

INTRODUCING
LATINX THEOLOGIES
Revised Edition

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Preface to the 2020 Edition

As authors who also are teachers, scholars, administrators, and activists we are profoundly grateful for the reception of the first edition of our small book and that so many people in multiple contexts not only engaged but also found it useful in many ways. Moreover, we deeply appreciate the many kind suggestions, helpful critiques (friendly and otherwise), and challenges to stretch our thinking in response to that first attempt of those younger scholars whom we were in 2001. This revised edition provides the opportunity for us to respond to many of those reactions, questions, suggestions, and criticisms, as well as engage with the enlarged discourse on Latinx theologies and religious studies. Moreover, we hope to incorporate our developed thinking now seasoned by the years in between, by new insights obtained through teaching, research, struggles, occasional opposition, celebrations, disappointments, deceits, and experiences of grace, hope, and hopelessness. And so we want to thank our editor Jill Brennan O'Brien, production coordinator Maria Angelini, and the entire team at Orbis Books for the great gift to produce this enhanced edition.

From the very start of the project when we were both still doctoral students at Temple University, we wanted this introduction to Latinx-Hispanic/Latino-Latina/o-Latin@-Latinoa theologies to be not only a description but also a living example of *teología en/de conjunto*, that is, a living and practical illustration of theology done through the joys and struggles of genuine encounter, collaboration, partnership, and community.¹ As we wrote then,

¹ A discussion on the positive and negative issues related to the ever-evolving pan-ethnic umbrella labels of Latinx, Hispanic, Latina/o, Hispanic/Latino, Latin@, and related terms appears in chapter 1.

This book is a collaborative product. It is about collaborative theology that emerges from communities of Latinas/os. In a true sense it was written together by two persons of different backgrounds, learning to work together, and growing in their relationship with one another as scholars and *hermanos* (brothers), that is, growing in community together. Likewise, Hispanic theology is at its heart a communal endeavor.²

Despite all the things that have happened in society, culture, and in our own lives during the in-between times, and the different ways we have changed our minds individually and jointly and hopefully have grown, one of the things that has remained constant over the years is our shared commitment to that goal of a joint endeavor, which is our desire and hope for this revised edition.

Community/*comunidad* was and still is very important to us, and all the more so because of the intervening life experiences that have taught us much over the years that affects our still-developing sense of *comunidad*. And part of that development is the need for us to share some thoughts, perhaps too ambitious or perhaps misplaced hopes, the reality of disappointments, and the power of the mythology of community/*comunidad* among scholars of religion and theology.

In one of the poems in the 1891 collection *Versos sencillos* (*Simple Verses*), the great Cuban philosopher, political activist, and poet José Martí gave an astute observation on life that is still relevant today as it speaks to the challenges for anyone who seeks to remain committed to community and integrity within the many spheres of daily living, *lo cotidiano*:

Cultivo una rosa blanca,
En Julio como en Enero,
Para el amigo sincero
Que me da su mano franca.
Y para el cruel que me arranca
El corazón con que vivo,
Cardo ni oruga cultivo:
Cultivo la rosa blanca.

I cultivate a white rose,
In July as in January,

² Miguel A. De La Torre and Edwin David Aponte, *Introducing Latinola Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), xi.

For the sincere friend
Who gives me his hand frankly.
And for the cruel person who wrenches from me
The heart I need to live
Neither thistle nor nettle do I grow:
I cultivate a white rose.³

Comunidad, which of course is the Spanish word for “community,” is the great motto and stated goal of many in Latinx contexts, whether we are engaged in theological studies, religious studies, or some other undertaking in life. *Comunidad* is employed in a particular way that strongly asserts that while dominant Eurocentric models of academic and scholarly participation most often are based on individualism, many Latinx scholars of religious and theological studies seek to be more mutual and supportive in common cause, working with each other in selfless acts of promoting and helping others in the community for the betterment of the entire community. And the perceived community is not solely a comparatively small community of scholars, but it is asserted that our work as scholars of theology and religion is connected organically to the vast and growing grassroots communities of Latinx peoples across the country. However, upon deeper reflection it must be stated that those of us who are Latinx who engage in the academic study of religion and theology far too often make the error of unquestionably accepting the tenet of *comunidad* and thereby essentializing what it means to be a Latinx. Sadly, despite recurring claims to collaborative work and community, at times we have been guilty of uncritically appropriating the reality of *comunidad* existing among the people in all their diversity—the poor and disenfranchised of the barrios, small towns, cities, and suburbs—upon the relational interplay of comparatively privileged Latinx intellectuals. To be sure, because of the intersectional realities of our multifaceted identities, there are limits to the privilege of any Latinx experience since our class identities and professional roles as intellectuals do not prevent us from being marginalized in other ways, whether by race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, after years of writing and singing the praises of *comunidad* as a reality among Latinx academics, we need to acknowledge that sometimes our talk about *comunidad* is a romanticization and that, more often than we care to admit, the reality can be less-than-communal relationships, sometimes masking gossip, backstabbing, and petty jealousies. Yes—the

