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“¡Que Viva el Cristo Negro de Portobelo!”

Ismael Rivera’s *El Nazareno* as an Exercise in Grassroots Theology

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Introduction

Theology, being a human activity, is inescapably contextual. For the better part of modernity, the activity of theology has been dominated by an attitude of intellectual objectivity and scholasticism which is, in fact, grounded in the particularities of Western culture. Within the Latin American continent, however, the practice is different: a type of *sensus fidelium*¹ can be appreciated in base ecclesial communities which have at its core a popular, rather than an academic, reading of Scripture. This means the theological activity, though fostered and guided by professional theologians, has remained a grassroots activity.² As a result, strains of

¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz offers an excellent definition of *sensus fidelium* from the perspective of Latin American reality: “The *sensus fidelium* is the belief that the faithful, from the bishops to the last member of the congregation, being led by the Holy Spirit, do not err in their beliefs.” See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha = In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), chap. 5, Kindle.

² Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (London, UK: Burns & Oates, 1987), 19-21. See also María Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, *Latin American Theology: Roots and Branches* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2016), chap. 1, Kindle. The pervasiveness of the theological enterprise as a quotidian reality for Latin American people is evident in the liberative praxis of the *mujerista* theology as expounded by Ada María Isasi-Díaz. She explains, “Thinking that only those of us who have academic diplomas can be liberation theologians flows necessarily into an oppressive paternalism that betrays the claim of our theological enterprise: *mujerista* theology is in itself a liberative praxis.” See Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha*, Síntesis del Capítulo 6 (my translation), chap. 6, Kindle.

theological thought are ubiquitous in Latin American culture, and they can be found, chiefly, in art.

In Latin America, art rethinks the way theology is done. Whereas the main medium of the theological discipline in modernity has been the text, Pablo Richard explains that “an authentic Latin American theology will be found in the symbols, rites, music, images, and stories.”³ Thus, theology in Latin America will be found in the quotidian lives of ordinary people and their cultural undertaking. Making the distinction between textual and living theology, Alex García-Rivera underlines the importance of art in the Latin American theological enterprise saying,

There exists a type of theology that can be called ‘living,’ as opposed to ‘textual.’ Living theology has its home in symbols, images, and *songs*. There is a theology that lives *in the music*, imagery, and cultural symbols of those who must live out that which textbook theology attempts to understand.⁴

Caribbean music is no exception. Ismael Rivera’s religious devotion to the “Black Christ of Portobelo” is narrated in his song *El Nazareno* which was featured in his 1974 album *Traigo de Todo*, from *Tico Records*. Given that the argument I intend to sketch here draws heavily from the song, it seems relevant to review its general structure.

A salsa song can be divided into two broad parts: *el tema* (lit. “the topic,” which generally narrates a story) and *el montuno* (a call-and-response dynamic in which the singer improvises responses to a repeated motif sung by *el coro* [lit. “the chorus”] which is, generally, the main idea of the song). From a musical arrangement standpoint one can identify additional

³ Pablo Richard, *Materiales Para Una Historia de la Teología en América Latina* (San José, CR: DEI, 1980), 12.

⁴ Alex García-Rivera, “Aesthetics,” in *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies*, ed. Edwin David Aponte and Miguel A. De La Torre (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 101. Italics mine.

parts. The structure for this particular song is (1) introduction, (2) *tema*, (3) *montuno*, (4) *mambo* (musical interlude), (5) second *montuno*, (6) second *mambo* (solos by *timbales* and trumpet), (7) third *montuno*, (8) ending. For the purposes of this article, however, a bipartite structure (*tema-montuno*) will suffice.

As a Puerto Rican⁵ salsa singer, Ismael Rivera (1931-1987) is a towering figure in the history of Caribbean music. Born on October 5, 1931, he grew up in Santurce, one of the poorest sectors of San Juan, Puerto Rico. From his birth, Ismael (henceforth, Maelo) knew the painful sting of poverty. This, however, did not preclude him from leading an early life full of energy, joy, and music. Aurora Flores, a journalist close to the singer, writes, “He ran off to play rhythms – banging on paint cans while shaking the baby bottles filled with beans.”⁶ His musical talent was deemed nothing short of genius.⁷ César Colón-Montijo records his mother saying,

⁵ The term “Latin American” is used mainly to refer to countries outside of the United States. Because of the inherent ambiguity of Puerto Rican identity, in this article I conceive of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican experience (i.e., outsider) as relating more to the Latin American experience, notwithstanding its (colonial) political relationship with the States. As a Puerto Rican, I resonate with Roberto Goizueta’s words. He says, “After years trying to become ‘American,’ and, then, trying to become Latin American, I realize I could not and never would be any of those two: I was, instead, *both things*, I was *in-between*” (my translation). See Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁶ Aurora Flores, “¡Ecuá Je! Ismael Rivera, El Sonero Mayor (A Personal Reflection),” *Centro Journal* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 64.

⁷ Here I am referring to the modern notion of artistic genius. Reading Kant, Bruce Ellis Benson explains that the modern notion of the artist as genius will have three characteristics: (1) they are original (rather than imitators); (2) what they create is exemplary for everyone else; and (3) they are unable to explain how they created their masterpieces. See Bruce Ellis Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), chap. 2, Kindle. It seems that Doña Margot is saying that Maelo’s musical talent had no discernible origin, in other words (Benson’s), she is unable to explain how he created his masterpieces. Of course, to describe Ismael Rivera as a genius in this way will be unwarranted, for the modern notion of genius necessarily entails a divorce of the artist from the

He would take small paint cans; he would hit them and get all kinds of sounds out of them. I don't know how that kid had such an ear. He would make maracas out of small Águila milk pots. I couldn't keep up with the grater and forks because he would use them like a *güiro*.⁸

Of course, she was being modest: Maelo's affinity for salsa music (as well as its concomitant religious interplay) did not come out of thin air—it was a family heirloom, one that he unmistakably inherited from his mother, Doña Margot. She not only was a talented singer, but she was also a healer (*curandera*).⁹ Her musical compositions seem to reflect both realities. “If one examines carefully her [musical] repertoire and narratives, one can perceive a wisely articulated story that relates her midwifery, healing, and mediumship as intertwined components of what she did as a community leader,” Colón-Montijo writes.¹⁰ Doña Margot was committed to *espiritismo popular*—a mixture of mediumistic spiritualism, popular Catholicism, and herbal

community, which is uncharacteristic for Latin American culture, as well as the well-known fact that the source and inspiration for Maelo's musical prowess was Doña Margot herself.

