

12-20-2020

Latin@s en la Fe: Gender, Solidarity, and the Common Good Among Latin@ Christians in Ohio

Elena Foulis
Ohio State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt>

Recommended Citation

Foulis, Elena "Latin@s en la Fe: Gender, Solidarity, and the Common Good Among Latin@ Christians in Ohio," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 22 : No. 2 , Article 4. (2020) :115-145
Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol22/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Latin@s en la Fe:
**Gender, Solidarity, and the Common Good
among Latin@ Christians in Ohio**

Elena Foulis
Ohio State University

Latin@s¹ are people of faith. This is a phrase I often hear from many of my narrators,² even when I do not specifically ask about their religious identity. In fact, it is only within the past year that I have begun to specifically explore how and why Latin@s choose to join certain congregations or privately practice some form of spirituality. Using oral histories, interviews, narrative analysis, and archival documents of Latin@³ faith leaders and those who practice religion inside and outside the home, I explore how Ohio is becoming a place where, despite

¹ I use the @ sign as a gender-inclusive term. I am aware that the term Latinx is becoming increasingly popular, but I believe that those who, like me, identify as Latina and have fought for the “a” to be included in written and oral rhetoric, are better represented by the term Latina for women, or Latin@ when referring to more than one gender.

² This article highlights the oral histories of four narrators who are part of a larger project called *Oral Narratives of Latin@s in Ohio* (ONLO), a digital-video oral history project archived in the Folklore Archives at the Ohio State University’s Center for Folklore Studies. The narrators are John Alvarez Turner, oral history interview by Elena Foulis, 2014, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/alvarez>; Irene Casale-Petrarca, oral history interview by Elena Foulis, 2018, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/irene-casale>; Rubén Herrera Castilla, oral history interview by Elena Foulis, 2016, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/ruben-castilla-herrera>; and Crucita Marrero, oral history interview by Elena Foulis, 2016, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/crucita-marrero>.

³ The majority of Latin@s in Ohio are of Mexican/Mexican-American descent, about 45 percent, and about 29 percent are Puerto Rican; I use the term Latin@s to include also many of the more recent immigrant groups such as Dominican, Salvadoran and Guatemalan, among others. See <https://development.ohio.gov/files/research/P7002.pdf>.

the still relatively low numbers of Latin@-focused places of worship, communities of faith work as spaces where Latin@s unite for social justice and are slowly seeing egalitarian systems being enacted. I provide here a window into the lived faith of Latin@s in Ohio by looking at some concrete examples of individual faith journeys and thriving ministries and using Latin@ theologians and scholars of religion to analyze the expressions of faith by oral history narrators. In Ohio, placemaking—private, public, physical and virtual—is happening in the arts, business, education, and faith communities, not only as a natural phenomenon of migration, but always under the premise of heritage, language and cultural preservation.

Scholars of Latin@ theology have for decades documented and theorized about the practices of the Latin@ communities in the United States,⁴ identifying specific practices that distinguish Latin@ *evangélicos* and Catholics. These practices are, in general, rooted in the

⁴ See Miguel A. De La Torre and Edwin David Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in U.S. Religion: The Emmaus Paradigm* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998); Virgilio Elizondo, "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 159–175; Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); Gastón Espinosa, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ismael García, "Hispanic Experience and the Protestant Ethics," in *Protestantes/ Protestants: Hispanic Christianity Within Mainline Traditions*, ed. David Maldonado, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 140–159; Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); Isasi-Díaz, "Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas' Subjugated Knowledge," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latin@ Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 44–67; and Daisy Machado, "Latinos in the Protestant Establishment: Is There a Place for Us at the Feast Table?" in *Protestantes/Protestants*, 85–103.

reality of *mestizaje*⁵ and in liberation theology, which emerged in the 1960s and sought to disrupt the power (political and within the church) held by the rich and give control back to the people, therefore actively engaging and involving the poor in their own liberation. As José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero note, “to speak of the Hispanic American church is to speak of the church of the poor.”⁶ This article builds on that previous scholarship but takes into consideration Latin@ faith in relation to place. The Midwest has opened possibilities for the experience and practice of faith for Latin@s, who often occupy submissive or marginalized roles in the community and in the church.

My focus here will be primarily Latin@ Catholics and Protestants (*evangélicos*) and the hybrid religions that emerge from these traditions, and this exploration of *Latin@s en la fe* is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive. It offers a window into how, in the state of Ohio, faith and spirituality are woven into the fabric of daily lived experiences and in *convivencia*. I use the term *convivencia* to mean, as theologian Gary Riebe-Estrella explains, an experience that, for Latin@s, is never individualistic and is always founded on a shared reality.⁷

⁵ *Mestizaje* refers to the cultural and racial mixing between indigenous peoples and white colonizers as a result of colonization. In Latin America, indigenous peoples continue to be the poorest and most disenfranchised in their communities.

⁶ José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 2.

⁷ Gary Riebe-Estrella, “Theological Education as *Convivencia*,” in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín and Miguel H. Díaz (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 209–16.

