

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Introductory Ecologies: Groundings in Time and Space

About 30 years ago now, I sat outside my grandparents' mobile home off Interstate 70, a little east of Denver, and stared up at the night sky with wonder. I think I had just learned some basics about astronomy, and I was overcome by my sense of how vast the universe is, that all of creation far exceeded my capacity to imagine it or make sense of it. I breathed in deeply and felt gratitude for being a part of this creation, a tiny speck in the midst of something so vast.

Many years later, I recounted this story in a twentieth-century theology survey course taught by the late James Hal Cone at Union Theological Seminary. Called to reflect upon my earliest experiences of God in the context of a Protestant seminary, I settled upon my first real sense of awe, which I had been taught was central to Protestant definitions of “religious

¹ This essay was first offered as my presidential address in a hotel in Indianapolis, Indiana, during the 30th anniversary colloquium of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS). I saw these remarks as an opportunity to process some of what I learned from participants in that colloquium, which focused on Latino/x/a quests for ecological justice in the face of environmental racism. These remarks also provided an opportunity for me to express my gratitude to ACHTUS and its members for making a scholarly home over the years. I do not use the word “home” lightly. My previous work has elucidated the ways I tend not to feel at home and the ambivalence I have around home as a concept. Using “home” now is a testament to the space, both wonderful and painful, that ACHTUS has been for me over the years. I offer these remarks as an expression of gratitude to those who have worked hard to build and sustain ACHTUS over the years. I would like to thank Jeremy V. Cruz, Neomi De Anda, Pia Kohler, Peter Mena, and Sourena Parham for helping me to think through and craft this piece. I also remain incredibly grateful to all the participants in the colloquium who challenged and transformed my thinking about the conjunctions of Latino/a/x theologies and the environment. All flaws are my own.

experience.”² I suppose my childhood experience with the night sky had been a moment of deep ecology; theologian Nancy Pineda-Madrid might suggest that I felt a moment of creatureliness because I experienced myself as a *criatura de Dios* and found myself drawn to God “by means of the glory of creation.”³ It was for me a moment of communion with creation.

It was also a moment of feeling at home in the midst of this communion. Because of my own and many other Latina/o/x experiences with displacement, feelings of home can be profoundly significant, if also ambivalent, sites of and for religious meaning.⁴ Home is a

² In the last several decades, there have been many critiques of the definition of “religion” and the way it centers certain sorts of Protestant norms. I was not so aware of those critiques at the start of seminary, but, based on my undergraduate in training reading the works of figures such as William James or Rudolf Otto, I presumed that when Cone asked about an encounter with the divine, he meant that sort of “mysterium tremendum.” I now realize Cone had a much more expansive sensibility in mind. See, for instance, William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature; Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered in Edinburgh 1901-1902* (New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1917), available at *Project Gutenberg*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/621>; and Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958). A good critique of the white racial normativity of James’s and Otto’s conceptualizations may be found in Charles H. Long, “The Oppressive Elements in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed,” in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davis Group Publishers, 1995 [1986]), 171-186. A useful summary of how European Protestantism of a particular class and era has served as a troubling prototype for our definition of religion can be found in Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 8-17.

³ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “¡Somos Criaturas de Dios! Seeing and Beholding the Garden of God,” *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, ed. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 324.

⁴ See Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, “Reading from No Place: Towards a Hybrid and Ambivalent Study of Scriptures,” in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematic, Objectives, Strategies*, ed. Francisco Lozada, Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 165-186; Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Revelation in Aztlán: Scriptures, Utopias, and the Chicano Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 16-22; and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, “The Bible as Homing Device Among Cubans at Claremont’s Calvary Chapel” in *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration*, ed. Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 21-42.

complex metaphor generating affective resonances with care, kinship, patriarchy, violence, belonging, exile, and displacement. For me, la lucha and home have been intertwined in ways I still struggle to name properly.