⁸ César Colón-Montijo, “Her Name Was Doña Margot,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 25, no. 2 (July 1, 2021): 47.

⁹ *Curanderismo* is an alternative expression of faith of the Latin American people. It is defined by Aponte and De La Torre as “a dynamic and fluid combination of indigenous Mesoamerican and Spanish popular religious outlooks and orientations to the physical world and spiritual realms that finds a particular expression in healing and health practices.” Edwin David Aponte and Miguel A. De La Torre, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001), 125. There are many kinds of healers in *curanderismo*, but the *curandera/o* was the highest rank—they are the only ones capable of healing a *brujo*, an evil spell.

¹⁰ Colón-Montijo, “Doña Margot,” 40.

remedies.¹¹ Maelo's music, therefore, can be seen as an echo of Doña Margot's style, organically mixing music and religious themes in a way that is always-already.

Fueled by religious devotion, Maelo sang songs that both prophetically denounced cultural inequality and racism and celebrated the intrinsic worth of Afro-descendant people. As Hiram Guadalupe Pérez explains, Rivera's legacy was that he, "a faithful devotee of the Black Christ of Portobelo, came to prominence in Puerto Rican music at the same time that leading black athletes like Roberto Clemente and Peruchín Cepeda were becoming leading celebrities in the Commonwealth and in its diasporas."¹²

It is the purpose of this article to extract, analyze, and understand some of the theology in Ismael Rivera's *El Nazareno*. Reflecting upon *El Nazareno* as a *locus theologicus*,¹³ I aim to argue that it features several elements of Latin American theological thought, specifically, (1) a mystical encounter with God in history, (2) the immanence over the transcendence of Christ, (3) *comunidad* over individuality, and (4) love over oppression. Maelo, then, harmonizes respectively with four loci of systematic theology: theology proper, christology, theological anthropology, and soteriology, thus enabling us to conceive of him as a grassroots systematic theologian. From the outset, it will be helpful to underline that throughout the article I will

¹¹ Colón-Montijo, "Doña Margot," 42.

¹² Hiram Guadalupe Pérez, "Rivera, Ismael 'Maelo' (1931-1987)," trans. Kate Adlela Cronin, in *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, ed. Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ Following Judith Gruber, by *locus theologicus* I mean the "theological resource, which guides and informs our way of knowing and conceptualizing God." See Judith Gruber, "Rethinking God in the Interspace: Interculturality as a *Locus Theologicus*," in *Svensk Missionstidstkrift* 100, no. 3 (2012): 260.

sometimes use the term *El Nazareno* to refer to Rivera's song and other times to refer to Jesus of Nazareth. Context will make clear which of those is in question.

Mystical Encounter: A Theology Proper

Maelo's theology proper underlines the reality of a living and engaging God, for "mysticism" simply refers to the religious belief that God is still active in the world and that it is possible for humanity to encounter God in daily and ordinary lives. Such a belief is supported by the theological notion that God is not only Creator of the cosmos, but also Sustainer (see Col 1:15-17)—that we live not in a buffered, but in a porous, world, a world open to the divine.¹⁴ As Gustavo Gutiérrez explains, "the biblical faith is, principally, a faith in a God who reveals Godself in *historical* happenings."¹⁵

In *El Nazareno*, Maelo narrates a story of a mystical encounter he had as he was out enjoying his life. Like the apostle Paul (cf. Acts 9:1-19), Maelo saw his plans frustrated by the unforeseen interruption of God's call. He sings,

Yo estaba en un vacilón

Fui a ver lo que sucedía

Cuando ya me divertía

Y empezaba a vacilar

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, "The Bulwarks of Belief," in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25-89. Reading Charles Taylor, James K.A. Smith makes a distinction between the buffered and the porous self. He defines the porous self explaining that "in the ancient/medieval social imaginary, the self is open and vulnerable to the 'enchanted' outside world—susceptible to grace, possession;" of the buffered self he says, "in the modern social imaginary, the self is sort of insulated in an interior 'mind,' no longer susceptible to the transcendent or the demonic." See James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), glossary, Kindle.

¹⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de La Liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1990), 201. My translation.

No sé de dónde una voz vine a escuchar

//

I was at a party¹⁶

I went to see what was goin' on

As I was havin' fun

And was starting to have a blast

Don't know from where, a voice I came to hear

A voice calling from among the commotion of a multitude is a feature also known to Gospel stories (see Lk 18:35-43). Hearing voices at a party is not uncommon, but the fact that *this* voice had no discernible origin underlines the supernatural and mystical nature of the experience. But who is it that speaks? For some theological schools, there can be aversion towards mysticism when it fails to give an empirical and objective ground for interaction with the divine. However, for Maelo this is not a problem. Unlike Paul, he does not seem to have the need to ask the question, “Who are you, Lord?” For him, it is clear who speaks:

Es el Nazareno

Que te da consejos buenos

//

¹⁶ Though *vacilar* in its common form relates to hesitation, here *vacilón* is rather different and difficult to translate, as there is not an English word that captures the intention behind it. Moreover, Spanish words might mean different things in different Latin American countries. In Puerto Rico, the word *vacilón* conveys a feeling of relaxation or freedom from worries that opens one up to be playful and joke with others. Several “non-academic” online dictionaries will gloss the word with (1) *party*, (2) *racket caused by many voices*, (3) *joker*, (4) *tease*, (5) *having a blast*, etc. Maelo uses *vacilón* in other contexts, too. For example, in his song *Las Caras Lindas* (The Beautiful Faces) he sings, “las caras lindas de mi gente negra son un *vacilón*” (listen at 2:30-34, etc.). There, the meaning is similar, namely, the beautiful faces of Black people cause Maelo to feel relaxed, free, happy. Bearing in mind the context of *El Nazareno*, I translate line 1 as “party” (social context) and line 4 as “having a blast” (feeling).