³ José Martí, “XXXIX,” from *Versos sencillos* (1891) in *Obras Completas de José Martí*, 26 *Volúmenes* (La Habana: Centro de Estudios Martinanos, 2001), 16:117 (authors’ translation).

old adage is just as true among Latinx scholars of religion and theology as the rest of the academy, namely, “The academic battles are so fierce because the stakes are so low.”

We both have witnessed heartbreaking outcomes for colleagues who lived under the dark shadows of allegations—sadly to be reported with glee within small circles by those same Latinx academics who with crocodile tears later publicly mourn their demise and disappearance. When that happens, such actions turn *comunidad* into a fairy tale among Latinx scholars of religion and theology. At times when we mention a particular Latinx intellectual whom we respect and admire to fellow members of our so-called *comunidad*—scholars who are well published and have helped younger, nontenured scholars get their first works in print or find employment—we are shocked by all the gossip that we hear in response. We are baffled as to how unfounded accusations are repeated as fact. Moreover, we are confounded by how those of us who are supposed to be research experts would rather revel in titillating chatter instead of methodically seeking out, as we are trained to do, what is most likely a boring truth. Intellectual-political intrigues grow, rivalries emerge, turf battles are fought, and alleged scores are created that take on impulses to be settled. Such machinations are compounded by the sad fact that, over the years, while some European American whites loudly proclaimed their progressive credentials as allies through their supposed commitment to justice and solidarity with communities of color, they nonetheless also were the very ones who placed duplicitous knives in our backs. We discovered unhappily that some of the fingerprints on the protruding handles were from those of our so-called *comunidad*.

And before we think this phenomenon of inconsistency is limited to just Latinx theology and religion scholars, it should be noted that some African Americans, Asian Americans, Native People, feminists, and those of the queer community also talk of the comradeship of their identity community as at times experienced as being a false construction, where disunity and contention are more common. In other articles and books Miguel has written about the image of “crabs in a bucket” pulling each other down instead of helping each other out—but as a colleague reminded him, when crabs are in their natural habitat, among the rocks upon which the waves crash, they pull each other up to safety. Like those proverbial crabs, colonialism and white supremacy may have placed Latinx in the limiting white bucket of academic hyperindividualism that is not our natural habitat, pulling each other down through backstabbing rivalry. How do we return to true collegiality and commit ourselves to the life-giving communal inclinations to fight against being placed in buckets of subjugation, or helping each other out when we are?

Although we can detect the various oppressive structures perpetrated against us, the insidious nature of the power at work is that sometimes we can remain oblivious of our complicity with oppression. Being placed in the white bucket by colonialism, class oppression, marginalization, and resurgent white supremacy risks the danger of our replicating oppressive structures or even creating new ones where the faces or ethnicities of new oppressors are the same as those who remain disenfranchised and persecuted. The temptation is for those so marginalized to shape themselves in the image of the dominant culture of oppression, learning to mimic the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and actions. Such colonized minds reinforce the marginalized lack of self-worth, which often leads to self-loathing.