My teaching assistant for Dr. Cone's class, Yoon-Jae Chang, read over my narrative and dubbed me an ecofeminist, a word I had never dreamed of applying to myself. He challenged me not only to see the universe as amazing in this most stereotyped moment of natural wonder, but to look for God in polluted waste and in the suffering of the poor who have been surviving environmental catastrophe for such a long time. As Hebrew Bible scholar Ahida Calderón Pilarski demonstrated in her work on prophets and poisoned water, the use of environmental degradation in order to assault a colonized population reaches back into some of our most ancient written sources. Neo-Assyrian kings Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE) and Esarhaddon (reign of 681-669 BCE) boasted of poisoning the water of conquered subjects.⁵ Calderón Pilarski showed how the writings of Jeremiah, such as Jer 25:15, respond to the imperial threats of environmental degradation by discussing an opposing "cup of wine of God's wrath," a divine retribution of poisoned water. Chang's challenge to me was thus sensitive to these diverse Jewish and Christian histories, to how colonized populations had experienced the environment, not as an idyllic space for communion, but as defiled homes that imperial powers had weaponized against indigenous people's very survival.

What I would only come to realize years after my time at Union, during my first year on the tenure track when I confronted a major health crisis, was that I did not have to look far afield

⁵ Here Calderón Pilarski drew particularly on the work of Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999). Ahida Calderón Pilarski, "What Do Prophets Have to Say about Poisoned Water? A Latino/a Reflection on Household Rules for Ecojustice and the Flint Water Crisis," paper presented at the ACHTUS Colloquium, June 2018, Indianapolis, Indiana.

in time or space to grapple with human persistence in response to environmental degradation.

When I took in those deep breaths in the shadow of the interstate, I had likely exposed myself to air pollution that gave me asthma as a little girl and that shaped other health outcomes later in my life. That same awe-inspiring breath caused me harm that I did not perceive. To be a *criatura de Dios* then, for me, is not just to join joyfully in a communion of creation. In this communion, I was like my fellow creatures, vulnerable to the environmental harms that we humans have created in our common home.

Although I certainly think my family background in Costa Rica, a country known for its efforts to protect and preserve its biodiversity, has contributed to my concerns about the environment, I prefer to focus my remarks on what I have learned from ACHTUS. Latina/x/o conversations about the environment must be grounded in conversations about people. Despite the theoretical moves of posthumanism that have illuminated how anthropocentrism and a focus on human difference have often inscribed human domination of the earth, of animals, and of other humans, too often environmental discourses have focused on the goods of the earth and its non-human animals at the expense of minoritized and poor humans.⁶ I hope that we can find a way to think to think about human diversity amid ecology and environment—the *oikos* in which we dwell—in a way that does not reinscribe human difference as domination (of the earth or of other humans). I argue here that Latina/o/x theological attention to the struggles—*las luchas*—of human communities has much to offer to ecologies and ecotheologies of justice.

Today, I am comparatively healthy, well-fed, and well-educated, but mindful of the

⁶ For one of many summaries available on posthumanist critiques of how the binary of the human-animal relates to and inscribes other forms of domination, see Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, “Civilisation and the Domination of the Animal,” *Millennium* 42, no. 3 (June 2014): 746–766.

contradictions embedded in my own story. Chang was correct that my story encoded privileges that most of the world's population do not have. Twenty-five years ago, residing in a different trailer park, my grandparents lost their home because of a severe rainy season that flooded the Kansas river. Thanks in part to support from FEMA, we were able as a family to rebuild. I was “fortunate” to move to a different home a few years after my early childhood wonderment at the night sky—but we should question why moving out or moving on is considered the good solution.

Opportunities to rebuild continue to be denied to many residents of the colonized U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands after Hurricane María (2017). These opportunities were certainly denied to the 3000 people (at least) who died as a result of the storm and the government response to these colonized lands.⁷ All 3000 and probably more lives cut short, unnaturally. Each of these stories are apocalypses, and not just because they represent an end. These 3000 stories reveal so much, more than any one person can name, but these stories also reveal much about the U.S.'s ongoing colonial practices, including a revelation of the frameworks and magnitude of environmental injustice. The stories demonstrate how *la lucha* and home remain intimately connected, especially in contexts of environmental crisis. Those who have been colonized and oppressed by dominating human beings suffer first the consequences of

⁷ For estimates about the death toll of Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, see, for instance, Vann R. Newkirk, II, “A Year After Hurricane María, Puerto Rico Finally Knows How Many People Died,” *The Atlantic*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/puerto-rico-death-toll-hurricane-maria/568822/>. In fact, the numbers still remain unclear, in part because of poor government assistance and in part because it is a struggle to agree on what counts as a death that can be attributed to the hurricane; see, for instance, Suzanne Carlson, “Death Toll from Hurricanes Remains Unclear,” *The Virgin Islands Daily News*, July 16, 2018, http://www.virginislandsdailynews.com/news/death-toll-from-hurricanes-remains-unclear/article_4777b42c-d3c9-53a4-8cf5-d2af77c7854c.html.

arrogant and cruel domination of the earth. Those most responsible for climate change shoulder far fewer of the risks of bodily harm that follow in climate change's wake.