It is the Nazarene

Who gives you good advice(s)

Thus, a mystical encounter, as an American theologian has said, “is veridical and unmistakable for him who has it; that such a person does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know and to know with confidence that he is in fact experiencing ... God.”¹⁷ And although Latin American theological efforts cannot be reduced to liberation theology, it is possible to appreciate when María Clara Luccetti Bingemer, reading Gustavo Gutiérrez, explains that “liberation theology does not begin simply from a critical analysis of reality. It begins with a mystical experience, a deep encounter with the Lord.”¹⁸ And it is right to call him “Lord,” since the one who speaks is identified by the singer as none other than Jesus of Nazareth, whom the first Christians recognized as *kyrios*. Maelo, then, grounded in the reality of a God who acts and speaks within history, moves from an abstract and impersonal voice to its identification with a historical figure: *El Nazareno*.

Immanence over Transcendence: A Christology

Maelo’s christology focuses on the humanity of the historical Jesus, rather than on his divinity.¹⁹ A common difficulty of attending first to the divinity of Jesus is that it highlights his transcendence over his immanence. The identification of Jesus as the *logos*, albeit truthful divine

¹⁷ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 43.

¹⁸ Bingemer, *Latin American Theology*, Kindle.

¹⁹ Resolving this theological tension is irrelevant to the purposes of this article. What I aim to argue is that Maelo is working within the Latin American christological focus. See footnote twenty-one below.

revelation, underlines the transcendence of God's chosen agent. In Latin American liberation theology, a different focus is brought to the forefront. Sobrino clarifies:

Although it may seem a play on words, everything is decided by the choice to give methodological priority to one of these statements: "Jesus is Christ," or "Christ? He's Jesus." I believe the New Testament bluntly says the second, and that is what makes the new faith new.²⁰

Thus, a methodological shift from the divinity to the humanity of Jesus is established as the starting point in Latin American christological thought.²¹ This is also true for the Latinoax community living in the United States. Roberto Goizueta explains that "U.S. Hispanics relate to Jesus not as an abstract or otherworldly spirit, but as '*el niño Jesús*' [the baby Jesus], or '*Jesús, hijo de María*' [Jesus, the son of Mary], or '*Jesús, mi hermano*' [Jesus, my brother], or '*Cristo, nuestro Rey*' [Christ, our King], or '*el Sagrado Corazón*' [the Sacred Heart], or '*Jesús, el peregrino*' [Jesus, the journeyer]."²²

For our purposes, notice that it is not "the Eternal Word" who speaks to Maelo, but *El Nazareno*. Maelo focuses on the immanence and shared humanity of Jesus *of Nazareth*, and this to a high degree; indeed, in one instance he calls Jesus "*el negrito lindo*," "the beautiful little Black one." Lest this be regarded as blasphemy, Edwin David Aponte and Miguel A. De La

²⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 40.

²¹ Sobrino writes, "In Latin America there has been an attempt to produce the necessary mediating christology ... that begins with Jesus *of Nazareth*" (my italics). Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 47.

²² Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), chap. 2, Kindle. Translations of Spanish terms are mine.

Torre explain a cultural-linguistic difference: “When referring in Spanish to God, the informal *tú* is used, not the formal *usted*. Since Hispanics recognize God as one who is in solidarity with them as a fellow journeyer, the informal familiar pronoun is employed.”²³

Further, this emphasis is not merely a cultural preference, as if one were choosing arbitrarily to overlook Christ’s transcendence, but it is grounded in God’s self-revelation in Jesus. Virgilio Elizondo writes:

To be a Galilean²⁴ Jew was already to be one of the ignorant, insignificant, and despised of the world. That God had chosen to become a Galilean underscores the great paradox of the incarnation, in which God becomes the despised and lowly of the world.²⁵

God reveals Godself as an intimate friend to the lowly. Maelo, grounded in God’s self-identification within history, refers to Jesus in a way fit for what he is: an intimate fellow journeyer. To further press on this divine accompaniment, a specific artistic work is referenced in the song, namely, the life-size statue of *El Cristo Negro de Portobelo* (The Black Christ of Portobelo).

There are different accounts as to the origins of the Black Christ of Portobelo. The most accepted story is that it was meant to be taken to Spain in the seventeenth century,²⁶ but after trying several times to unsuccessfully depart from Panama because of a recurring storm, the

²³ Edwin David Aponte and Miguel A. De La Torre, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 77.

²⁴ Nazareth was a city in the region of Galilee, hence the connection.

²⁵ Virgilio P. Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), chap. 4, Kindle.

²⁶ Dates are a point of contention since the *Iglesia de San Felipe*, where the statue resides, was built in 1814.

superstitious sailors threw the statue to the sea and it appeared ashore some time later.²⁷ Since the statue is made of heavy cocobolo,²⁸ the skin of the Christ is reddish-brown, which piqued the interest of the natives. Taking the statue, they placed it on the altar of *Iglesia de San Felipe*.

