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Nichole M. Flores, The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy

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Nichole M. Flores. *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021. xii + 166 pp. \$49.95 Paper. ISBN: 9781647120917.

As its title suggests, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity* is written at the intersection of theological aesthetics and theological ethics. As the subtitle indicates, its scholarship is methodologically grounded in U.S. Latinx popular religion, the lived faith of a community. In this compelling work, Nichole Flores articulates a vision of solidarity that elucidates (and insists on) both the ethical demands of a Christian theological aesthetics and the aesthetic dimension of a Christian theological ethics.

The book's argument is laid out and articulated over the course of the introduction and five chapters. The introduction provides the intellectual context of the book by summarizing not only the overall plan of the book but also the various practical and intellectual resources the author will draw upon and engage critically. Here the reader is introduced to Flores' praxis-based methodology. The starting point of the chapter—as it is for the book as a whole—is the popular religious practices of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Denver and, more specifically, that community's regular presentation of the drama *The Miracle at Tepeyac*, written by the playwright and activist Tony García and performed by his company Su Teatro. Flores then summarizes the principal scholarly resources she will engage as she examines these religious practices: U.S. Latinx theological aesthetics, *mujerista* theology, the thought of John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum, Catholic theological ethics, and Catholic social teaching. Finally, she outlines the plan of the book and explains the terminological choices she has made in writing the book.

In the first chapter, "A Political Theology of Guadalupe and Juan Diego," Flores describes in greater depth the sociohistorical context of her work, in particular the tensions inherent in the Denver Catholic parish's hosting a drama with origins in the Chicano movement.

The “relational ethics of Guadalupe and Juan Diego” that emerges from that tension will interpret the narrative not primarily as describing a Marian apparition but as recounting an interpersonal encounter and the resulting relationship that develops *between* Guadalupe and Juan Diego, i.e., two *subjects*. As Flores points out, now Guadalupe cannot remain a pious, “private” religious devotion but becomes an inherently religio-political enactment, with dramatic (in every sense of the word) social implications.

Having established this foundational relationality as the locus where aesthetics and ethics meet and from which she will articulate her aesthetics of solidarity, the author now further clarifies her position by dialectically engaging two of the most influential liberal philosophers, John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum. If theological aesthetics attends to particularity and embodiment, Rawls’ methodological privileging of abstraction and universality makes him perhaps the paradigmatic anti-aesthetic thinker. In making her case against Rawls, Flores draws on a range of voices, including womanist and *mujerista* ones. However, unwilling to simply set up modern liberalism as a “straw man” that can be all-too-easily demolished, Flores, in the third chapter, complicates the case against liberalism. Enter Martha Nussbaum. In Flores’s words, “Nussbaum cautions against dismissing Rawls’s liberalism . . . Situating herself as the inheritor of Rawls’s argument, she offers an account of political emotions oriented toward cultivating a just society” (77). In her analysis of Nussbaum’s thought, then, Flores revives the possibility of a liberal aesthetics. Yet, in the end, she also finds Nussbaum wanting. Here Flores draws on Alejandro García-Rivera to question whether the liberal framework is capable of providing an adequate understanding of social justice.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Flores develops her constructive alternative to the liberal paradigm. In Chapter Four, “Lifting Up the Lowly,” Flores examines the theological aesthetics

of Alejandro García-Rivera, especially his notion of the community of the beautiful, as particularly helpful in articulating a Latinx relational theological aesthetics. In this chapter, Flores addresses the necessary, intrinsic relationship between aesthetics and justice. She also draws on important critical voices within Latinx theology itself to offer important and much needed critiques of our failure to challenge injustices within our own Latinx communities. In the concluding fifth chapter, “The Aesthetic Dimension of Solidarity,” Flores articulates her own constructive vision of aesthetic solidarity that integrates beauty and justice.

The Aesthetics of Solidarity represents a major contribution to the ongoing development of U.S. Latinx theology. Flores has produced a first-rate scholarly monograph in which she carefully develops, and clearly articulates, the intellectual features of an aesthetics of solidarity—a rich notion that will, no doubt, influence theological conversation in the future, not only among Latinx scholars but in the broader theological community. The fascinating, creative character of Flores’s work derives from her ability to maintain her focus on this constructive argument in the course of developing several simultaneous dialogues that provide the resources for her argument, i.e., the dialogues between Guadalupan popular religious practices and Guadalupan scholarship, between theological aesthetics and theological ethics, between Flores’s own aesthetics of solidarity and Latinx theological aesthetics, and between Latinx theology and philosophies of liberal individualism. In each case, Flores demonstrates not only a highly nuanced knowledge of the dialogue “partners” but also an ability to represent her interlocutors fairly and accurately. In each chapter, and throughout her argument, she also integrates the narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish and *The Miracle at Tepeyac* to demonstrate how an aesthetics of solidarity is ultimately rooted in such religious practices. The book is also beautifully written in lucid prose that, while scholarly in the best sense, never devolves into technical jargon. As such, this is a

work that will appeal not only to theological scholars and advanced students but, as well, to Christian pastoral ministers, religious educators, and social activists.

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