Ecologies of Environmental Racism

It has been more than 30 years since the United Church of Christ first produced a report on race and toxic wastes in 1987.⁸ In the decades since then, we have come to more clearly articulate environmental racism, which Laura Pulido has described as impacting Latinx/a/o communities through practices of urban planning. For instance, Pulido shows how white privilege in California works to move Euro-American and wealthier Californians away from industrial waste, forcing poorer, minoritized Californians to live with this waste.⁹ Environmental racism does not work because individuals act quickly and specifically to poison people like the ancient Assyrian kings did; rather racialized structures work to expose some populations to greater environmental risk while protecting others, all the while discounting the experiences of poor and minoritized populations through the practices that Rob Nixon terms “slow violence.”¹⁰ This slow violence is, as ethicist Melissa Pagán might argue, a product of coloniality, an approach to life that views some humans and their lands through an acquisitive and extractive lens.¹¹ Over the course of the ACHTUS colloquium's history, various scholars, like Pagán, have

⁸ Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: 1987), <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1310/ML13109A339.pdf>.

⁹ Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (2000): 12-40.

¹⁰ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2-3.

sought to address our ecological turmoil through decoloniality or through integral ecology, as Calderón Pilarski discussed in relation to Flint, or by developing an ecological theory of liberation grounded in political ecology, as Daniel Castillo proposed.¹²

Decolonial critiques draw attention to how the very category of the “human” was never imagined as capaciously inclusive. Papers presented at the ACHTUS colloquium in June 2018 illuminated the limits of traditional “tree-hugging” environmental discourse. For instance, Christopher Carter’s paper described how often environmental discourses are embedded in a white racial frame that can obscure, negate, and oppress the experiences of minoritized communities.¹³ Carmen Nanko-Fernández’s paper demonstrated the ways that elite discourses that seek to create and preserve “green space” have too often done so at the expense of human communities. For instance, one need only consider how Central Park was created in order for elite white communities to have a space away from working-class immigrants. People once lived in Central Park, and they were unhomed to create the idyllic green space that allows wealthier New Yorkers to experience moments of deep ecology. Nanko-Fernández illuminates how often elite pursuits of green space have relied on displacing and deporting human populations from an environment.¹⁴

¹¹ Melissa Pagán, “Extractive Zones and the Nexus of the Coloniality of Being/Coloniality of Gender: Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology,” paper presented at the ACHTUS Colloquium, June 2018, Indianapolis, Indiana.

¹² Daniel P. Castillo, “Toward an Ecological Theology of Liberation: Defining the Framework, Stating the Question,” paper presented at the ACHTUS Colloquium, June 2018, Indianapolis, IN.

¹³ Christopher Carter, “Blood in the Soil: The Racial, Racist, and Religious Dimensions of Environmentalism,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Nature: The Elements*, ed. Laura Hobgood and Whitney Bauman (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 46-47.

¹⁴ Carmen Nanko-Fernández, “Real-izing Escatología: Creation, Recreation, y la Nueva Creación,” paper presented at the ACHTUS Colloquium, June 2018, Indianapolis, Indiana.