The Black Christ of Portobelo stands in the company of other “Black Christs”²⁹— symbols of the suffering Jesus who identifies with the oppressed, so that “the art work [*sic*] is intended to be ‘read’ for theological statements. In the modern age the crucifixion scene is often employed as a symbol of oppressed humanity and for this reason the face of Christ assumes the skin color of the oppressed.”³⁰

Needless to say, artistic depictions of Christ have been a matter of debate for centuries. Although I do not aim to resolve that matter in this article, as an artist-theologian it seems to me that a short excursus for the proposal of a hermeneutical matrix is in order. In my view, there are two primary ways to engage with artistic works, two directionalities in which the theology-arts conversation can be established: either *from theology* or *to theology*.

The *from theology* approach concerns itself with an “accurate” representation of theological truths. Here, the artwork is measured against a standard of orthodoxy and is judged better or worse according to its capacity to “correctly” portray some dogmatic or historical truth.

²⁷ J. Gordon Melton, *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, and Spiritual Commemorations* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 118.

²⁸ Hardwood made from Central American trees.

²⁹ I mean artistic depictions of a dark-skinned Christ. For example, there is a Black Christ in Esquipulas, Guatemala; another Black Christ in Quiapo, Manila, Philippines; etc.

³⁰ Teresa Berger, “A Female Christ Child in the Manger and a Woman on the Cross, Or: The Historicity of the Jesus Event and the Inculturation of the Gospel,” trans. Mary Deasey Collins, *Feminist Theology* 11 (January 1996): 36. See also Edgardo Colón-Emeric’s treatment of the Black Christs of Esquipulas in *Óscar Romero’s Theological Vision: Liberation and the Transfiguration of the Poor* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 161-162.

Generally, though not always, this approach favors a literalistic hermeneutic of Scripture: depicting Jesus as male, the Holy Spirit as a dove, small fires atop the apostles' heads, etc. The *to theology* approach, on the other hand, takes liberties with the immediate characteristics of the biblical materials, taking them to new terrains in order to use the art as a springboard for further theological reflection. (Indeed, this whole article is an example of a theology done from the art *to theology*.) This directionality does not aim to contradict dogmatic pronouncements but to highlight the contextualization of the message of faith. Thus, I agree with Teresa Berger when, talking about artistic renditions of Christ as a woman, she says, "I want to show that these images *in no way deny* the historicity of the Jesus event, but rather are images that have a legitimate place within theological reflection about the inculturation of the Gospel".³¹ In spite of this, the *to theology* approach to art has been the cause of much debate since it is perceived by some theologians to be akin to heresy.

What approach should be taken, then, as we come into the presence of the Black Christ of Portobelo? Is the statue to be understood within the hermeneutical matrix of *from theology* or *to theology*? Here the matter of race comes shining through, for if the historical Jesus of Nazareth was White (as he has been depicted throughout most of church history), then there is no way out: the Black Christ of Portobelo is to be understood through the *to theology* approach. The Black Christ would be, therefore, a source to foster contextualized theological reflections about Jesus—especially his relevance to, and appropriation by, the Latin American community and his identification with the oppressed.

But is the artistic depiction of the Black Christ of Portobelo truly *to theology*? The artistic imaginary of a White Jesus is understood to be *from theology* simply because it has been the

³¹ Berger, "A Female Christ Child in the Manger," 33. Italics mine.

standard especially since the colonial period, not because it is true to the historical reality of the Middle Eastern Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the dividing line between the historical Jesus and a White Jesus start to blur. However, taking historical contingencies and geographical particularities under consideration, it is likely the case that Jesus's "skin was a darker hue consistent with the skin tone of people of the Middle East."³² This would then mean that the Black Christ of Portobelo, being closer to a brown-ish Middle-Eastern skin color by virtue of the wood from which it was fashioned, need no longer be understood as taking artistic license for theological dialogue (*to theology* approach) but will therefore be an accurate representation of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, both physically and historically (since it identifies Jesus with the downtrodden and marginalized in society, a reality that he himself experienced). Thus, it could be "bolstered" to the *from theology* approach.

This is not to say that the *from theology* approach is better than the *to theology* approach. They are different methodologies that answer different questions and, as such, they are both useful in their own right. What the depiction of a Black Christ does, by its very nature, is deconstruct the status quo, calling into question the White Christ that for centuries has been the standard imaginary for Jesus. Such an imaginary is no small feat, for skin colors are not simply the greater or lesser amount of melanin in one's skin; especially within the purview of Western reality, skin color is inescapably tied with societal distinctions that privilege one group of people while oppressing another. Therefore, to say that Jesus is White is "to imbue him with a sense of privilege and power contrary to the story of what Christ experienced."³³ If the message of the

³² Joan E. Taylor, *What Did Jesus Look Like?* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 163.

³³ Tatayana Richardson, "News Flash... Jesus Wasn't White," *The Chronicle*, last modified November 16, 2020, <https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2020/11/richardson-16112020>.

Gospel is summarized in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ so that without Jesus you do not have Christianity, then his skin color matters profoundly in relation to whether that reality will further, or derogate, the unjust systems of oppression that exist today. It seems to me that in struggling to maintain the status quo, one can embrace color-blindness and relativize skin color, but only at the expense of theological and biblical integrity.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., upon being asked the question, “Why did God make Jesus White, when the majority of peoples in the world are non-White?” (a question that does not make sense if not within the standard imaginary), commented on Jesus of Nazareth’s skin color by saying:

The color of Jesus’s skin is of little to no consequence. The whiteness or blackness of one’s skin is a biological quality which has nothing to do with the intrinsic value of the personality. The significance of Jesus lay, not in his color, but in His unique God-consciousness and His willingness to surrender His will to God’s will. He was the Son of God, not because of His external biological makeup, but because of His internal spiritual commitment.³⁴

Of course, King’s dream was that people “will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”³⁵ In “relativizing” the color of Jesus’s skin, King was aiming for the dominant culture to recognize a deeper biblical truth, namely, the commonality of the *imago Dei* in minority peoples and God’s parental love (King would have said “fatherhood)

³⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Advice for Living,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborn Carson et al., Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Kindle.

³⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” August 28, 1963, Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC; Transcript: The Avalon Project, Yale Law School: Lillian Goldman Law Library, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mlk01.asp.

over all creation. I would posit that in a liberative struggle that needs to be fought on many fronts, the relativization of Jesus' skin color in favor of his submission to God was an appropriate approach for the particular phase of the racial reconciliation movement in which King was ministering.

Today, however, the movement for racial reconciliation builds upon the work of King to ask further questions and expand upon his dream. A misreading of King will embrace color-blindness; the biblical picture of the eschatological new creation, however, does not have color-blindness as its *telos* but multicultural harmony (see Rev 7:9)—something Dr. King undoubtedly knew.

Further, to embrace such relativization will yield serious consequences.³⁶ When Jesus's skin color is relativized, we relativize Jesus' corporeal and embodied reality (he was a *real* man), his cultural particularity (he was a *real* Jew), his connection to the Davidic dynasty (he had a *real* lineage), and the continuity of the story between the Old and New Testaments (he was the *promised Messiah*).³⁷ The relativization of Jesus's skin color leaves us with a Docetic Christ—a Christ whose humanity was apparent, but not *real*, or even relevant. The current phase of racial

³⁶ Against the objection that the *to theology* approach also ends up relativizing not only Jesus' skin color, but Jesus' gender, Jesus' nationality, etc. I would answer that it does not because it is not the purpose of these artworks to redefine the historical particularities of the Gospel story. In other words, when confronted with, say, a female Christ, some *might* encounter it as a threat to the maleness of Jesus when what is being conveyed is the relevance of the Christ event to the female gender, and then engage in a conversation from the art. What is being said is that Jesus belongs to all, something Sobrino explains when he says, "Jesus Christ is not the exclusive property of the Church, but that of humanity, and as a matter of fact there are non-Christians who ... even say to us Christians 'Give us back Jesus.'" Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 29.

³⁷ For a fine treatment of the historical and embodied particularities of Jesus of Nazareth, read Christopher J.H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).

reconciliation constrains us to say that the significance of Jesus *does* lie in his cultural particularity by virtue of his being the greater and true Israel, the vehicle through which God is drawing all nations to Godself and redeeming the world from the effects of sin.

Artistic depictions of Jesus, then, especially as they relate to the color of his skin, are by no means irrelevant since they have a powerful capacity to form religious social imaginary and to either to further or derogate today's unjust systems of oppression. In a world where a racially inflected (i.e., White) vision of Christianity is imposed through power, a Black Christ is presented as the disruptor of the status quo and, therefore, good news to the poor.

The problem, however, seems not to be simply with the artistic depiction but with the worship given *to the art*—a discussion that now takes us into iconoclasm territory. Instead of a retrieval of Western iconodoulia/iconoclast theology, such a discussion will need to respect the particularity of the Latin American people, giving precedence to understanding such devotion from a grassroots religious viewpoint, that is, through the people's own experience. It is necessary, then, to narrate Maelo's own experience with the Black Christ of Portobelo.

What made *this* Black Christ special for Maelo was the fact that he came to meet the figure at a time when he was struggling with heavy drug dependency. The man credited for having introduced the Black Christ to Maelo was Pedro “Sorolo” Rodríguez.³⁸ Sorolo recalls that he felt the voice of the Black Christ saying to him, “find Ismael Rivera and tell him about me.” He was in luck, because Maelo was performing a concert in Panama. Finding his way through the crowd, Sorolo reached the stage where he recognized one of his musician friends who said to him, “Sorolo, come with me, I’ll introduce you to Ismael Rivera.” When they met, Sorolo

³⁸ Referenced in the song at around three minutes and fourteen seconds, “con Sorolo ... voy pa’ Portobelo a cargar el negrón” (with Sorolo ... I’m going to Portobelo to carry the Black one).

whispered in Maelo's ear, "Here in Panama we have a Black Christ who works miracles; you need to come with me to Portobelo and meet him."³⁹ Though the singer initially hesitated, he acquiesced twenty-four hours later, and upon visiting the altar on which the Black Christ rested, he experienced a miraculous liberation from drug addiction as a result of the meeting.⁴⁰

Sorolo narrates that when Ismael entered the church of San Felipe and saw the statue, the Black Christ had a "profound impact on his being;" he crumpled and fell on his knees and stayed there for about an hour. Gerardo Quintero Tello, in an article for a Colombian news company, writes, "The impression that that religious experience left in the great artist was such that upon his return to the hotel in Panama City he decided to give [Sorolo] the syringes [along with other paraphernalia] with which Maelo avoided his difficult reality."⁴¹ This was the start of Maelo's devotion to the Panamanian sacred figure and of his resolve to theologically highlight a Jesus who walks with the suffering people.

How does Maelo's own experience with the Black Christ of Portobelo play into the iconoclasm discussion? It seems to me there are, again, two ways of understanding it. On the one hand, Latin American popular religiosity is embedded in in-betweenness, in the interplay of different religions. Ada María Isasi-Díaz explains:

If their beliefs are taken seriously, what we learn is that for [Latin Americans] the different religious systems or belief systems do not exclude one another. The Latinas and

³⁹ Gerardo Quintero Tello, "¿Qué le dijo 'El Nazareno' a Ismael Rivera?" in *Noticiero 90Minutos*, <https://90minutos.co/especiales/que-le-dijo-el-nazareno-a-ismael-rivera-12-05-2022/>.

⁴⁰ See footnote number 17 in Francis Nina Estrella, "Ismael Rivera – El Nazareno: Apuntes Preliminares para un Viaje Literario," in *Revista Umbral* 14 (December 2018): 19.

