

## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

*A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophecy Freedom*. By Teresa Delgado. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xv + 204 pages. \$99.00.

### Editor's Note

The editors of *Horizons* select works for review symposia based on the quality of the book, its contribution to theology, and the importance of the topic for our readers. Some texts provide particularly timely opportunities that cannot be ignored. In light of the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria and the death-dealing devastation of the hurricane for the people of Puerto Rico, the editors seized the possibility to train attention on the slow and continuing task of recovery by conducting a symposium on *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology* by Teresa Delgado.

### FOUR PERSPECTIVES

#### I. What Does Freedom Look Like When the Oppressor Is Within? Engaging Teresa Delgado's *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophecy Freedom*

"Say it loud and there's music playing. Say it soft and it's almost like praying ... it's almost like praying ..." The first lines of Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Almost Like Praying," a song to benefit Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, riff on the lyrics to the *West Side Story* song "Maria." Miranda chose these lyrics in the hope that recalling their beloved association of the name "Maria" with song and with prayer would retrieve the beauty of this name in the imaginary of the Puerto Rican people.<sup>1</sup> The rest of the song's lyrics are a shout-out litany of Puerto Rico's seventy-eight municipalities. This song of lament echoes the way Puerto Ricans in the diaspora called out their towns' names into the Facebook-sphere in the hopes that someone from that town would answer back with news of loved ones.<sup>2</sup> This when the entire island had gone both dark and silent after the devastation left behind by the hurricane.

I write these notes on Teresa Delgado's *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophecy Freedom* just a few days shy of the one-year anniversary

<sup>1</sup> Joe Coscarelli, "Lin-Manuel Miranda Gathers All-Star Latin Artists for Hurricane Relief," *New York Times*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/arts/music/lin-manuel-miranda-puerto-rico-relief-song.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

of Hurricane Maria striking the islands of Puerto Rico, Dominica, and the US Virgin Islands on September 20, 2017. Only a week before that, Puerto Rico's northeast coast had been impacted by Hurricane Irma, which devastated the islands of Barbuda and the British Virgin Islands.<sup>3</sup> The memory of these events and their continuing impacts are still raw and trigger deep emotions for me. As a Puerto Rican in the diaspora I saw no escape for my island from the monstrous hurricane barreling across the Atlantic. I saw a people already spent from a prior hurricane the week before, the imposition of a federal fiscal oversight board a year before, and massive emigration and economic stagnation for decades before. And I waited. Phone contact with loved ones went dead a few hours into the hurricane's onslaught. Soon after, we gasped at satellite images of the place where the lit shape of Puerto Rico should have been in the nightscape, but only darkness remained, our imaginations running wild about the likely devastation and horrible conditions left behind, fears that were confirmed when news media began to broadcast images and videos showing the plight of the people.

We shouted out into this darkness in whatever way we could. Puerto Rican ethicist Melissa Pagán coined and develops the hermeneutic and theology of *el grito* (the shout) as the primary theological response of the Puerto Rican people in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> Pagán's hermeneutic of *el grito* takes its name from the decolonial shout—or cry—uttered in *El Grito de Lares*, the revolt against Spanish colonial rule in 1868 in the town of Lares, and subsequent calls for its reissuing or repetition against colonial US rule over the island. A hermeneutic and theology of *el grito*

demands that we critique the theological categories that perpetuate neo-liberal, global coloniality. Such a critique requires not a simple reimagining of our theological categories but a complete obliteration of them. Only once we have done that can we rebuild.<sup>5</sup>

Teresa Delgado's *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology* is the first "grito" responding to Pagán's call. A volume over ten years in the making but taking into account over five hundred years of coloniality embedded in our very skins and bones, Delgado's work pushes us to confront truly the

<sup>3</sup> Julia Belluz, "It's Not Just Puerto Rico: 6 Other Caribbean Island Nations Are in Crisis after the Hurricanes," *Vox*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/9/26/16367410/hurricane-maria-2017-puerto-rico-caribbean-barbuda-dominica-virgin-islands-cuba-st-martin>.