A 2014 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that in the U.S., 55 percent of Latin@s identified as Catholic and 22 percent practiced various Protestant traditions, while 18 percent did not identify any religious affiliation.⁸ However, aside from an online directory of Latin@ churches, not much has been documented on Ohio Latin@ congregations.⁹ On the other hand, studies on Latin@s in the Midwest are on the rise, even when the Latin@ presence in places like Ohio is not recent.¹⁰ Despite the low numbers of Latin@s in this state, migration to northeast Ohio saw a spike in the 1920s for Mexican and Mexican-American farmers¹¹ and then again in the 1940s for steel mill workers, mainly from Puerto Rico.¹² Ann Millard and

⁸ See Pew Research Center, *The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States* (May 7, 2014), Chapter 1: Religious Affiliation of Hispanics, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/chapter-1-religious-affiliation-of-hispanics/>.

⁹ Ohio Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs, 2020, <https://www.ochla.ohio.gov/Portals/0/Documents/DIRECTORIES/FINAL%202019%20Ohio%20Hispanic%20Serving%20Churches.pdf>. The directory identifies nearly 100 Latin@-serving churches.

¹⁰ See Omar Valerio-Jiménez, Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez, and Claire F. Fox, eds., *The Latina/o Midwest Reader* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017) and companion website, <https://dsps.lib.uiowa.edu/latino-midwest/>; Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); and Sujevy Vega, *Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest*. (2015).

¹¹ See <http://www.lorainpubliclibrary.org/research/local-research/local-history-resources/history-of-lorain-ohio--chronology#1920>; Frank Jacinto, *The Emergence of the Hispanic Community in Lorain, Ohio*, rev. ed. (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society, 2001), 1–2; and Frank Jacinto, *The Mexican Community in Lorain* (Avon, OH: self-pub., 1981), 1, 3.

¹² *Lorain Morning Journal*, [author and title unknown] February 6, 1948, 2 and Eugenio Rivera, “The Puerto Rican Colony of Lorain, Ohio,” *Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (1987): 12-23.

Jorge Chapa, authors of *Apple Pie and Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest*, comment on this in their introduction:

We . . . did not anticipate that Latinos would take the initiative to establish their own religious congregations, in many cases recruiting pastors from other parts of the U.S. and Latin America. Latino churches provide many crucial social services, including emergency food and clothing. Important to many newcomer families, bilingual church staff provide crucial referrals to health and social service agencies; that is, they connect newcomers to ongoing assistance in the form of food stamps, children's Medicaid, and other benefits. Some pastors also informally represent their congregations to the local mayor and other town officials. These activities undoubtedly contribute to the vitality of many of the newly founded Spanish-speaking congregations in the Midwest.¹³

The history of communities of faith where Latin@s gather to participate in weekly services and yearly events is a long one, rooted in a call to solidarity with those who are most vulnerable. One does not need to look very far to see how work against deeply rooted injustices, discrimination, poverty, and violence continues to be at the forefront of faith communities. From organizations such as the InterReligious Task Force on Central America (IRTF),¹⁴ founded in the late 1970s in Cleveland, to the Catholic dioceses throughout the state, the

¹³ Ann Millard and Jorge Chapa, with Catalina Burillo et al., *Apple Pie and Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 10.

¹⁴ See <https://www.irtfcleveland.org/>.

Latin@ community in Ohio has established a presence that voices local concerns and extends solidarity to countries like El Salvador, Honduras, and Colombia. In a 2018 article from the Catholic News Service, Bishop Nelson Pérez of Cleveland condemned the action of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for grossly targeting farm workers in northeast Ohio. A recent raid at a gardening and landscape company, he said, “makes clear that our current immigration system contributes to the human suffering of migrants and the separation of families.” Bishop Pérez urged Catholic Church members to demand immigration reform from their legislators in Congress, noting that “the church is advocating for comprehensive and compassionate reform of our immigration system so that persons are able to obtain legal status in our country and enter the United States legally to work and support their families.”¹⁵ The raid in question resulted in the arrest of over one hundred workers, following which their families gathered at St. Paul Catholic Church in Norwalk, Ohio, looking for guidance and information.

To understand faith practices and affinities in the Latin@ community is to acknowledge daily lived experiences tied to the place where they happened. Carmen Nanko-Fernández explains:

Latin@s affirm that lived reality is *source* for divine revelation and as such worthy of theological reflection. Lo cotidiano as lived en nuestros barrios y nuestras casas,

¹⁵ Rhina Guidos, “After Raid, Ohio Bishop Says Immigration System Adds to Suffering,” Catholic News Service, June 7, 2018, <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2018/after-raid-ohio-bishop-says-immigration-system-contributes-to-suffering.cfm>.

en comunidades y familias, in the particular and the local, from the underside, peripheries, and grassroots is a dynamic matrix of sin, grace, and ambiguity, of the perceived presence of God as well as of the perceived absence of the divine. The ordinary as experienced through our hybridities, bodies, senses, struggles, fiestas, socioeconomic status, and migratory and historical legacies offers legitimate starting points for critical investigation.¹⁶

In identifying place as the space that one inhabits and belonging as relational to those who share our lived experiences which are culturally, linguistically, and historically rooted, *lo cotidiano* not only acknowledges a lived reality but is integral to the creation of communal faith practices. I find that it is within this focus of *lo cotidiano* and place that the door opens for moving towards solidarity, the common good, and gender inclusion.

