

DECOLONIZING THEOLOGY: PUERTO RICO AS LOCUS, SOURCE, Y
CONTEXT EN TEOLOGÍAS LATIN@S—SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Carmen Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union at Chicago
Moderator: María Teresa Dávila, Andover Newton Theological School
Presenters: José R. Irizarry, Villanova University
Neomi De Anda, University of Dayton
Jean-Pierre Ruiz, St. John's University, NY
Carmen Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union at Chicago

Editorial Note: The administrative team of this session has made explicit editorial requests for the purpose of decolonizing theological language. This session summary reflects the following decisions of this selected session's administrative team:

1. Spanish is not italicized or translated.
2. Sentences and/or words may be written in Spanglish.
3. Varying terms are used: *Latinoa*, *Latinx*, *Latin@*, *Latin@s*

Puerto Rico, in all of its complexity, serves as *locus theologicus* for a number of theologians and scholars who identify under the umbrella of *latinidad/hispanidad*. This session focused on scholarship from four diverse perspectives that participated in the decolonization of theology by intentionally and critically engaging the contested space of the 2016 CTSA meeting.

José Irizarry problematized cultural popularization of faith expressions in “Teoinsularismo: Recovering Transcendence as a Decolonizing Practice in the Puerto Rican Context” and called for a critical re/covery of theological sources as a decolonizing practice. These theological sources were placed in conversation with analytical frameworks that are unique to the Caribbean intellectual tradition, including the epistemology of rhythm and cultural hybridity. Irizarry investigated the popularization of these expressions via the mediation of politics, communications, and social rituals as they respond to colonial practices such as undifferentiated dependence and rugged consumption. At the confluence of faith expressions and colonizing practices, Irizarry proposed a theological mediation that rescues the decolonizing, transformative potential of critical religious discourse.

In “Problematizing the Cultural Move from Sacred to Secular: A Focus on Nuestra Señora de Belén in Puerto Rico,” Neomi De Anda studied one of the oldest Marian devotions in Puerto Rico and América, an example of *María de la Leche*, a nursing Madonna. De Anda's research challenged scholarly conventions that claim the meaning of the breast shifted from sacred to secular after the eighteenth century. De Anda demonstrated the problem with this dichotomy in a presentation of various images of *la Virgen de Belén* across two colonizations of *la isla*. By attending to *lo cotidiano* and popular religious practice, as these lenses have been constructed in *Latinoa* theologies, De Anda situated the breast in a complex matrix of daily life which includes religious aspects and, in the case of Puerto Rico, counteracts USA colonizing logic of hegemony based upon privileged application of systems of stratification of race, sex, class, gender, and land.

Jean-Pierre Ruiz re-read John's Apocalypse in conversation with the work of scholars on the island and in the diaspora in his provocative contribution “‘Come out of her, my people’ (Rev 18:4): The Post(?)colonial Politics of Apocalypse from the

Puerto Rican Diaspora.” Ruiz proposed that these analyses of the Puerto Rican colonial situation have resonances that shed new and different light on the predicament in which the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia found themselves. At the same time, the prophetic imperative of Revelation challenges Puerto Ricans at home and in diaspora to reimagine disentanglement from imposed colonizing structures, systems, and dysfunctions as a matter of decolonization, “of active resistance to the still-powerful twenty-first century Beast and its all-too eager and equally predatory colonial co-conspirators.”

The memorialization of Puerto Rican baseball player Roberto Clemente Walker is filtered through the humanitarian dimension of his death in language and veneration reserved for saints and martyrs. In “Safe @ Home: The Sanctification of Roberto Clemente,” Carmen Nanko-Fernández explored this realidad through two examples from Puerto Rican literature and material culture. For Puerto Ricans, in his life and death, Clemente becomes a symbol of their collective identity, not just to themselves but to the world, and especially to those who would demean them. Fidelity to his memory means a life lived with dignity, with and for others. In the words of one of his friends, a Puerto Rican sportswriter, Clemente was “un hombre verdaderamente tocado por Dios.” This nuanced configuration of sanctity contests simplistic dominant USA cultural understandings of sainthood that fail to account for resistance to oppression as holy labor.

By taking seriously the local Puerto Rican context through a variety of intersecting perspectives, this session offered incisive insights into how theology can advance the project of decolonization, and how Latin@ theologians continue to resist colonizing impulses in theology.

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