<sup>4</sup> Melissa Pagán, "Puerto Rico Forum Reflection #3: Cultivating a Hermeneutics of *El Grito* in the Eye of the Storm," *Perspectivas* 15 (2018): 72, [http://perspectivasonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/P-E-R-S-P-E-C-T-I-V-A-S\\_2018.pdf](http://perspectivasonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/P-E-R-S-P-E-C-T-I-V-A-S_2018.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

theological implications of colonialism gone unchecked. Its release date, September 21, 2017, forever weds this *grito*, this volume and its reflections, to the *grito* of millions of Puerto Ricans who felt the impact of the hurricane in one way or another. Both Hurricane Maria and Delgado's volume lift the veil off this island paradise to expose the painful subjugation and economic stagnation inflicted by colonial forces, past and present, on the people and land of Puerto Rico. Both review a landscape scarred by resource extraction and import substitution, and industrialization, with farmers and rural communities paying the highest price for the greed of Spain and the United States. Both reveal how water—floodwaters from hurricanes throughout history, the waters between San Juan and New York, the waters of the lagoons that shape parts of the metropolitan area—in many ways challenges, threatens, *and* represents who we are. Both force a reckoning with the ways central assumptions of colonial Christianity were used to enslave and dominate us, while also potentially offering keys to radical decolonial liberation. And throughout this past year, both have forced me to contend with my place in the Latinx theological academy and beyond, as a distinctly Puerto Rican voice. While it has always been my contention that I look/talk/think/dance/celebrate/pray/rage/love like I do because of the colonial violence of the past five hundred years,<sup>6</sup> Delgado boldly throws in our faces that, "in fact, there is less of a distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, in the case of the Puerto Rican nation. ... Puerto Ricans embody the colonizer in one way or the other, truth be told" (181). Truth be told.

### *Narrative Matters*

At the 2017 meeting of the American Academy of Religion a cadre of Puerto Rican scholars planned an urgent panel to discuss historical, theological, ethical, and pastoral impressions in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.<sup>7</sup> Delgado's particular contribution looked at the ways media have portrayed Puerto Rico over the last sixty years, particularly the fascination with the

<sup>6</sup> María Teresa Dávila, "Catholic Hispanic Theology in the U.S.: Dimensiones de la Opción Preferencial por los Pobres en el Norte," *Proceedings of the Annual Convention (Catholic Theological Society of America)* 63 (2008): 43.

<sup>7</sup> Jorge Juan Busone Rodríguez V, Jules Martínez, Loida Martell, Melissa Pagán, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, Teresa Delgado (panelists), and MT Dávila (moderator), "Puerto Rico and Maria: Histories and Vulnerabilities in the Eye of the Storm" (panel presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, November 19, 2017). The video of the panel presentation is available on the event's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/PRatAARSBL/>.

musical *West Side Story*.<sup>8</sup> She proceeded to deconstruct the ways in which the musical just gets it wrong with respect to Puerto Rican life on the island, as well as Puerto Rican life in the nascent yet large diaspora in New York and other cities on the East Coast. From the overly sexualized character of Anita, to the ending of the much-quoted song “America” with a resounding “olé” that has everything to do with Spanish colonialism and nothing to do with how Puerto Ricans express themselves and celebrate life, Delgado unraveled the thread of the harms done by bad cultural representation when all a people are thirsting for is visibility in economic, political, and cultural spheres.

Representation matters. But, more importantly, what Delgado highlights in stark relief both in her astute critique of *West Side Story* and extensively in *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology* is that narrative matters. In particular, narratives that accurately describe our histories, our sorrows, our everyday lived experiences, our loves and passions, our cultures, our wisdom, our hopes—even against the deepest injustices enacted against us—these are the narratives that matter. In struggling to forge a seat for us at the table of US Latinx theologies Delgado proposes that Puerto Rican theologies of liberation must be decolonial, for they are birthed in the belly of that still occupied space that is at the margins of US citizenship and territoriality. Delgado honors the invitation extended by Latinx theologies for Puerto Ricans to join their ranks. But she rightly notes that “unless Puerto Rican theologians reflect upon their experience of God within the context of Puerto Rican life, the reality of colonization for Puerto Ricans will be slow to emerge as a relevant theme for *all* U.S. Latinxs” (8; emphasis added).