Activism, Sanctuary, and Social Justice

In the summer of 2017, Edith Espinal, an undocumented mother of three from Mexico, sought refuge at the Columbus Mennonite Church in Clintonville, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. She was the first individual to publicly receive sanctuary in Ohio. Espinal initially stayed at the church so she could petition to stay in the United States and avoid deportation. She, like many other undocumented immigrants seeking permanent legal status in the U.S., had to wear an ankle GPS tracker while waiting to hear about her asylum case. Her case was denied and she

¹⁶ Carmen Nanko-Fernández, "Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 16.

now lives at the church indefinitely. Her story and case were discussed by several religious and non-religious organizations and support for Espinal was unanimous. On August 26, 2017, recounts an article in *The Mennonite*,

the [Columbus Mennonite Church] congregation's leadership team met to process Espinal's request for sanctuary. They also checked with other organizations that use the building, including a Jewish congregation and a day school program, which were both onboard [*sic*]. The following day, they presented the proposal to the congregation, and on Wednesday, Aug. 30, after receiving broad input and support from the congregation, the leadership team voted unanimously to offer their building as a sanctuary space for Espinal.¹⁷

The Mennonite church, along with many activists, including Rubén Castilla Herrera, has been working to bring about awareness and change for the many of undocumented immigrants who live, raise families, and work in Ohio.

Espinal's case has been made public due to the efforts of Castilla Herrera, who in 1988 confronted and stopped a local TV station from broadcasting a live immigration raid, and in 2004 witnessed the fire at the Lincoln Park apartments on the west side of Columbus that took the lives of ten Latin@ immigrants, including a mother, father, and their three sons. Castilla Herrera had moved to Ohio in 1987 to attend seminary in Delaware, Ohio. Originally from

¹⁷ Hannah Heinzekehr, "Undocumented Mother Takes Sanctuary at Columbus Mennonite." *The Mennonite*, September 11, 2017, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/undocumented-mother-chooses-sanctuary-sojourn-columbus-mennonite/>.

Seguin, Texas, he and his parents and siblings were migrant farm workers. Castilla Herrera moved to Oregon for college and eventually came to Ohio as a single parent of three children. He recalls, “I went to Methodist Theological School; they had housing for families and there was a community. I came and I didn't know anyone. I came with five hundred dollars in my pocket and three children.”¹⁸ Since moving to Ohio, Castilla Herrera has been working inside and outside the church to provide resources, information, and support to the Latin@ community. Castilla Herrera describes the church as a place of refuge for newcomers like himself. He remembers:

I realized that the Catholic Church was interesting, even though I wasn't really raised Catholic. I was baptized Catholic but I'd become United Methodist and I realized that the church was that place ... Santa Cruz [Catholic Church] was downtown and that became a space where I knew I could see people in numbers. I would go to the Catholic church just to be in that space because there were many *mexicanos o hispanos* there. That was really the reason I would go, and I would take my children. It wasn't so much of a spiritual thing, and so then they would eat afterwards because we would eat, that's another big thing, coming together to eat.¹⁹

¹⁸ Castilla Herrera, oral history interview. Rubén Castilla Herrera's oral history interview has been edited for clarity.

¹⁹ Castilla Herrera, oral history interview.

Castilla Herrera's activism, rooted in family, faith, culture, and religious mixing, is part of the Latin@ experience in Midwestern cities. Luisa Feline Freier's article "Religion, Ethnicity and Immigrant Integration: 'Latino' Lutherans versus 'Mexican' Catholics in a Midwestern City," describes a similar phenomenon. Feline Freier writes:

The conversion of Latino immigrants to Lutheranism is not primarily religiously motivated but rather rests on ethnicised socioeconomic identification and differentiation. Socioeconomic identification can thus superimpose religious and ethno-cultural feelings of belonging. The cultural and civic integration of Latinos within the Lutheran Church and in the broader Madison community rests on the mobilisation of this multilayered and class-based 'Latino' identification.²⁰

Members of both Protestant and Catholic churches seem to be practicing what José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero call *teología en conjunto*,²¹ a theology that acknowledges Latin@s' rich diversity and collaborative spirit. *Teología en conjunto* is done in a communal context with pastors and lay persons in dialogue and cooperation. Castilla Herrera acknowledges that his decision to attend the Catholic church was one based on community and finding a place he and his children could call home.

²⁰ Luisa Feline Freier, "Religion, Ethnicity and Immigrant Integration: 'Latino' Lutherans versus 'Mexican' Catholics in a Midwestern City," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 8, no. 2 (Sept. 2008): 284-285. See also Ken R. Crane and Ann V. Millard, "'To Be with My People': Latino Churches in the Rural Midwest," chap. 8 in Millard and Chapa, *Apple Pie and Enchiladas*, 172-195.

²¹ Rodríguez and Martell-Otero, *Teología en Conjunto*, 2.