In line with Pope Francis's arguments in *Laudato Si'*¹⁵ we can understand that violence against peoples and ecosystems are inextricably interconnected. This sense of interconnection allows us to examine slow violence as a problem of ecology. Examining slow violence helps us to think about the still ongoing water crisis in Flint, the water crisis that surrounded the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the environmental crises that affect Latina/o/x communities, even in places like Indiana. For instance, in the city of East Chicago, Indiana, a predominantly Latina/x/o and African American community, tests revealed dangerous levels of arsenic and lead in both the soil and the water. The West Calumet Public Housing Complex (West Chicago, Indiana) was built on land that once belonged to a smelting facility, but it was not until 2016 that any action was proposed to help people living on this toxic land. Even so, the response did not work to repair the environment or care about the sense of home and place held by the people living in West Calumet.¹⁶ Instead, the government response was to unhome 1000 people, feeding into the sense that escaping environmental degradation through displacement is the only option that poor and minoritized communities have. Since coloniality has been built on ongoing displacement, this solution of more displacement can make environmental struggles seem antagonistic to minoritized quests to do more than survive. Coloniality is an ecology of displacement. Life amid coloniality suggests that the pursuit of home and the needs of environmental safety are at odds.

Nanko-Fernández's paper, revised, appears in this issue of *JHLT* as "A View from the City: Creation, Recreation, y la Nueva Creación."

¹⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015).

¹⁶ Craig Lyons, "Crews Ready to Demolish West Calumet Housing Complex After Evacuations Due to Lead and Arsenic," *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/news/ct-ptb-east-chicago-west-calumet-demolition-st-0326-20180323-story.html>.

Yet concerns about “home” are central to much Latina/o/x thought. Ecology was coined in the nineteenth century with the Greek word *oikos* for home/household at its root because ecology was understood as the study of the relationship between living beings and the places they dwell. Thus *Laudato Si’* is known to us in English as “Care for Our Common Home.”¹⁷ ACHTUS has, over the years, been a fruitful place for thinking critically about the fraught relationships between Latinx/o/a populations and the places they dwell. The late Alejandro García-Rivera and other Latina/o/x and Latin American theologians turned to notions of creation to show the interconnectedness of human and non-human struggles for justice before there ever was a Pope Francis,¹⁸ though I was glad that Pope Francis produced a document linking social and environmental injustice.

After attending the Catholic Theological Society of America’s Annual Convention focusing on *Laudato Si’* in 2017, I realized that too many readers of Pope Francis’s encyclical assume that we can practice improved environmental justice simply by using frameworks of home and relationality. Too many scholars at that 2017 convention imagined that rhetorics of kinship could override rhetorics of domination and anthropocentric stewardship. Many papers at that 2017 convention seemed to assume we could re-script human interaction with non-human nature through discourses of home and that this imagination of home and kinship between humans, the earth, and other creatures would be sufficient to transform our world because somehow the concepts of home and kinship are antithetical to notions of domination and

¹⁷ See <http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/holy-see/francis/pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si-on-environment.cfm> and http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_ enciclica-laudato-si.html.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Alejandro García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 101-102.

exclusion. Although I do not wish to discredit some of the good that can come from a turn to metaphors of kinship, I also would suggest that colonizing cultures' conceptualizations of home have actually been part of the problem feeding environmental racism and environmental injustice. It matters that we think through our metaphors of kinship and home very carefully before we turn to them as ways to create a more just environment.

Latina/x/o Ecologies of Home

amid Histories of Displacement and Dehumanization

Informed by the slow violence of my childhood, I perceive Latino/x/a experiences with home as complex and ambivalent; our experiences with both fast and slow violence at home can challenge overly idealistic theological understandings of home. The late Ada María Isasi-Díaz, in her attention to the revelatory power of *lo cotidiano* and the emphasis that she and other members of Las Hermanas placed on transformative struggle, on *la lucha*, offer us another model for thinking about home.¹⁹ In our daily lives, many Latinx/a/os have experienced the violence done by others in the name of home and thus we know about struggle, about how dominant populations continually struggle to build home on the backs of others and how we constantly *luchamos* to build home on the bridges that are our backs.²⁰ Thus we know *la lucha* as home.

¹⁹ In these remarks, I mostly draw on Ada-María Isasi-Díaz's discussions of *lo cotidiano*, *la lucha*, and home, but it is important to remember that she was not the only Latina theologian to reflect on these topics. See Lara Medina, *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 123-146. See particularly Ada-María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). Also see her important essay on kinship and *hogar*, Ada-María Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal," in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamín Valentín (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 171-189.

²⁰ See especially Cherríe Moraga's Preface describing bridges and homes, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd ed., ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983 [1981]), xiii-xix.

