

## LATINO/A/X THEOLOGY – CONSULTATION

Topic:	Queer Puerto Rican Identity
Administrative	
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Convener:	Jennifer Owens-Jofré, Saint Louis University, Loyola Marymount University
Moderator:	Bobby Rivera, St. John’s University
Presenters:	Ish Ruiz, Emory University
Respondents:	MT Davila, Merrimack College Miguel Diaz, Loyola University Chicago

The Latinx Consultation for the 2023 convention explored the topic of queer Puerto Rican Catholic identity. Ish Ruiz presented a paper, titled “Liminality, Pedagogy, and Freedom: Exploring the Liberatory Practices of Queer Puerto Rican Catholics,” and MT Davila and Miguel Diaz offered responses.

Ruiz’s paper analyzed ways in which queer Puerto Rican Catholics, an emerging voice in Puerto Rican culture, live in a liminal space between these three conflicting identities. Through this lens of liminality, Ruiz examined the tensions present between several different intersections of this identity: the relationship between Puerto Rican identity (*Puertorriqueñidad*) and US citizenship, the relationship between queerness and Catholicism, and the relationship between queerness and *Puertorriqueñidad*. He concluded that queer Puerto Rican Catholics often live in a cognitive tumultuous state of “in-between-ness” which is characterized by both suffering and transformation. Drawing from the work of Roberto Che Espinoza, Ruiz argues that this liminal space equips queer Puerto Rican Catholics with a new epistemological and ethical perspective that allows them to engage in liberatory action. In other words, the liminal space is transformative internally and externally. Internally, a sort of synthesis occurs where queer Puerto Rican Catholics can examine each component of their identity in light of the other and—after reformulating their understanding of these identities—begin to experience harmony among them. Externally, according to Jose Esteban Muñoz, this synthesis equips queer Puerto Rican Catholics with a new epistemological understanding of utopia that informs and guides their political and liberatory practices.

MT Davila reflected on how the concept of queer Puerto Rican Catholic liminality was manifested in the 2019 protests to oust the governor of Puerto Rico. The island-wide protest events were varied and most famously included a *perreo combativo*, which involved blasting reggaeton music and dancing in a sexually provocative manner. More poignantly, the *perreo combativo* took place at the steps of the Catholic cathedral, which is a few blocks in front of the governor’s mansion. During this protest, a trans flag was hoisted upon the wall of the cathedral as queer people danced “obscenely” in front of this sacred place. Recounting this story in light of Ruiz’s paper, Davila reflected on the liberatory power of such a protest in the liminal space, which is reflected on the fact that the protest took place at the steps of the cathedral, for they would not be allowed to conduct this action inside the cathedral itself. For Davila, the physical liminal space reflected in this protest at the steps of the cathedral supports Ruiz’s claim of the liberative power at the intersection of queerness,

*Puertorriqueñidad*, and Catholicity. She discussed how the liminal spaces are places for liberation but also survival. She further reflected on her own experience in seeking gender affirming healthcare for her child and the safety measures that were in place that would facilitate this healthcare. In many ways institutions that offer a safe refuge for queer people, and especially queer people of color, are aiding their navigation of the liminality between their conflicting identities.

Miguel Diaz opened his remarks with a popular image of the relationship between Puerto Rico and Cuba, which states that each island is like a wing of a bird—both flapping over the same heart. With that image, he offered theological reflections on the cultural ties between Puerto Rico and Cuba as well as the image of a bird, which is often invoked in slurs toward queer people in both islands: the word *pato*, which translates to “duck,” functions as an insult against them. Responding to the concept of liminality, he drew from his own work and his own experiences in support of Ruiz’s claims. His recent book, *Queer God de Amor*, uses San Juan de la Cruz to reflect upon God’s queer loving self-communication. De La Cruz is known for his poem, *Dark Night of the Soul*, which Diaz reinterprets as a liminal space where God’s communication could be made manifest. Regarding his own experience, he recounted the liminal “dark nights” that he experienced in his own quest toward accepting his queer identity.

The ensuing discussion further reflected on the concepts of liminality and intersectionality. Some important questions discussed included: How does liminality bring about freedom and what implications does it have for religious freedom? Is liminality a temporary state or is it possible for some people to live in a liminal space in a more permanent manner? Does the harmony or synthesis that Ruiz alluded to involve erasing components of one’s identity in order to accommodate others and wouldn’t that be problematic (because it is giving in to oppression)? How does one reflect theologically on the presence of intersectional diversity? And how does *mestizaje* operate as an identity without an essence? The illuminating conversation was productive and showcased a variety of perspectives on the matter.

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