Nichole Flores presents us with a broadened definition of family, noting that the Latin@ family is not only made up of blood relatives:

Latinas/os often come to relate to community members who are not biological relatives as extended family members to whom they are deeply committed. These relationships make it possible for Latin@ communities to channel significant resources beyond the boundaries of particular households and form the basis of a community of response and resistance to socioeconomic inequality facing Latin@ communities today. The Latin@ practice of extended communal family promotes solidarity, which strengthens the larger community.²²

In his role as an elder in the community, Castilla Herrera works towards the common good, defined in Catholic social teaching as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily,”²³ not only within the church but also outside of it. As Castilla Herrera points out,

there are churches, but churches can only fulfill a certain amount of safety or provide some kind of service or referral service, and that is enormous, [but] the struggle that we have here in Columbus and even Ohio is because we're not a place that people consider us to be like a large Latino population, but we are here.

²² Nichole M. Flores, “Latina/o Families: Solidarity and the Common Good,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 69.

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

Castilla Herrera, although reluctant to describe his work as spiritual, also acknowledges that the people whom he has served often want to bless him. He adds, “I don't know if it is spiritual but it's also a kind of a circle of respect, right? and I think *that* we can't lose.”

Recognizing the historical presence of Latin@s in North America, which predates the founding of the United States, has to be at the front of this analysis given that, as Rubén Rosario-Rodríguez emphasizes, “Latino/a theological voices within the church and the academy have been marginalized – even silenced – for much of this history.”²⁴ Recognizing the heterogeneity of Latin@s and their traditions is also vitally important. Felipe Hinojosa’s work on Latin@ Mennonites in the Midwest provides us with a historical account of religious congregations that, at times, have been paternalistic and segregationist toward Latin@ people, especially those living in poverty. These churches have often undermined Latin@ representation, especially in leadership positions. Hinojosa writes, “Latino religious identity politics were in full bloom in the 1970s as religious leaders demanded from their mostly white coreligionists that they be attentive to the cultural and political needs of Spanish-speaking communities.”²⁵ Latino and Latina *evangélicos* were pushing for inclusion and culturally relevant expressions of faith—including worship services that incorporated mariachi and

²⁴ Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, “Sources and *En Conjunto* Methodologies of Latino/a Theologizing” in Espín, *Companion to Latino/a Theology*, 54.

²⁵ Hinojosa. *Latino Mennonites*, 176.

conjunto music—and advocated for white religious leaders to be responsive to these issues.²⁶

Hinojosa finds that

like African Americans, Latinos merged their biblical understandings of justice to help transform religious institutions that they believed were unresponsive to the needs of Latino communities. In the mid-1970s, Latino religious identity politics emphasized what white Mennonites did not want to hear: that after 20 years of discussions on race, the church had made few strides in diversifying its leadership.²⁷

Hinojosa’s valuable research focuses primarily on Indiana, a state with a history of seasonal migrant farm workers from South Texas and Illinois. In my research in Ohio, I find that Latin@ faith leaders there today, like those of the 1970s in other parts of the Midwest, are pushing to be inclusive of all backgrounds and to educate congregations about resources and civil rights, while at the same time breaking gender barriers for women in leadership. I am not suggesting that somehow Ohio is late in seeking representation, but rather that, in 2019, Latin@ leaders are creating congregations founded with these issues in mind. That is, they are working from the inside out, starting *en su propia casa*.

Rosario Rodríguez notes, “Latino/a theology concedes the interested perspective of every theological tradition and encourages inter-subjective conversation as a corrective against

²⁶ According to Hinojosa, “On April 14, 1973, close to 60 Latinos gathered at the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita in Moline, Illinois for the first conference organized by and for Latinos in the Mennonite Church.” Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 149.

²⁷ Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 175.

the tendency to universalize particular points of view, defining theology as inherently communal and discursive.”²⁸ This discursive and communal experience is happening beyond traditional church spaces. Yet experiences within Ohio and across the Midwest vary. For example, Jeremy Rehwaldt’s research on white communities with an increased influx of Latin@ immigrants, especially in rural towns, tells of the tensions that continue to exist as majority populations deal with anti-immigrant rhetoric and how Latin@s might shape the religious landscape in rural communities.²⁹ Jane Juffer also examines the rural areas in Iowa, where existing Latin@ Catholic churches and growing Latin@ Protestant churches negotiate physical and spiritual spaces among majority congregations, particularly those of the Dutch Reformed tradition.

Ohio’s landscape has offered a space for religions that are rooted in the enjoyment of nature.³⁰ John Alvarez, a Puerto Rican man who lives in Akron, talks about feeling free to practice his religion, Santería, despite the obvious limitations regarding animal treatment. He is aware that most people do not know much about Santería and that, if they do, it is associated with negative connotations. The wide range of expression of Latin@ popular religion has its own history of marginalization and exclusion from majority religions in Latin America and the

²⁸ Rosario Rodríguez, “Sources and *En Conjunto* Methodologies,” 57.

²⁹ Jeremy Rehwaldt, "Responses by White Christians to Recent Latino Immigration in the Rural U.S. Midwest," *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015).

³⁰ Jane Juffer. "Hybrid Faiths: Latino Protestants Find a Home Among the Dutch Reformed in Iowa," *Latino Studies* 6, no. 3 (2008): 290-312.