Thinking about “*lucha* as home” is fitting in 2018, a year of 50th anniversaries. 1968 was a year of uprisings in Mexico City, Paris, and Prague. In Colombia, the Latin American Episcopal Council of Roman Catholic bishops (CELAM) met, inaugurating liberation theology as we know it. Here in the United States, we witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. We also witnessed a series of high school blowouts, the most famous taking place in East Los Angeles. 1968 was a year when many people, especially young people around the world, protested and fought for better homes.

Fifty years later, Latinx/o/a communities still struggle to make home in the U.S. amid displacement, whether because we descend from peoples conquered by U.S. imperial expansion or because we descend from migrants or are ourselves migrants from parts of Latin America. Too many of us have had to fracture the homes we grew up in or came from. For some, this means having multiple homes; for others, it means never quite feeling at home anywhere. Moreover, on account of settler colonization and exploitative labor models that have pushed poorer, Afro-Latinx/o/a, and indigenous Latino/a/x into underpaid and environmentally risky jobs laboring on land owned by others, our relationships to lands considered “home” are complicated.

Living in the U.S., many of us of Latin American descent feel like we are not at home and not meant to be, because of a set of colliding factors. Just outside of ACHTUS’s 2018 meeting space, the city of Indianapolis boasts a monument to U.S. wars, a monument that reminds indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican peoples that they were conquered. ACHTUS 2018 colloquium participants had to walk past police officers to attend the session because there was a meeting of federal agencies next door; for too many of us, the presence of law enforcement officers was a haunting reminder of how these federal agencies patrol Latina/o/xs in the U.S.

Theresa Delgadillo has shown how, despite more than a century of Latino/a/x settlement in Milwaukee, people still do not think Latina/x/os belong in the Midwest.²¹ In May 2018, Neomi De Anda described to me how many Latinx/o/a farmworkers in the state of Indiana must consistently confront Trump/Pence signs, whose main rhetorical effect is to remind workers that they may till the soil, but do not get to think of that soil as home. While distinct, this experience shares an affinity with Christopher Carter's discussion of African Americans, whose agricultural skills were valued even as they were dehumanized through chattel slavery and segregation. They were also often denied access to the land they worked and to the fruits of their labor.²² As Jeremy V. Cruz pointed out during the ACHTUS 2018 colloquium, we have multi-generational traumas with land that we must remember and with which we must think ecologically, even as we must cultivate with complexity the more easily romanticized alternative ancestral relationships to land.

When the 2015 Latino Decisions poll found that Latinx/o/as care more about the environment than other ethnic groups in the USA,²³ I was not surprised. Environmental activism has long been part of various Latino/a/x struggles for social justice. Thinking back on the late 1960s, we remember that Latinx/o/a farmworkers waged public *luchas* around pesticides.²⁴ We also remember that the Young Lords took up a "garbage offensive" and demanded that city

²¹ Theresa Delgadillo, *Latina Lives in Milwaukee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 1-8.

²² Carter, "Blood in the Soil," 47, 58.

²³ Latino Decisions, "Latinos and the Environment: Earthjustice & GreenLatinos 2015 Environmental Attitudes Survey," *Earthjustice* website, <https://earthjustice.org/features/poll-latino-opinion>.

²⁴ Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 57-124.

structures care for the lived urban environment of working-class populations.²⁵

In the U.S., many Latino/a/xs also know what it is like to be treated as part of the natural world. We know what it is to be romanticized as an object of study. We know what it is like for people to treat us as if we offer some romanticized spiritual wisdom to the dominant culture because we are Other, and yet such romanticization does not allow us to speak for our full, complex humanity. This romanticized treatment of *latinidad* is part of that same coloniality of being Pagán discussed at the ACHTUS 2018 colloquium, the coloniality that allows some people to claim full humanity while denying it to others.

Romanticization of Latino/a/x/ spirituality is not the only way that coloniality works to elide the full humanity of Latino/a/x populations; there are histories of more direct dehumanization. For instance, on May 16, 2018, President Donald J. Trump described immigrants as animals.²⁶ I do not care whether he claims he was referring to gang members or not. He was still referring to Latinx/o/a human beings as though they were not human. When I heard his words, I was pretty sure he really meant me, that he really meant Latino/a/xs and other non-European migrants in general. Latina/o/x experiences with dehumanization may make us wish to distance ourselves from animals, but these experiences may also allow us to think about how humans are part of nature.²⁷ Indeed, it might allow us to better think with and through how

²⁵ Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 122-143.

²⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at a California Sanctuary State Roundtable,” May 16, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-california-sanctuary-state-roundtable/>.

²⁷ This point of conversation came up in relationship to Carter’s discussion of African American experiences with and responses to dehumanization. See Carter, “Blood in the Soil,” 52, 58.

discourses of the human have structured hierarchal domination in ways that have been perilous for human and non-human animals.

La Lucha for Home in Latina/o/x Contexts

Dehumanizing logics and rhetorics are intertwined with histories of domination of land and colonization of homes, something that is enacted not just through practices of spatial control but by literally tearing families apart. Attorney General Jeff Sessions' decision to separate children from parents at the U.S.-Mexico Border²⁸ has a long history in U.S. and European colonial practices. Spanish Franciscan missionaries separated children from their parents in colonial California. The missionaries thought they could raise better Christians by attempting to destroy indigenous families. The U.S. mimicked this Spanish practice in boarding schools for Native American children. Enslaved African families were regularly torn apart as part of the war European and U.S. tyrants waged on the bodies and spirits of African peoples and their children. In these cases, colonizers and enslavers often appealed to rhetorics of patriarchal family, to notions of hierarchal kinship and kyriarchal households.²⁹ They claimed that they were caring paternalistically for the peoples they dominated, the peoples whose families they destroyed. Latinx/o/a histories teach us to be critical of how dominant and colonizing cultures have used home and family as rhetorical structures of domination that underscored a lived reality of

²⁸ Pete Williams, "Sessions: Children, Parents Entering U.S. Illegally Will Be Separated," *NBC News*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/sessions-parents-children-entering-us-illegally-will-be-separated-n872081>.

²⁹ See some of the arguments in Fay Botham, "The 'Purity of the White Woman, Not the Purity of the Negro Woman': the Contemporary Legacies of Historical Laws against Interracial Marriage," in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, Bernadette J. Brooten, ed., with the assistance of Jacqueline L. Hazelton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 249-264.

destruction. Kinship was not a metaphor that offered egalitarian safety here. Rather, it underwrote practices of violence and control. These histories also teach us that our families and the homes we learn to build for ourselves are so powerful that colonizers constantly work to tear them apart.

Nevertheless, we persist.³⁰ We know home not only as the struggle that dominant cultures take up to unhome us, but we *luchamos* to make home nonetheless. The images on the ACHTUS 2018 colloquium program, drawn from the wonderful photographs Sourena Parham took when we toured East Los Angeles murals with David Sánchez and Atsuko Niitsu in 2014, are but two examples of how Latinx/o/a populations have found imaginative and figurative ways to make home. For instance, Paul Botelló's work "Inner Resources," found in City Terrace, takes a wall in a concrete filled urban landscape and makes it into a veritable garden of Eden with the flowing water of life, but one where traditional Aztec symbols and goddesses flourish alongside the cities as we know them. During the festivities of the July 22, 2000 dedication of this mural, Botelló described the depiction as a representation of a "global family" that incorporates humans from around the world as well as animals and plants. He contrasted his work with other earlier cultural

³⁰ I am here referring to a popularly quoted statement from Senator Mitch McConnell about Senator Elizabeth Warren when she criticized then nominee for attorney general, Jeff Sessions, despite McConnell's warnings that he would silence her. See, for instance, Amy B. Wang, "'Nevertheless, she persisted' becomes new battle cry after McConnell silences Elizabeth Warren," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/08/nevertheless-she-persisted-becomes-new-battle-cry-after-mcconnell-silences-elizabeth-warren/?utm_term=.5a8dc7c8b14f. But I am also referring to rhetorics found in the Plan of Delano (1966) which claims "We SHALL ENDURE" and the famous poem by Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales, "I am Joaquín," which ends with the proclamation "I WILL ENDURE!" as an ode to persistence. See Hidalgo, *Revelation*, 33-34.

nationalist murals, arguing that his generation of artists had come to care about a more diverse “collective spirituality” and larger collective healing.³¹



