PART TWO

Womanist and Latina/Mujerista Theology in Dialogue

Michelle A. Gonzalez

Dr. Gonzalez raises some concerns regarding the impact of race on the construction of Latino/a and Black identities in contemporary religious discourse.

In this essay my emphasis is on the particularity of the Latin American and Latino/a condition and the manner in which race has shaped the identity constructs we employ today. I begin with a historical nod toward the construction of Latin American identity that serves as the foundation for contemporary Latino/a identity construction. I then turn to the constructed identity of Latino/a and Black theologies respectively. I conclude with some comments that open up a conversation with Black and womanist theologies surrounding the question of race.

Any discussion of race in contemporary Latino/a culture must ground itself in the Latin American historical condition. The Latin American colonial subject lived in a pigmentocracy where one’s closeness to mother Spain and the color of one’s skin determined their social status (Castellanos, 19). However, factors such as

Dr. Michelle A. Gonzalez is assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Miami. Her publications include: Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas (Orbis Books, 2003), Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture and Identity (University Press of Florida, 2006), and Created in God’s Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology (Orbis Books, 2007).
culture and religion also played a role. This complex picture of identity is in sharp contrast to the monolithic manner in which Latino/as and Latin Americans are often categorized today. The colonial subject was always attempting to legitimate its voice in the face of the European-born Spaniard (Martínez San Miguel). This is an important historical moment in the constitution of an “American” subjectivity, found at the intersection of Spanish, Indigenous, and African cultures, religions, and worldviews. Mestizo/as and mulatos, in order to secure their political power and racial privilege, often distanced themselves from their mother’s indigenous or African blood and culture. The idea was to model their culture and behavior after the lighter-skinned Spanish criollo/as. They thus supported the use of the Spanish language, embraced Christianity, downplayed Indigenous and African communities, and argued for a new ethnicity that united the mestizo/a and the criollo/a. It is for these reasons that Latin Americanist J. Jorge Klor de Alva argues that we must nuance our understanding of post-independence Latin Americans and pay special attention to the function of race and power in Latin American identity construction. “In short, the Americas, as former parts of empires which, after a series of civil wars, separated themselves politically and economically, but not culturally or socially, from their metropoles” (Klor de Alva, 247). The leaders of the wars of independence were not the subalterns of Latin America; they were not blacks and Indigenous peoples; they were criollos, mestizos, and mulatos. As Roberto Fernández Retmar echoes, “While other colonials or ex-colonials, in metropolitan centers, speak among themselves in their own language, we Latin Americans continue to use the language of the colonizers” (Fernández Retmar, 10). This is also why, in turn, mestizaje and mulatez can be problematic notions, for they can privilege the Spanish. Claiming a mestizo/a or mulato/a identity is a manner of “whitening” one’s racial identity, gaining privilege over black and indigenous populations.

Since its inception, Latino/a theology has identified Latino/as, and consequently Latin Americans, as mestizo and mulato peoples. This mixture of Spanish, African, and Indigenous cultures has been the clearest marker of Latino/a racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. Anthropologically, mestizaje/mulatez functions to name the ambiguity and in-between-ness of Latino/a identity. Latino/a theology, at least within theological and religious studies, presents a notion of Latino/a identity where the indigenous, African, and Spanish are not oppositional but coexist as constitutive of Latino/a identity. This is seen directly in the sources of Latina theologies. Latino/a scholars are quite at ease in using the cultural and religious
production of Indigenous and African peoples to be sources for our theological reflection while simultaneously maintaining a dominant paradigm within our construction of Latino/a identity and religiosity. We do this without acknowledging the function of power within our academic appropriation of non-Christian and non-European sources. This is seen most sharply in the Christian starting point of Latino/a theologies and the ways in which non-Christian sources and cultures are appropriated into our discourse. Latino/a theologians approach Latino/a religion from a Christian foundation, adding the flavors of African and Indigenous America as they see fit.

In their retrieval of Latino/a culture and context, Latino/a theologians have recovered a vital dimension of historical and contemporary Christian religious expressions. In this process, Latino/a theologians have constructed a Latino/a religious identity. Whether it is Our Lady of Guadalupe, mestizaje, or the Conquest of the Americas, there are certain key themes that have become “canonized” in the corpus of Latino/a theology as fundamental dimensions of Latino/a religiosity and history. This has resulted in, whether intentional or not, a construction of Latino/a identity that foregrounds particular elements of Latino/a culture and history at the expense of, I argue, the fullness and diversity of Latino/a peoples. Most notably, the presence of African peoples and their participation in Latino/a history and identity have been downplayed. The black Latino/a experience is strikingly insignificant within the narrative and construction of Latino/a historical identity. This has led a depiction of Latino/a history, religious experience, and culture that privileges certain elements and erases others. Latino/a theologians of all backgrounds, not just Mexican Americans, perpetuate this normativity.

