

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION ON CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY—
CONSULTATION

Topic:	Intercultural Grace: A Challenge for Transformation
Conveners:	Elizabeth L. Antus, Boston College Julia H. Brumbaugh, Regis University Colleen M. Carpenter, St. Catherine University
Treasurer:	Jessica Coblentz, St. Mary's College of California
Secretary:	Christina Lledo Gomez, Charles Sturt University
Moderator:	Julia H. Brumbaugh, Regis University
Panelists:	Sophia Park, S.N.J.M., Holy Names University Pearl Maria Barros, Santa Clara University C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union

The Women's Consultation on Constructive Theology session began with a presentation by Sophia Park. Park led attendees into an exploration of grace through Mechtild of Magdeburg's concept of grace as *fließen*, a "flowing or fluid light" from the trinitarian Godhead. Park set the context of this exploration as what she described as a world called toward various encounters "including those between cultures, races, genders, and places." The quality of "in-betweenness" of such encounters with each other particularly causes great anxiety because they lack the assurance of certainty, predictability, and definitiveness. Further, such encounters challenge the givens in our world, to the extent that they may no longer apply today and certainly into the future. We were led to ask how we could live our faith in this context. Park proposed that Mechtild's view of grace as *fließen* can provide some guidance. For Mechtild grace as *fließen* leads to boundary crossings, fragmentations, and polyphony, challenging us to flexibility, receptivity to the "other," and a unity with the trinitarian Godself. Park showed that already this was possible, as evidenced by our early Christian history recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. The first and most obvious example is Pentecost where the Holy Spirit enabled understanding between many people even as each person kept their own language. The second example is in the inter-subjective encounter between Peter and Cornelius. As a consequence, "Christians in Jerusalem accept that the Gospel is also for Gentiles."

Next, Pearl Barros used the concept of "Borderlands" by Chicana writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa to explore what grace demands from those living between two worlds and what transformations it inspires in others. Borderlands or *una herida abierta* ("an open wound") refers to a geographical location, the national border between the United States and Mexico. As well, it refers to a non-physical location, a *mestiza* consciousness, where ontological grappling takes place and one deals with "the tension of living between seemingly contradictory markers of identity." The border is where inherent suffering takes place involving a "pulling of the flesh." It is where insiders and outsiders are determined, lending to dualisms which ultimately marginalize and categorize certain persons as abnormal. Barros pointed out that, while there is deep suffering involved in border living, it also presents opportunities: to imagine the borderlands as *sin fronteras* (without borders) and rather a place of crossroads; to "realize the inadequacy of dualistic categories" which lend to the oppression of one group over another—leading then to a resistance against dualistic thinking and practice. Barros, though, warned against romanticizing the borderlands.

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From experience at the borders to conversion/transformation, it is no easy translation Barros left her audience with three “insights”/challenges deriving from this *mestiza* consciousness: (1) necessarily encountering suffering in the search for grace; (2) the only reality as being *nos/otras* (we) rather than an “us and them”; and (3) authentic wholeness inextricably involves acceptance of our own fragmentation.

Finally, C. Vanessa White spoke of grace in terms of her experience as a womanist practical theologian, where the root of womanist points to the womanish girl, one who was seen to be “in charge. . . a gatherer of knowledge and serious about her task.” For White, womanist spirituality is a social witness: witnessing to a communal way of being (loving and living with people in the present and the past including scholars who have paved the way); witnessing to groundedness through love of self and others; and witnessing to the work of feminisms which has enabled womanist theology to rise. (Where feminisms called out injustices at the level of gender, womanists pointed to the further injustices of race and class.) White described the experience of grace for African Americans as coupled with suffering and the devaluing “of black life and black bodies.” True to her discipline, White enabled her audience to taste this bittersweet experience by calling us to enter into her (re)narration of the journey of black bodies from Africa to the Americas, requesting us to repeat after her telling of story, a prayer of praise, “Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound.” From start to finish we praised in the face of every injustice, bringing to our acute awareness that indeed they were anything but sweet. Quoting Paul Tillich, White explained that for black people “grace ma[de] courage possible when meaning seem[ed] lost.” She asked if not for grace “Where would we be?” White concluded that it is because black people have received grace that they are a people of gratitude, who continue to hope, to be moved to action, and ultimately believe they are being led to freedom.

After the panel presentation, Park, Barros and White answered the question “Where do you experience grace in your teaching and research?” Attendees of the Women’s Constructive Theology session were consequently invited to answer this question themselves. Much input and feedback were solicited. While all three presentations were distinct in their approach and content, they all spoke of the same themes: border-crossings/in-betweenness that challenge dualisms or an “us” and “them” mentality, fragmentation/suffering as inextricably a part of the experience of grace, and the grace of hope as characterizing our Christian living because it belongs to our history, our current living, and our future.

Following the panel, the Women’s Consultation turned to the presentation of the Ann O’Hara Graff Award to Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Associate Professor of Theology and Latino/Latina Ministry, at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry.

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