While tapping essential elements from US Latinx theologies, such as *mes-tizaje*, *lo cotidiano*, the role of community, the option for the poor and the option for culture, and the sense of justice, Delgado’s most emphatic acknowledgment of the influence of Latinx theologians is her methodological focus on the role of narrative for ethical reflection. She craftily balances four interwoven sets of narratives. One is a thorough account of Puerto Rican history since the era of Spanish conquest and colonization as it relates to the economic, cultural, religious, and political integrity and dignity of the Puerto Rican people, all the way to the current absurdity of the US federal fiscal oversight board meant to supervise expenditures in order to maximize the repayment of Puerto Rico’s extensive bond debt to mainly US creditors. The second is her selection of various fictional narratives of Puerto Rican

<sup>8</sup> Robert Wise, Ernest Lehman, Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, et al., *West Side Story* (Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003).

life by authors who in Delgado's estimation offer significant commentaries on the Puerto Rican experience. For Delgado,

as a descriptive source, the literature is an ethnographic site which provides a lens through which we can examine the culture from a variety of angles. ... Second, literature as a product of the imagination reflects the vision of the writer and, by extension, the community to which they are accountable. (11)

The third narrative Delgado pulls in is the biblical account of the figure of Rachel, and other characters emblematic of displacement and coloniality through which we come to witness God's holy purpose through, with, and for the poor, the displaced, and the colonized. Finally, Delgado weaves these narratives against the backdrop of her own life, a narrative about Puerto Rican identity crafted in the back-and-forth that is the island/diaspora experience, and which she had to piece together herself because so much has been lost for Puerto Ricans whose family histories of exit and return to the island hold particular pain or shame.

Delgado's development of a Puerto Rican decolonial theology brings together the fictional work of Esmeralda Santiago, Pedro Juan Soto, and Rosario Ferré with

Christopher Morse's comprehensive work on doctrine, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*... Morse's methodology—drawing out the rejected belief behind the accepted belief—parallels my own methodology of drawing out the silence behind the dominant speech, as well as the decolonial methodology of affirming “the epistemically disavowed colonial subjects” of Western modernity. (87)<sup>9</sup>

Having to tease out some of the more corrosive elements of Christianity as a tool of conquest imposed on the Puerto Rican people by Spanish Catholic colonizers, and then by US Protestant missionaries who parceled out the island into denominational cantons as part of the US strategy to bring US civility to the island after the invasion in 1898, Delgado returns to the essential liberationist questions: “In a world where we struggle to know and feel the love of ourselves as Puerto Rican, where we are continuously mandated to negate our identity, how do we come to know that God loves us as Puerto Rican?” (87).

Affirming the incarnational premise that “God's unfolding historical project can be witnessed within the Puerto Rican community” (88), Delgado develops a decolonial anthropology through the lens of the suffering

<sup>9</sup> Delgado is quoting from Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 80–81.

of the subject in Esmeralda Santiago's work, a decolonial soteriology from the historical journeys at the edges of hope in the work of Pedro Juan Soto, and a decolonial eschatology from Rosario Ferré's engagement with the themes of boundedness and freedom. All of these authors brutally lay bare and upend expectations of what is socially, spiritually, and politically acceptable, in order to reveal the kind of true healing sought after by the deep wounds of a historically mangled subject. It is no wonder, then, that Delgado draws deeply from Rachel and Jeremiah, mangled characters of the Bible who nonetheless speak profoundly to God's radical acceptance and abiding love for us and the histories that shape us. This, even as we dare to declare a wholeness that escapes us in history—which is more often than not robbed from us violently and with impunity—but for which every cell in our being longs. Following Morse's invitation, Delgado rejects doctrinal expressions of human being and becoming, history, and salvation that judge as aberrations our very tortured, enslaved, raped, impoverished, mangled, and exiled selves.

Delgado navigates building eschatological hope for a battered and suffering people with great theological acumen. Launching from theologies of hope, such as those of Moltmann and Justo González, she reaffirms that hope has to be grounded in the present moment, confronting suffering as it really is if it is to be transformed at all. As the cross transformed the reality of human sin not as we wish we could describe it, but as it really is in all its depth, our hope in a transformed tomorrow rests on the deep awareness of our pain today. Otherwise, we risk cheapening our hope in Christ crucified and resurrected. Nowhere is this more vivid than in Delgado's description of her own family's journeys to create a better *mañana*, the bursts of revolutionary zeal that in both fiction and history light the Puerto Rican imaginary with the possibility of freedom, and still today, as farmers, local businesses, and community action groups stand determined to create sustainable alternatives for Puerto Rico's future, even as it continues to be buffeted by the neglect and malfeasance that turned a natural disaster into a humanitarian catastrophe.