Caribbean. Miguel De La Torre explains that a religion is identified as “popular” not in the sense of popularity, but in direct relation to the disenfranchised who are “responsible for its creation, making a religion of the marginalized, of the common people.”³¹ De La Torre notes that Cubans practicing Santería, a religion tied to African heritages, have been the target of social scrutiny, yet “in the United States they [have] embraced the faith as part of their cultural identity.”³² Santería has always resisted colonization and offers a space for religious freedom to those who often find themselves rejected by majority religions. De La Torre writes:

In the Spanish Caribbean, specifically in Cuba and Puerto Rico, which were still under Spain’s colonial yoke, freedom fighters began to find in Spiritism an alternative to the Catholic Church, which they perceived to be in league with the Spanish monarchy. With the suppression of political organizations that challenged the colonizer’s authority, Spiritism served as a political space for liberal ideas to flourish.³³

Santería, as De La Torre describes, has attracted members because it offered a place for community gathering. For Alvarez, it has provided a place of identity expression and acceptance. Alvarez describes the general lack of understanding of the meaning and practice of Santería in this way:

³¹ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 178.

³² De La Torre, *Santería*, 178.

³³ De La Torre, *Santería*, 173.

[People] have no earthly idea what *locumi* is,³⁴ what *Santería* is, they didn't understand when a student who actually practices a religion, but is not a priest, like I am, came to throw themselves to me, like they literally tried to prostrate themselves to me and I'm like, "You can't do this." They don't understand the animal sacrifices involved, in fact, I wanted to bring a program on this campus, because there was a case in the Supreme Court about that has passed 9-0 and it's part of our religion. It's accepted legally in the United States, and I tried to bring this person, very important person, a very pivotal case that's being studied in all law schools, and this law school said, "Well I'm not sure that we want to sponsor something like that because of the possible ramifications with PETA." ... I've gotten push-back, I saw the micro-aggression a bit, for instance, the "Voodoo" comments I heard from administrators. It doesn't bother me because I'm a very self-assured priest.³⁵

In contrast to many religions, particularly those most often practiced within Latin@ communities, Alvarez has found full acceptance within his chosen faith practice. He specifically talks about feeling accepted as a gay man, explaining:

I can tell you that I practice two religions, *Santería* and Catholicism, and that's normal in our religion. Catholicism, because I owe everything to Jesus Christ and God.

³⁴ *Locumi*, or *lukumi*, is the liturgical language of *Santería*, composed of words and phrases derived from the Yoruba language. The word can also simply be synonymous with "Santería."

³⁵ Alvarez, oral history interview.

Santería, because I'm not accepted in the Catholic Church, and I am in Santería. You can be gay and you're accepted, it doesn't matter. You can be a priest, you're accepted. And this is something I've always needed to find in my life, you know, acceptance, and so, being gay and being a *Santero*³⁶ in Ohio right now . . . all I can tell you is a big-ole question mark. Because the day that I have to do my first *matanza*,³⁷ for my *orishas*,³⁸ we're gonna see the reaction of what happens. Even though this is kept very secretive and it's done behind closed doors, it's still something that is not seen unless you go up to Cleveland, Columbus, or Cincinnati, the urban centers where there's more Hispanics that practice the religion. Especially down in Columbus I heard there's some Cubans down there, and Cubans and Puerto Ricans predominantly are the ones that practice the religion.³⁹

Despite the small numbers of Santería practitioners here, Alvarez has also experienced acceptance in the African American community. He says:

³⁶ A priest in the Santería religion.

³⁷ Animal sacrifice.

³⁸ *Orishas* are deities of the Yoruba peoples of West Africa and, in Santería, powerful beings who mediate between the human and spiritual realms—between humanity and the Supreme Being—and are dependent upon the sacrifices performed by their devotees. Practitioners of Santería usually have a special relationship with one particular *orisha*.

³⁹ Alvarez, oral history interview.

I actually met a priest that came to play at one of the drummings here for Africa Night, and he lives in Kent State [*sic*], and he's an African American though, he's not Hispanic. But he is in the religion and he's an elder and so when I saw him and I saw him playing, I was entranced. I have been accepted by the African American community in Ohio that really want to go back to their roots. What I was surprised [by] is, I haven't been accepted by the African American community that is very church-going, Christian community. . . . The Hispanic community, they don't care. They just find somebody to speak Spanish, "Welcome! We need more of us," you know. So I don't throw my religion out there, I really don't, if I go to the Catholic church to mass, I won't wear all this stuff, I'll hide it.⁴⁰

Alvarez's fluidity of religious practices confirms what Rosario Rodríguez describes as the historical reality of contact zones, heightened after the Conquest. Rosario Rodríguez writes:

Latino/a Christianity is indelibly shaped by the Iberian Catholic conquest of the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Therefore, an important resource for understanding Latino/a Christianity is the syncretistic religious practices of the people of Latin America that combine the Christian symbols and rituals of the Iberian Catholic conquerors with indigenous forms of spirituality as well as African religions.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Alvarez, oral history interview.

⁴¹ Rosario Rodríguez, "Sources and *En Conjunto* Methodologies," 57.