Within black and womanist theologies, the Afro-Latin is glaringly absent. Black and womanist theologies have strongly emphasized race as a central analytic lens through which to interpret the experience of African Americans in the United States. While recent scholarship has sought to nuance this depiction of African American identity, race remains a central marker of the African American experience. In their retrieval of black sources and black experience, black and womanist theologians have delineated a particular understanding of black identity that determines the themes of their theology and consequently the nature of blackness in the United States. This construction of blackness is limited, I argue, in that it
totally excludes the experiences of Spanish-speaking blacks in the United States. Black theologians have systematically ignored the lives, history, and religiosity of black Latino/as and Latin Americans.

I will focus my comments on womanist theology, though were I to discuss Black theology my analysis would be quite similar. As defined by Delores S. Williams, “Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm, and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community” (Williams, xiv). Similarly, in her own excellent introduction to womanist theology Stephanie Mitchem defines womanism as, “The systematic, faith-based exploration of the many facets of African American women’s religiosity. Womanist theology is based on the complex realities of black women’s lives” (Mitchem, ix). Black, for most womanist theologians, is equivalent to African American. The black community which womanist theologians claim as their community of accountability is the African American community.

The womanists cited above are unclear, however, about why their construction of blackness is solely African American and does not include, for example, black Latino/as. Not all blacks in the United States self-identify as African American, and one must wonder if womanists choose to ignore their religious experiences or if they are being wrongfully (and for some against their will) subsumed into the category of African American. There is, therefore, a construction of identity operating in womanist theology that defines blackness in narrow terms without critical criteria for their exclusionary process of constructing the black community solely in terms of African Americans. This is, I would argue, in direct contrast to the intention of Walker’s definition, which not only uses black, but the even more inclusive category of “feminist of color.”

As a Latina, I in no way intend to dismantle womanism and its significance for womanist theologians. I am, however, challenging womanist theologians to become more explicit in the implications of their construction of black identity. In other words, I do not find it problematic that womanist theologians chose to focus their scholarship on African American women. My concern is regarding the ambiguous use of the terms black and African American within womanist scholarship. Womanists cannot claim to be writing about black women’s experiences in the

The womanists cited are unclear, however, about why their construction of blackness is solely African American and does not include, for example, black Latino/as.

As a Latina, I in no way intend to dismantle womanism and its significance for womanist theologians. I am, however, challenging womanist theologians to become more explicit in the implications of their construction of black identity. In other words, I do not find it problematic that womanist theologians chose to focus their scholarship on African American women. My concern is regarding the ambiguous use of the terms black and African American within womanist scholarship. Womanists cannot claim to be writing about black women’s experiences in the
For both black and Latino/a theologians yet another challenge is before us. As theologies that are informed by liberationist movements in the Americas, we must address the current state of the church that is before us. Here I will limit my comments to Roman Catholicism. Much has been made of the current exodus of Catholics to primarily Pentecostal and evangelical churches. While this is a concrete reality that scholars of Catholicism must face today, I would argue that at least from my area of expertise, Latin America, the numbers are grossly inflated. What is not inflated, however, is the growth of a more Spirit-focused, what many would label conservative spirituality that is clearly seen in the growth of Charismatic Catholicism. I would also like to challenge us to think more broadly about the church here in the United States. In my eyes it is no longer useful to speak of a Northern or Southern Church but instead an American Church that embraces all of the Americas. This is not a revolutionary statement. Whether one looks at John Paul II’s 1999 Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* or economic and cultural analyses of globalization, the porous nature of national borders in these domains is our lived reality today. Nonetheless, academic theology, both black and Latino/a is slow to face this contemporary context. We have isolated ourselves in our exclusive attention to the United States and debates about minority politics. Those debates need to end and we need a more inclusive realistic depiction of the communities we claim to represent and the manner in which the power of our academic voice distorts the lived realities of the millions of black, brown, Asian, and white peoples our presence supposedly symbolize.

Engaging the question of race, whether it be through the lens of theology, pastoral life, or any field within the academy, cannot merely be a conversation about racism or a discussion that centers on race in isolation. To reduce conversations about race to racism is to ignore the function of race within the global Catholic Church and the manner in which race currently functions within the spirituality and lived religion of Catholic communities across the globe. There is also a danger in treating race in isolation of the other factors that shape our identity. I only speak here for the Latino/a experience when I state that race, culture, ethnicity, gender, class, and immigration status create a complex web of identity where each piece can be studied individually yet always in light of the whole. For me a conversation between Latinas and womanists cannot occur in isolation, but must incorporate the plurality of issues and shades of color that constitute the American Church.

**References**