Figure 1: Paul Botelló’s “Inner Resources” in City Terrace.
Photo Credit: Sourena Parham

So much could be said about this mural. As a scholar of the biblical book of Revelation, I cannot help but look at this image and see the New Jerusalem, a city with the Garden at its center. In Rev 21-22, we find a depiction of the heavenly New Jerusalem descending, suspended between heaven and earth. Elsewhere I have described it as a utopian image, but I think it is here relevant to remember it as an urban imagination, an urban space that people who lived in cities

³¹ Gisela María Latorre, “Chicana/o Murals of California: Indigenist Aesthetics and the Politics of Space, 1970-2000” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003), 114.

dreamt about. In Rev 22:1-2, “the river of the water of life” flows from God’s throne in the center of the city. Given Pilarski’s work on ancient imperial poisoning of water and given lived Latina/o/x experiences with poisoned water, the beauty of flowing, life-giving water in both Revelation and this mural ties them together as imaginaries of ecological healing. The tree of life appears on either side of the river, and “the tree’s leaves are for the healing of the nations.” Here we can recognize an allusion to Eden, but humans are allowed to return, and rather than the trees being forbidden, they are able to heal nations who have suffered the ills of colonization under Rome.

When I look at “Inner Resources,” I can see better how Revelation’s New Jerusalem could be a healing ecological imagination offered to urban populations who have suffered marginalization and been forced to live amid landscapes filled with human waste. We can see the river of the water of life flowing from temples in the background that resemble an Aztec temple and a colonial-era church. Trees abound, and a god stands in the foreground of the river, wrapped around a tree trunk and seemingly holding a symbol of the tree of life. Notably, an Aztec goddess (Coatlicue) now stands in the center of the painting with a variety of humans and animals around her, just as God has a variety of nations around God in the New Jerusalem. Yet the buildings to the right remind the viewer that this scene takes place within a city. We can see that nature and human-built structures have come to co-exist.

Much more could be made of this parallel between “Inner Resources” and the New Jerusalem as imaginaries of ecological healing that speak to urban, marginalized populations across different centuries and locations. Here, though, I wish to examine what this mural tells us about home. The artist was born and raised in East Los Angeles, and he has numerous murals throughout historically Latino/a/x neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Murals themselves often

contest the assumptions about Latino/a/x *barrios* as dirty and dangerous, and murals mark these areas as beautiful spaces of pride and affirmation.³² In my first book, *Revelation in Aztlán*, I chronicled the ways that Chicana/o/x activists worked to create the home that Anglo-U.S. domination denied them; although I focused on scriptures, another strategy for creating Aztlán—the mythical Aztec homeland—in the midst of community was through these murals.³³ The mural itself was meant to make and mark the landscape of home in a space structured by a politics of domination and restriction that had tried to prevent ethnic Mexicans from feeling at home.

The work is called “inner resources” because people do not have to leave their homes as I did in order to find more sustainable ecologies. The people of this mural carry these multivalent resources with them, and they know how to relate to these resources in non-extractive ways. The mural imagines that we have the resources we need for Latinx/a/o, human, and non-human earth’s flourishing. This image is but one example of the many inner resources Latino/a/xs use in *luchando* for home.

The mural “Inner Resources” also shows why thinkers like Virgilio Elizondo and Gloria Anzaldúa mobilized the category of *mestizaje* in order to reimagine Latinx/o/a homes. Néstor Medina and others have already offered important critiques of race and gender in the category of *mestizaje* that I will not rehearse in these remarks, but the critiques demonstrate how even Latina/o/x efforts to build home have too often come at the expense of other Latino/a/xs, particularly women, LGBTIQ, African, Asian, and *indigenous* Latino/a/xs.³⁴ Yet Latinx/o/a eco-

³² Latorre, “Chicana/o Murals,” 87.

³³ Latorre, 90.

theologies should dwell on some of the work that *mestizaje* did for Latinx/o/as in the U.S. in the twentieth century. To claim *mestizaje* was to refuse simple binaries.