Alvarez's religious rituals are not confined to the private space. Even in a religion that carries such a stigma as *Santería*, Alvarez practices his faith in open spaces. He explains:

Practicing here has been okay so far, I think people see me very weird when I go walking by a cemetery, I gotta do immediately a prayer because there is a prayer for that. If I go walking by the Cuyahoga river here, I am a priest of Ochún, who owns the river, so of course, I have to pay my respects. I'm not doing anything that they get offended by. The animal sacrifice will be very difficult here, though. I have not done that, in fact I was supposed to when I brought my *orishas* in, through my house up here, I brought them up from Florida. I had to feed the door with two doves but I didn't. I do have two *orishas* that are outside of my door, my front door, they're shells, conch shells, and the *orishas'* faces are . . . cemented on there. And they found out that my partner's gay, and at first it was the talk of the street. We were accepted because, later on, I found out there's another Puerto Rican family on the street.

Alvarez is fully aware of the limitations placed on his religious ritual practices as determined by his geographical location and related laws. Nonetheless, he has experienced freedom and acceptance of his faith and identity as a gay man. It is important to note that the way he relates his experience of being “the talk of the street” and being accepted as “another member of the Puerto Rican family” points to the local community's bend towards the familiar—or more familiar—as a move towards acceptance.

Alvarez's practice of Santería and Castilla Herrera's faith practice of communal spaces can be understood through the lens of what Carmen Nanko-Fernández writes regarding popular religions:

These popular religious expressions are forms of traditioning, catechizing and pastoral caregiving; they do not separate strands of living or place them in contrived correlations that seek to distinguish culture from religious tradition. These manifestations of the "faith of the people" blur distinctions between secular and sacred activity, public and domestic space, official and unofficial church ritual.⁴²

Both Alvarez and Castilla Herrera perform faith practices that reveal a commitment to social justice and religious acceptance.

Pastoras Latinas en Espanglish

Wendy, a local *pastora evangélica* who identifies as Nuyorican and who uses Spanish and English in the same sentence, says that her use of both languages simultaneously reflects who she is and the congregation she serves. I start with an example of a conversation she had with me and my students because it shows that to be a Latina faith leader is to straddle multiple worlds. Wendy spoke to us about having to know the different variations of Spanish in her congregation and of how when she addresses a group of Latino men, it takes a couple of encounters before they accept her as one in a position of authority. Her experience mirrors the

⁴² Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, "Performative Theologies: Ritualizing the Daily Latinamente," *Liturgy* 29 no. 3 (2014): 22.

experience of *pastoras* Irene Casale-Petrarca and Crucita Marrero, who are aware of the gender-biased and cultural positionality they occupy in their role as faith leaders. The representation of women leaders in the Catholic and Evangelical churches is, at best, marginal. Latina faith leaders have even lower numbers of representation marked by race, class, language, and immigration status. Yet Latinas are breaking into previously male-dominated spaces, while at the same time dealing with internalized traditional gender-role binaries. For Latina faith leaders who are positioned within the context of the majority church, and who sometimes operate in primarily white spaces and English-only congregations, crossing borders and expanding boundaries are part of daily lived experience. Theologian Loida Martell-Otero, in her study of *evangélica* soteriology, explains that “Latinas theologize[d] from a peripheralized places of powerlessness and voicelessness” and that, tied to *lo cotidiano*, “this historical concreteness implies that salvation must include an inherent ethical imperative that leads to the holistic humanization of the oppressed and disenfranchised.”⁴³ This often includes confronting and dismantling places and spaces of power and privilege within and outside the women pastors’ own congregations. The experiences of Casale-Petrarca and Marrero analyzed here demonstrate how these women confront internal cultural biases, thus making it possible for women to occupy with authority communal spaces of faith practice.

⁴³ Loida I. Martell-Otero, “From *Satas* to *Santas*: *Sobrajas* No More: Salvation in the Spaces of the Every Day,” in Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Condé-Frazier, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 35.

Reading the narratives of Pastora Crucita and Pastora Irene (as they are called) through a Latina feminist lens informed by *mestiza* identity and spirituality frames a model for egalitarian and social justice practices that these *pastoras* embody. Jeanette Rodríguez explains that, for U.S. Latina faith leaders, “The engaging and motivating insights that come from U.S. Latina feminist religious understanding are anchored in the belief that the function of one’s faith is not only to explain and interpret its meaning, but also to assist in the transformation of reality itself.”⁴⁴ For Latinas, faith without the pursuit of justice is no faith at all. Indeed, whether inside the church or in the everyday life of communal living, change is taking place. Marcela Lagarde notes that women’s push for equality also happens quietly, in community and solidarity:

*El feminismo ocurre también en la soledad. No sólo en las luchas públicas, sino también en las nuevas formas de convivencia y cotidianidad. Ocurre en torno a fogones y mesas de cocina, en los mercados, en los hospitales, en las iglesias. Está en las aulas, en las salas de conciertos y los proyectos productivos.*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Jeanette Rodríguez, “Latina Activists: Toward an Inclusive Spirituality of Being in the World,” in *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice*, ed. María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 119.

⁴⁵ “Feminism also occurs in solitude. It is present not only in public struggles but also in new forms of daily living and common life. It happens around stoves and kitchen tables, at the market, in hospitals, in churches. It is present in classrooms, concert halls, and productive projects.” Marcela Lagarde y de Los Ríos, “Claves éticas para el feminismo en el umbral del milenio,” http://www.posgrado.unam.mx/publicaciones/ant_omnia/41/04.pdf.