⁴¹ Tello, "¿Qué le dijo 'El Nazareno' a Ismael Rivera?" Translation mine.

Latinos embrace more than one belief system at a time, moving between them with great fluidity, being led by the necessities of quotidian life.⁴²

In this view, Maelo's devotion to the Black Christ of Portobelo is understood as an expression of a Latin American popular religiosity. Such a hypothesis is not too far-fetched. Salsa music, both in its lyrical content and in the Afro-Caribbean musical influence on its creation, unabashedly contains references to *santería* which, at least in this song, mixes with Catholicism, since the Black Christ of Portobelo is on the altar of a Catholic church. In addition to this, we can recall that Maelo's own mother, Doña Margot, was a practitioner of *espiritismo popular* which was in itself a syncretistic blend between spiritism and Catholicism.

On the other hand, a uniquely Christian *apologia* for such devotion can be offered. It comes from Roberto Goizueta. He writes:

If the particular has no intrinsic relation with the universal and an individual entity is, in itself, simply an individual entity, then devotion to statues can only be seen as pantheistic or idolatrous ... But, if this piece of wood, shaped into Jesus' crucified body, is itself the particular and concrete manifestation of a universal, supernatural reality revealed in and through this object, then to kiss the wood is to make the *only* appropriate Christian response.⁴³

The nominalism debate becomes highly relevant here. What has reality: the universals or the particulars? Is "statue" as a category what is real, or is it *this* statue that has reality? In Latin American popular religious thought, the latter has preeminence. The belief, then, is that the transcendent Christ has become particular in the form of the statue so that worship given to *this*

⁴² Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha*, Síntesis del Capítulo 2 (my translation), chap. 2, Kindle.

⁴³ Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus*, chap. 3, Kindle. Italics in the original.

statue is not only acceptable but encouraged, since the artwork functions as a sacrament, pointing beyond itself to the God who is most worthy of praise. *¡Que Viva el Cristo Negro de Portobelo!*

Comunidad over Individuality: A Theological Anthropology

El Nazareno speaks. But what does he say? What “advices” does he give? Maelo sings,

*Haz bien, no mires a quién*⁴⁴

Dale la mano al caído

Y si acaso bien malo ha sido

Dale la mano también

Hazle bien a tus amigos

Ofrécele tu amistad

Y verás que a ti lo malo

Nunca se te acercará

En cambio, todo lo bueno

Contigo siempre estará

//

Do good, don't look to whom

Give your hand to the fallen⁴⁵

And, if he has been awful,

⁴⁴ An idiom; here translated woodenly.

⁴⁵ Though *caído* is a masculine adjective, in this context it can include masculine and feminine subjects since it aims to describe a state of being. However, since the next line develops the subject with *bien malo*, a masculine subject is envisioned, which is why I translate “if he has been awful.”

Give your hand regardless

Do good to your friends

Offer them your friendship

And you'll see that evil

Will never draw near you

Instead, everything that's good

Will be with you always

The “advices” of *El Nazareno* are profoundly relational. They reveal the importance of human relationships in bringing about the good. As such, Maelo’s theological anthropology, arising from the Latin American experience, focuses on the value of *comunidad* over individuality.

“For Latinos/as,” Aponte and De La Torre explain, “theology is more than dogmas or faith formulas, it is the daily articulation of life in community, where it is known that God and the divine activity move and participate within history to save, liberate and reconcile.”⁴⁶ Thus, a grassroots theology by its very nature expands from only judging a theology according to a predetermined standard of orthodoxy. Though not completely eschewing this, it gives preferential treatment to theology’s concrete application in the world—an application which has as its center the well-being of the *comunidad*.

Maelo frames human beings as relational and communal, rather than individual, beings. Again, this is not a result of cultural subjectivity, but a reality that arises from a scriptural paradigm, namely, that the purpose of God in calling Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1ff.) was to create a

⁴⁶ Aponte and De La Torre, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*, 71.

covenant community that would mediate God's presence and redemptive purposes in the world. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul develops this communal theme by arguing that the new, multi-ethnic, Christian community has been grafted into the story of the Jewish people so that this community, too, have been given the privilege of being participants in God's redemptive mission (see Jn 4:22; Rom 11). The biblical story, then, reveals *comunidad* as God's original design for humanity and God's instrumental means for the redemption of all things.

Thus, as a true Latin American theologian,⁴⁷ when Maelo reaches the latter part of *el tema*, he focuses on a concrete application of this biblical reality as an organic and natural outflow of his anthropological commitments. This is because "a relational anthropology, wherein the person is contemplated as intrinsically social, is thus rooted in human action, or 'praxis.'"⁴⁸ "Do good," "Give your hand to the fallen" even when they have been awful, "Offer them your friendship;" these sentences are nothing less than a rewording of similar themes found in the Sermon of the Mount (see Mt 5:16, 38-42 and parallels) which has as its aim the formation of a Christian character conducive to God's *shalom* in human relationships. As Michael Williams writes:

According to Scripture people are always in relationship to one another, come to full expression, fulfill their God-given tasks, and even experience self-fulfillment and redemption, only in the context of the social relationship known in Scripture as Israel, the body of Christ, the people of God, or the church. The relationship represented by that

⁴⁷ "Latinas/os maintain that 'knowing' truth is insufficient and that so-called objective concepts of knowledge are problematic. The purpose of Latino/a theology is praxis, the *doing* of theology, known as orthopraxis (literally 'correct action'), which is more important than developing abstract philosophical concepts about God." Aponte and De La Torre, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*, 73.

⁴⁸ Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus*, chap. 4, Kindle.

body is intrinsic to the redeemed life and the very being of creatures made after the image of God (...) Individualism, however, atomizes people, disrupts community, and fragments society.⁴⁹

As a result, not only does Maelo sing from the perspective of a theological anthropology which is relational at its core, but he aims to inspire people through his music to live consistently within this worldview, just as he himself lived.