For Gloria Anzaldúa, a new critical *mestizaje* opened up the possibilities of other forms of consciousness, of other ways of relating to the world and to ourselves that might move both within and beyond coloniality. As Anzaldúa described it, “I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.”³⁵ These creatures, light, dark, and otherwise, are all *criaturas de Dios*; for Anzaldúa they can all exist together because new *mestiza* consciousness models home as more fluid and more dynamic than those homes that only housed a creature of light.

Conclusion: *La Lucha* as Home

Anzaldúa’s notion of *mestizaje* demonstrates something else; we find ourselves at home *en la lucha*, in an act of kneading. Our homes were thus themselves made sites of struggle, and for women as well as gay, lesbian, bi/pansexual, and trans individuals this statement holds doubly true. Feminist and queer critics have reminded us of the heteropatriarchal nature of imaginations of the *mestizo* home.³⁶ *Mestizaje* often requires a dominating masculinity that

³⁴ Néstor Medina, *Mestizaje: Remapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latino/a Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

³⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 81.

³⁶ See, for instance, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “There’s No Place Like Aztlán: Embodied Aesthetics in Chicana Art,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 103-140 and Richard T. Rodríguez, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

created and maintains *mestizaje*. These critiques of *mestizaje* remind us that Latinx/o/a homes are themselves contested sites of *lucha*.

Yet Latino/a/x theologies have demonstrated that even if home and family are sites of struggle, we do not necessarily abandon them. We challenge each other to make our homes better. As Miguel Díaz reminded the room at the ACHTUS 2018 colloquium, we should take seriously how those cast out of churches have found ways to build spiritual homes beyond ecclesial walls. Isasi-Díaz's discussion of Latina kinship practices and the "kin-dom of God" underscored that Latino/a/x families generally incorporate non-blood kin and are often rooted in structures outside of heterosexual coupling.³⁷ Ricky T. Rodríguez's book *Next of Kin* examines how Chicana/o/x activists practiced queer *familia*, on account of the ways in which heteronormative and patriarchal *mestizo* familial rhetorics were mobilized in the movement era. Many queer Chicano/x/as did not abandon family as a concept. Instead they built their own models of family. They struggled for a family home that worked for them.

We can see, for instance, that in the case of Bienestar, a Latinx/o/a public health organization in Los Angeles started in the 1980s in response to the AIDS crisis, home itself was reimagined. Bienestar's outreach campaigns to youth in Latinx/o/a neighborhoods expanded in 1997 to incorporate a space they called "La Casa" in East Los Angeles. Bienestar created a space for healing, and they called it home even while recognizing how fraught a category home was.³⁸ The outreach cards advertising La Casa seem to admit a sense of displacement even as they try to

³⁷ Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-dom," 181-182.

³⁸ Here I am indebted to the work of Jennyfer Gálvez-Reyes, "Cultural Citizenship and Public Health: Bienestar's Emergence and Approaches to the AIDS Epidemic in Los Angeles" (undergraduate honors thesis, Williams College Latina/o Studies Program, 2018), <https://unbound.williams.edu/islandora/object/studenttheses:1279>, 36-46.

describe La Casa as a space of emplacement: “You can kick back and relax in your own neighborhood!”³⁹ This very description implies that Latina/x/o LGBT youth did not feel like they could be at home in their neighborhood, but Bienestar was working to provide them a space. In the outreach cards that Jennyfer Gálvez-Reyes dug out of the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California, she saw evidence for how Bienestar complicated home while still building homes, while crafting alternative, “culturally relevant” spaces for belonging and healing.

I have shared these initial thoughts about my ambivalent embrace of home because our Latinx/o/a histories can contribute our *lucha* with and for home to those theological and ecological frameworks that employ rhetorics of home and kinship. We can press people to think not only about relationality but to ask what kind of relationships they aspire to. What are the power dynamics and structures of those relationships? Who is imagined as inside, outside, and at the margins of those relationships? What is the work that home is doing in different ecological frameworks? How can we approach home and kinship as always works in progress, as unfinished practices we take up and rethink together, always pushing each other to pursue relationalities of greater justice even as we know our conceptions of justice are also unfinished? *La lucha* continues. ACHTUS inherits a history of *luchando* for home; may it continue to be a great, if ambivalent, home for another 30 years and then some.

³⁹ Gálvez-Reyes, “Cultural Citizenship and Public Health,” 43.