Educator Paulo Freire noted that everyone in some part of their being seeks to be a “subject” who is able to act, know, and transform their environment and be directly involved in re-creating, so that by accruing “knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators.”⁴ Thus, members of marginalized communities who are objects acted upon, rather than subjects who do the acting, have an escape route but also more new ways of understanding their own realities. While habitually alienated and acted upon, some marginalized communities desire a sort of acceptance or at the very least recognition as well as wanting to become subjects in their own right. The safe route, or at least the way of limited conflict, is to imitate the dominant society whose acceptance they crave. In a very real sense, the consciousness of members of marginalized communities becomes submerged. They become unable, or unwilling, to see how the operating interests and values of the dominant culture are internalized. As long as we refuse to critically analyze how deeply Latinx minds are colonized, and how complicit we are in *el chismeteo*, the gossip, we will never create *comunidad*.

Despite the above assessment and the reality of many disappointments, there still is the possibility of *comunidad* and *teología en/de conjunto*. At the risk of being narcissistic, the reality that Edwin and Miguel are working together after all these years is a testimony of the genuine *comunidad* that exists between the two of us. And despite the pain and disappointments experienced with the passing of time, there is real community beyond the two of us. One of the hard truths learned and relearned is that *comunidad* becomes reality not in the saying but in the doing. The fact is that we still are working together and have

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Berman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 69.

produced this re-vision of *teología en conjunto*. This is not just self-absorbed navel-gazing, because there are many examples of *teología en conjunto* beyond the two of us. Despite disappointments there also is collaboration and honest critique between Latinx scholars of religion and theology. We have experienced solidarity with those going through professional difficulties. We have experienced *comunidad* with colleagues beyond the fuzzy boundaries of who is Latinx with African American, white, Native American, and Asian American colleagues. The experiences of the years have reinforced the reality of what we asserted in 2001, which is that *comunidad*/community is relational, with all the messiness of life that interpersonal interaction implies. When *comunidad* is evoked without relational commitments and the associated risks, then it can become highly wrought mythological rhetoric, self-deception, and the basis of the oppression of others. When commitment perseveres through disappointments, misunderstandings, and persecution—and through the bad times as well as good—then the reality of *comunidad* is experienced and the potential for working toward the good and just is unlimited.

We can talk about *comunidad* as if it will occur *ex nihilo* and never achieve it, or we can labor to make it a reality in daily life. We choose and commit to the latter. *Comunidad* is not some utopian concept; it can be authentic if approached with a good dose of humility and achieved through hard work when accompanied by a willingness to recognize past faults and failings not conducive to creating *comunidad*.

We recognize the many times when we personally have fallen short of true *comunidad* and were complicit with oppressive structures. For those times when we failed, when we refused to critically analyze how deeply our minds were colonized, and when we were complicit in spreading gossipy scandal that tore down *comunidad*, we offer our sincere apologies to whomever we offended and look forward to making amends—with a deep resolve to do better going forward, to cultivate *una rosa blanca*, and to begin reconciliation and perhaps model better what Latinx *comunidad* should look like (Mt 5:23–24). And for those who prefer not to reconcile but who choose to pursue a different path and weave alternative realities, we both say, *cardo ni oruga cultivo, cultivo una rosa blanca*.

So, this multifaceted challenge is true and, like many things in life, not neat—namely, that *comunidad* among Latinx scholars of theology and religion may be experienced as a myth, but also as a reality. Both possibilities are running concurrently within the same communities, and even the same person may experience both simultaneously. Consequently, even this revision—this book—remains a collaborative product, but one in which we try to pass along what we have learned from a broad com-

munity of people with whom we share *comunidad* and accordingly who have contributed to our ongoing formation, including the never-ending surprises that community exists with people and in places we did not anticipate previously. Likewise, this revision also reflects what we have learned from the absence of *comunidad* or when *comunidad* was evoked in ways that proved disappointing, unsatisfactory, destructive, and even mythological.

We are many things, but certainly we are scholars whose interdisciplinary work has taken us in different but occasionally overlapping directions as we address the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, privilege and oppression, desperation and hope. And therefore, even in this revised edition, and despite the joys, disappointments, and—yes—pain of the years, this book still is both about collaborative Latino/a-Latinx theologies as well as being one example of it. Again, taking heed of the insights of the great Paulo Freire we must remember the critical importance of hoping against hope, even as we engage struggle. Therefore, in the midst of hopelessness, our humble hope is that this book will help generate many other examples of such mutual theologies, as well as encourage others within and outside of the Latinx-Hispanic/Latino-Latino/a-Latin@-Latinoa community to take the risk and commit to *comunidad*.

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