This type of feminist practice, practiced in the home, in the kitchen, in the marketplace, in hospitals and churches, is a feminism of *convivencia* and *lo cotidiano*.

Pastora Crucita Marrero had been involved in the church for many years. She moved to Lorain, Ohio in October of 1982 and recalls seeing the town booming socially and financially. She also remembers seeing the town disappear when the steel mill plant closed and many left Lorain in search of jobs. She recalls:

I saw a lot of businesses just leave, we saw the mill lose so many workers, stores closing, unemployment. We begin to see some of the signs that, from where we used to live, [there was] a little bit of gang activity, you know, the youth having nothing to do, that's what we saw, and even till this day we still see some of the homes that are dilapidated and abandoned. But what that has done for us is to make us want to stay even more and get involved . . . and try to change things.⁴⁶

Marrero and her family stayed behind and continued to work with the church. Marrero oversaw the music ministry, where she composed and played music. She remembers being “invited and tempted” to leave the church in Lorain because other churches had “really noticed we have a ministry here that you could flourish, but it would mean I would have to leave. But we've always done things on prayer, you know, we don't make a move unless we are sure that God is going to bless it.” Marrero and her family decided to stay because they felt that they were not done working in this community.

⁴⁶ Marrero, oral history interview.

After her husband was forced to retire due to illness, Marrero says, she never considered stepping in as the new pastor, although the congregation had expected her to. She remembers:

I didn't think I was someone called to do this, I said, I'm a worship leader. I like praise, I'm not a minister, so I resisted for a while, so we were in another church, doing ministry, doing worship. For eight years we were in that church and God sort of made a calling to me, you know, [God said] you're going to be, I want *you*.⁴⁷

Marrero understood her role in the church in a more traditional way, working and supporting her husband, not as lead pastor. Although her husband had retired from the pulpit, she knew they were still working for God in the various roles they held in the church.

In 2007, Marrero received a call from another church that had lost its pastor and once again, she was asked to step in as the new minister. She continues, “They wanted me to step in there and that's what I did, in God's name, so that's where I've been and so my husband is my assistant.” Marrero continues to be the pastor of Misión Cristiana el Faro,⁴⁸ Discípulos de Cristo in Lorain, Ohio. Pastora Crucita Marrero's small, but very actively involved congregation, is an example of women-led congregations that, within their own traditions, collectively engage in community and spiritual legacy, with a commitment to justice.

⁴⁷ Marrero, oral history interview.

⁴⁸ According to the church website description, this is “the only Disciples of Christ Spanish [-speaking] church in all of Lorain County. Celebrating 10 years of service to God and the Lorain community.”

Across the Midwest, many of the congregations that list services in Spanish hold those services at a different time from the churches' main English-speaking services.⁴⁹ In some cases, the Spanish-speaking congregation is affiliated with a completely different denomination. In most cases there is little to no interaction between the two congregations and the two communities exist in separate silos. However, this is not the case for La Viña, in Westerville, Ohio, where Irene Casale-Petrarca pastors the Spanish-language congregation. Casale-Petrarca is an immigrant from Venezuela and a pediatrician who held many jobs before changing professions, going to the Vineyard Church's Bible Institute and becoming the first pastor for the Spanish-speaking congregation of the Westerville Vineyard church. Many things that stand out about this congregation, including its rapid growth and Pastora Irene's role as the first female pastor for Vineyard churches in the U.S.⁵⁰

Spanish-language services at La Viña started in October 2013 and meet at the same time as the latest service of the English-speaking congregation in the same church. La Viña began with twenty-five people, but today about two hundred people attend the Sunday service. The youth in this congregation attend the main English-speaking children's ministry. According to Casale-Petrarca, twenty-three Latin American and Caribbean countries are represented in the Spanish-speaking congregation, including Brazil (a Portuguese-speaking country). She mentioned that the congregation includes people from Spain and even Japanese

⁴⁹ This observation comes from my field work across the state of Ohio.

⁵⁰ Vineyard USA is a non-denominational community of churches founded in 1974. The Spanish-speaking churches in this community are called "La Viña."

people who speak Spanish. For her, practicing her faith in the U.S. has been easier than in her country of origin:

Yes, it is different, the experience is definitely different. I think there is more freedom here, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and one can share with others. Religion is not taboo, like in our countries: one can share what Jesus has done in one's life. We can invite people [to church] without barriers, without the obstacles of fear, it happens more naturally and with more liberty.⁵¹

Although Casale-Petrarca did not speak of it explicitly, her statement alludes to the decrease in political and religious freedom of expression in Venezuela after President Hugo Chávez⁵² took power.

Casale-Petrarca, like Marrero, is breaking barriers that women often face in the church. In fact, even progressive churches like Vineyard witness sexist attitudes whenever a woman preaches. Some members of the congregation leave the building, silently expressing their disapproval. Yet La Viña chose as its first pastor a woman. Casale-Petrarca says, "The opportunity to be the founder of La Viña and to be the first female pastor of Viñas across the U.S. . . . opened the way for many others female pastors that came after me." She also comments on some of the challenges of leading as a woman pastor:

⁵¹ Casale-Petrarca, oral history interview. The interview has been translated from the original Spanish and edited for clarity by interviewer Elena Foulis.