### *Gender Matters*

One question that surfaced for me in reading Delgado's work is that of the genderedness of decolonial theology. This volume, as well as other works by Delgado, hints at her having a much more robust theory of this gendered dimension of a Puerto Rican decolonial theology than we are overtly exposed to in *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology*.<sup>10</sup> The majority of the characters in

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Delgado's essay "Prophesy Freedom: Puerto Rican Women's Literature as a Source for Latina Feminist Theology," in *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, ed.

the fictional works she engages throughout the volume are female characters, living in their skins much of the abuse—domestic and intimate, but also political, economic, religious, and social—that makes them such great vehicles for understanding the particular narrative of the suffering and hope of the Puerto Rican people. Delgado’s own narrative features women prominently making choices to carry their families forward—*echar la familia pa'lante*, as we say—sometimes with painful side effects, but always focused on the hope that God has something better in store for us. These women include the biblical figure of Rachel, a marginal female nobody, whom God chooses to be every-body as a matriarch of Israel (95).

The question of the gendered nature of conquest and coloniality has been widely considered in circles outside of the theological academy.<sup>11</sup> Inside the theological academy it has been explored by ethicists and theologians such as Kathleen Grimes (USA), Anna Perkins (Jamaica), Maria Laura Manrique Nava (Mexico), Keun-Joo Christine Pae (Korea), and others. Two particular questions for Delgado and those who read her will help clarify the direction of her work in this area. First, do we add *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology* to the body of work considered *mujerista* theology, as it explores questions of gender and coloniality? Are there pitfalls for our generation of Latinas, and those to come, in taking on this mantle anew, asking the deep questions regarding the experience of suffering and salvation of women on the margins of colonial experiments? Would Delgado find this label helpful to her project, or a setback? Second, what are we to do theologically with the feminization of conquest and colonization? How do the cross and resurrection speak specifically to the stories of our *abuelas* and *mamis* who forged particular paths for their families within a colonized sphere, painfully aware of the already/not yet that characterizes most of Christian soteriology? How do characters such as Rachel, the marginal matriarch, speak to a liberation from gendered violence and oppression that turns us—and most colonial subjects—into no ones? What the study of the gendered nature of coloniality and conquest reveals for us is that the turning into no ones of the colonial subject is not gender neutral, but bears the weight of the dynamics of gender violence, in their domestic, social, and political spheres. Delgado affirms that God offers this colonial subject “a way of living into a state of decolonial freedom, not

María Pilar Aquino, Daisy Machado, and Jeannette Rodríguez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 23–52.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Nancy Rose Hunt, Tessie Liu, and Jean Quataert, eds., *Gendered Colonialisms in African History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); Nora Jaffarey, ed., *Gender, Race, and Religion in the Colonization of the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

waiting for that honor to be bestowed by others but claiming it in the now for ourselves because it is already promised by God" (174). It is with much anticipation that I look forward to broader articulations of this gendered *grito* from female Puerto Rican authors such as Delgado and Pagán, female characters in a theological play, ready to prophesy freedom.

*I Represent No One, but Am Everyone at Once*

Closing the volume with references to Albert Memmi's analysis of colonizer and the colonial subject, Delgado comes full circle to identify how the colonial subject represents no one, and so "prove[s] to be the best of witnesses."<sup>12</sup> It is a characterization that speaks to the invisibility of the colonial subject, who, in her complicated narrative integrating many worlds and experiences of ethnic, religious, political, and racial conquest and rebirth that "straddle these multiple identities constantly, hoping to find a place [to] ground [her] footing," becomes "the best of witnesses" to God's plan for liberation (180–81).

The challenge of Delgado's volume is this: to understand the places where our histories—deeply connected to conquest and colonization, whether as colonizers or colonized—make us the theological "no ones" that will be the best witnesses to the liberation of a *mañana* that is to come. To hear Delgado's first *grito* is to wonder what other *gritos* or screams can be heard from the other outposts of US territoriality, to hear them truly, not strictly as the cry of the poor, but as the cry of the violently impoverished. And then to join in with our own.

MT DÁVILA  
Merrimack College

**II. "Prophesying Freedom" from the Boricúa Borderlands: A Reflection on Teresa Delgado's *Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology***

In her book, *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophecy Freedom*, Teresa Delgado places Puerto Rican history and stories (of those on the island and in the diaspora) into dialogue with the Christian doctrines of anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. While upholding the contention that Puerto Rican stories ought to be in dialogue with the Christian story,

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, introduction to Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), xxii, quoted in Delgado, 180.