Flores describes how Maelo had a love for the outcasts and those in the margins of society, specifically children and beggars, and how he sought to incarnate that love through concrete actions. She recounts:

Maelo loved children ... He recalled a party in his honor at the start of his career at a five-star hotel in Puerto Rico. Maelo rented a van and gathered all the kids from the block. When the promoter of the party saw those scruffy children in the lobby, he began to chase them out. Maelo stepped in and said, “These are my guests, and this is my party. I want them treated just like any other visitor at this hotel.”⁵⁰

And about beggars she says:

[Maelo] was the same with beggars. It didn’t matter what they wanted the money for ... I once asked him why he would throw his money away on someone who was just going to get high with it. Maelo answers, “If you’re going to give—don’t look at where it’s going—just give it away and don’t look back.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Michael D. Williams, “Individualism and Biblical Personhood,” in *Pro Rege* (March 1993): 7.

⁵⁰ Aurora Flores, “¡Ecuá Jeí! Ismael Rivera, El Sonero Mayor (A Personal Reflection),” *Centro Journal* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 67.

⁵¹ Flores, “¡Ecuá Jeí!,” 68.

It appears that Maelo practiced naturally what has taken considerably more time for theologians to understand and articulate—the intrinsic worth of ordinary people. Flowing from his relational theological anthropology, he lived with a great sense of responsibility towards the other, including those who are culturally and anthropologically poor.⁵² Goizueta writes that “the term sacrament refers not only to the revelation of God in creation, but also to the revelation of God in the person’s embodied action in the world, in interaction and *participation*.”⁵³ It is in this light that Maelo’s actions in favor of the other could be conceived as nothing less than sacramental. To conceive them in such a way becomes relevant when one sees the powerful link of friendship—the main theme of the song—to soteriology, to which we now turn.

Love over Oppression: A Soteriology

Finally, because Maelo conceives of humanity as relational, his soteriology goes beyond an individual relationship with God toward a *misión integral*, or integral mission, which is defined as “the task of bringing the whole of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ’ and includes the affirmation that there is no biblical dichotomy between evangelistic and social

⁵² María Clara Lucchetti Bingemer explains that liberation theology has expanded to include other types of poverty additional to socio-economic poverty. She says, “liberation theology has enlarged its perspective beyond concern for poverty at the socio-economical-political level in order to address anthropological and cultural poverties, including gender, race, and ethnicity.” Bingemer, *Latin American Theology*, Introduction, Kindle. It is my contention that children today, as in the time of Jesus, experience a kind of social ostracizing from the greater society due to their lower and dependent status (cf. Mt 9:13; 14:21; 15:38). I believe what Alejandro García-Rivera wrote about innocence is relevant in this regard. He says, “Many describe this type of innocence in terms of ‘lacks’—the lack of self-critical ability, the lack of knowledge, and so on. Such innocence describes the innocence of a child.” Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 27. If children in our society are treated as having an inherent “lack-ness,” they can be included in the category of anthropological and cultural poverty, and therefore, a relevant site for further liberative theological reflection.

⁵³ Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus*, chap. 5, Kindle.

responsibility in bringing Christ's peace to the poor and oppressed."⁵⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez expands, "there are not two histories, one profane and another one sacred 'juxtaposed' or 'closely linked,' but only one human becoming assumed irreversibly by Christ, Lord of history. His redemptive work encompasses *all dimensions* of existence and leads it to its fulfillment" (my translation, my italics).⁵⁵ Thus, a divorce of the sacred from the secular, the Church from the world, the private from the public, the religious from the political; in sum, the hyper-individualizing and demythologizing project of the Enlightenment is completely absent in Latin American theology. As C. René Padilla summarizes, "Integral mission is a logical consequence of the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ."⁵⁶

Notice, then, how *El Nazareno* does not call Maelo to renounce this world and dedicate himself to "holier" things, but rather to immerse himself *more* into the world by caring for his friends. Such is the main message of the song – the repeated motif in *el montuno*,

El Nazareno me dijo

Que cuidara a mis amigos

//

⁵⁴ Jay Hartwell, "Integral Mission," in Lausanne.org, April 13, 2013, <https://lausanne.org/networks/issues/integral-mission>. The Cape Town Commitment also explains, "Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in *all areas of life*" (my italics). See "The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 67.

⁵⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1990), 199.

⁵⁶ C. René Padilla, *What Is Integral Mission?* trans. Rebecca Breekveldt, Global Voices: Latin America (Oxford, UK: Regnum, 2021), 103.

The Nazarene told me

To care for my friends

Caring for one's friends as an extension of an allegiance to God is the most immediate form in which this integral mission takes place in Maelo's soteriology. As we discussed in the prior section, salvation is not limited to an independent, personal relationship with God, but it aims to restore God's *shalom* in both a vertical dimension—relationship with God—and a horizontal dimension—relationship with others as well as with creation.

Within this context, it is not irrelevant that among the range of meanings $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ (*sōzō*), the Greek word for salvation, we can find a healing connotation; “I heal.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the Louw-Nida Greek lexicon links $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ to a range of other words, including $\acute{\iota}\alpha\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ (*iaomai*), “I heal, cure, restore,”⁵⁸ defining it as, “to cause someone *to become well again* after having been sick.”⁵⁹ This restorative movement has as its goal the reversal of the “sickness” of falling short of true humanity. As Edgardo Colón-Emeric explains, “Humanity has been made in the image of God, but sin has smeared this image to such a degree that humans are strangers to themselves.”⁶⁰ It is through our accompaniment, then, that people are healed from the malady of social estrangement that came because of the fall. As Goizueta explains, “to be accompanied by others one is to be a

⁵⁷ Warren C. Trenchard, *Complete Vocabulary Guide to the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 106.