⁵² Hugo Chávez was president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013.

At the beginning the challenge was in regards to *machismo*—our culture is *machista*, they have attitudes about seeing a woman preaching—but that is the beauty of Vineyard, the beauty of this church is that it is about God’s word, the calling and service to God, not about gender, whether one is male or female, it’s not about gender, it is about the calling.⁵³

Pastora Irene has a similar story to that of Pastor Crucita: in both cases husbands have taken on a supporting role. Even as Irene Casale-Petrarca mentions the *machista* practices as an initial challenge—and probably an ongoing challenge for new members—she also attributes to patriarchy the reason for her acceptance into the pastoral role:

I believe that when one shows integrity, honesty, respect for people, one receives the same. Men treat me with much respect, my husband is always with me, behind the scenes, working alongside. He supports me in everything, that has been important, but I believe part of the success [of acceptance] has been that in our patriarchal culture, women’s presence, women’s strength, women’s courage at home [is important], because all Hispanic women are courageous, working inside and outside the home, striving for their children, their family. I believe that this plays a big role in how people see me as a spiritual mother.

What Casale-Petrarca describes as patriarchy has a strong connection with *marianismo*, an identification with Virgin Mary’s characteristics of self-sacrifice and

⁵³ Casale-Petrarca, oral history interview.

martyrdom and a concept and practice familiar to most Latin Americans.⁵⁴ Casale-Petrarca's experience as a woman leader is marked by her culture and reveals cultural features that are recognized in the Catholic tradition.⁵⁵ Indeed, to lead a Latin@ congregation in the U.S. is to engage in religious and cultural mixing, which can be observed in Pastora Irene's self-identification of spiritual mother.

Conclusion

Although not all faith practices are represented in this essay, it is important to note the growth, representation, and egalitarian possibilities of faith leaders and practitioners among

⁵⁴ In her analysis of feminist *mestiza* theology as one that is centered around women's lived experiences and wisdom, Gloria Inés Loya explains that the two central historical figures of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Malintzin are the initial roots of *mestizaje*. These two figures, which through *mestizaje* symbolize deity and indigenous people, are part of the cultural fabric of Latin American people's understanding of the role of the mother, even the spiritual mother. Loya concludes, "Through theological reflection and discourse, a *mestiza* feminist theology becomes a place and process in which women are welcomed and invited to participate in doing theology in community. This theological and spiritual journey nurtures, challenges, and sustains us in the struggle for justice and dignity." Women, according to Loya, are creating new paths of faith and of spirituality which include a shared wisdom, community, and moral leadership. Gloria Inés Loya. "Pathways to Mestiza Theology," in Aquino et al., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, 238.

⁵⁵ Nora Lozano's survey on ecclesiology from a Latin@ perspective finds that often, regardless of the tradition of particular church, we often find fluid expression of faith in Catholic and Protestant congregations. Lozano explains, "For instance, *los coritos* [short songs of worship] are very popular in Latin@ Protestant circles, but every day they become more common and present also in Catholic worship experiences. Las Posadas [processions enacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging before the birth of Jesus] are a Catholic tradition, but they have made their way into the Latin@ Protestant churches. The same can be said about the celebration of *la quinceañera* [the coming of age celebration when a young woman turns fifteen]." Nora O. Lozano, "Ecclesiology." in Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *Hispanic American Religious Cultures*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009, ProQuest Ebook Central), 609.

Spanish-speaking congregations and faith practitioners. It is also worth noting that mixed-language families, particularly families where individuals who are not fluent Spanish speakers outnumber those who are, often choose to attend services with the linguistic majority (English-speaking) members. This results in a limited expression of Latin@ theological practices available for mixed families, who must choose between attending different services or attending the English-only services that involve little to no attention to Latin@ spiritual practices. Further study also needs to be conducted on the experiences of Latin@ youth who attend anglophone congregations while their parents attend Spanish-only services.

Finally, the stories and experiences of Latin@s in Ohio used in this article illustrate the importance of archiving Latin@ perspectives in all areas of life. They witness to faith practices as tied to lived experiences, religious hybridity, and social justice. The commitment to solidarity as a component of ethical faith practices rooted in the protection of the most vulnerable is also at the forefront of many Latin@ faith leaders' priorities in the state of Ohio. As we continue to provide a more complete and complex view of the Latin@ experience in the Midwest, we can pay particular attention to gaps in policy, representation, and services that steadily escalate as the population continues to grow.

Acknowledgments

While I am forever thankful to each of the narrators whose stories I present here, I would like to dedicate this article to Rubén Castilla Herrera, who died unexpectedly on April 6, 2019. I met Rubén a few years before I conducted his oral history interview. He came to talk

about his work in my class and I asked him about his role as an activist. He replied, “I just show up.” This has always stayed with me. Rubén is a clear example of the urgent need to document Latin@ history and the work of our communities so that we know what has been done and what is left to do. Ruben was a father, a partner, a *compañero*, and at his core a spiritual person who understood connection, empathy, and *sustento* as key to our relationships with one another. He said, “I don't know if it is spiritual but it's also a kind of a circle of respect, right? and I think *that* we can't lose.” Indeed, a circle of respect. *¡Hasta la victoria, Rubén!*