⁵⁸ Trenchard, *Complete Vocabulary*, 49.

⁵⁹ Louw-Nida 23.136, V.2, 122. Italics mine.

⁶⁰ Edgardo Colón-Emeric, *Óscar Romero's Theological Vision: Liberation and the Transfiguration of the Poor* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), chap. 4, Kindle.

person.”⁶¹ Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that friendship is an outworking of salvation—of healing humanity from sin’s effects upon itself and restoring it to the image of Jesus Christ, the true human.

Maelo understands *philia* love—the love between friends who are as close as siblings—as the vehicle through which God will bring about the salvation of the world. If one listens carefully to the song, one can see this love also adds an extension of *agape* love—a love towards others that is unmerited and gracious—since it “gives a hand to the fallen” regardless of whether “he has been awful.” We are, then, before a distinctive paradigm: a *philia-agapeic* love, the inclusion of others into the unmerited and gracious love given to family and friends. This, undoubtedly, Maelo learned from *El Nazareno*, since

the Jesus of the Gospels relativizes the nuclear family in order to insist that the most intimate, most particular, and most personal relationships, our family relationships, must extend beyond the nuclear family and characterize *all our relationships*. The authentic community is inclusive and not exclusive.⁶²

⁶¹ Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus*, chap. 7, Kindle. This, of course, does not mean that anytime one is physically alone one is less than human, so that we *always* need to be surrounded by others. Goizueta himself qualifies this relational anthropology by explaining that accompaniment is the very constitution of our humanity because we owe what we are to what others have invested in us. He says, “There is no ‘I’ without ... others. ... When someone encounters me, they also encounter my parents, relatives, friends, community, my people, as well as well as the God who created me and the earth which nourishes me.” Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, chap. 3, Kindle.

⁶² Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus*, chap. 7, Kindle.

This is the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose “fundamental motivation was Christian love, sacrificial love.”⁶³ Such a love is neither idealistic, nor weak, but “the biggest force for personal and social transformation.”⁶⁴ This, too, is the legacy of Maelo himself.

As I noted earlier in this essay, Maelo struggled with drug dependency prior to his miraculous liberation upon meeting the Black Christ in 1969. The moment he hit rock bottom was seven years before, in 1962. He was set to arrive with his orchestra to San Juan’s airport, when someone alerted the authorities that the band was carrying drugs. The informant was not lying. However, Maelo’s sacrificial love for his friends moved him to cover for them. “Maelo stepped forward and took the rap for everyone, asserting that all the drugs were his,” Flores asserts. She continues, “He was arrested, handcuffed, and paraded for all the media and the public to see. Owing to the large quantity of drugs found, he was charged with trafficking, trying to smuggle drugs into the island.”⁶⁵

Of course, it is not the purpose of this article to portray Maelo as a saint. But this event *does* portray the great lengths Maelo was willing to go in caring for his friends. *Philia* love was not merely an ideal for Maelo, it was a concrete reality – a reality which informed and shaped his decisions and his way of living in the world.

Virgilio Elizondo understands the importance of *philia* love for soteriology when he writes, “It is not material things and artificial beauty that will bring happiness into a person’s life, but the discovery and enjoyment of authentic friendships – with persons who will accept me as I am, love me, and respect me simply because I am myself. It is not more *things* that will save the

⁶³ Padilla, *What is Integral Mission?*, 79.

⁶⁴ Padilla, *What is Integral Mission?*, 79.

⁶⁵ Flores, “¡Ecuá Jeí!”, 70.

world, but more *love*.”⁶⁶ It is this love which is exemplified by *El Nazareno* – “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends...” (cf. Jn 15:13-14). It was through Jesus’ sacrificial love portrayed in his giving his life for his friends that God achieved nothing less than the redemption of the whole created order and the triumph over the oppressive powers and authorities (cf. Col 2:15).

Maelo’s soteriology, then, looks intently to the revelation of God’s love in Jesus of Nazareth and its replication in the singer’s own life as the answer to the problem of sin; both in its relational and, by implication, its structural dimensions.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, a concomitant vision has emerged, namely, to both think theologically about music and, perhaps more important, the ability to theologize *from* the music. This, of course, is nothing new to the Christian intellectual life—Christians have been theologizing from music since millennia by taking as their *locus theologicus* the book of Psalms, which is both God’s revelation of Godself and the musical compositions for the worship of communal Israel.

One of the main purposes in singing the Psalms is to shape the identity of the people who sing it in order that their affections might be redemptively redirected towards faithful devotion to God and commitment to the covenant community.⁶⁷ It is in this context that Ismael Rivera’s *El*

⁶⁶ Virgilio P. Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), chap. 8, Kindle. Italics in original.

⁶⁷ C.S. Lewis hints at this when he writes, “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.” C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 53.

Nazareno can be conceived as a Psalm—a Psalm that, by the command of *El Nazareno* himself, he dedicates to his friends. But who are Maelo’s friends? He sings that *El Nazareno* told him,

Que siguiera cantando cositas lindas y bonitas para ustedes

Que son mis queridos amigos

//

That I should keep singing beautiful and pretty things *for you all*

Who are my beloved friends

We are his friends, the listeners of the song. I contend that Maelo is obediently fulfilling the command of *El Nazareno* by singing a song that functions as a Psalm—a song that redirects our affections to an active and living God who speaks within history and interrupts our ordinary lives, to a Christ who is better known through the suffering and oppressed Jesus of Nazareth, to a community that renounces individualism because it sees itself grounded in God’s communal design, and to a *philia-agapeic* love that has the power to save the world.

Maelo, then, as a grassroots systematic theologian, is a figure of the historical Jesus: a “second-class citizen with no formal [theological] studies”⁶⁸ who was able to reveal the heart and redemptive power of the One who sent him.

⁶⁸ Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, chap. 5, Kindle.