

REVIEW ESSAY

The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy.
By Nichole M. Flores. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021. xii +
172 pages. \$49.95 (paper).

“What moves the human heart?”¹ is a question the late Alejandro García-Rivera spent his life examining through his many works on theological aesthetics. In *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, Nichole Flores furthers this work by framing her important contribution to the field in a new direction: “What often remains unexamined ... is the role the very structures of liberal democracy itself plays in hindering robust participation among Latines² and other marginalized groups. Understanding why this is the case invites an exploration of the relationship involving political liberalism, Latine theological aesthetics, Catholic social teaching, and Our Lady of Guadalupe.”³ In this captivating book she advances the overarching claim that “Latine theological aesthetics can help generate a framework for thinking about pluralism and participation within a democracy.”⁴

Yet, not every, not even most, aesthetic experiences lead us to ethical and just outcomes, as Flores acknowledges with the example of the 2017 white supremacists’ use of aesthetic images and symbols that eventually led to racial hate crimes in Charlottesville, VA. This horrific example of racial hate and murder illustrates the need for ethical criteria that make explicit that not only are we integrally related to one another but also our integral relationality makes demands of us if we are to advance “solidarity, justice, and the common good,” and in so doing, support a vital participatory democracy.

¹ Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999): 9. I am grateful to Dr. Tim Matovina for his close reading of an earlier draft and his insightful comments.

² In US Latinax theological discourse, there are many different terms that are currently in use by different theologians. Along with a growing number, Nichole Flores has chosen to use “Latine” because it “conveys the broad scope of Latinx/o/a identity while still being able to be readily incorporated into both spoken Spanish and English.” See Nichole M. Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 15.

³ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 3.

⁴ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 11.

From Aquinas⁵ and von Balthasar,⁶ among many others, we learn that it is the transcendental of aesthetics that grounds our pursuit of the good and true. It is easy to lose sight of this because, of all the transcendentals, aesthetics is the most understudied. Aesthetics is far too often treated as an add on or an afterthought. Flores is wise to turn our attention to aesthetics. That said, “What remains in need of elaboration,” Flores argues, “is the way that the aesthetic dimensions of particular religious traditions can be engaged in cultivating a more participatory democracy that invites substantive contributions to society’s common life from religious people and communities.”⁷ Her goal is to identify how aesthetic experiences in the everyday can be used to cultivate “solidarity, justice, and the common good” and do so across human difference.⁸

In his 2002 book, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference*, Benjamín Valentín observed that at that juncture much of US Latinax⁹ theology focused almost exclusively on cultural identity and exclusion. Missing, he argued, was “Latino/a liberation theology as a form of trans-cultural public discourse.”¹⁰ He argued for an expanded vision in *public*, one that would include “an overarching, integrative, emancipatory sociopolitical vision in such a way that it movingly captures the attention and moral conscience of a broad audience.”¹¹ Valentín’s work signaled the beginning of a Latino/a political theological discourse. Since 2002, a growing number of US Latinax theologians have contributed works that are congruent with Valentín’s vision. With her book, Flores is among them. She rightly identifies her work as a practical ethics, a work that engages “the distinct-but-related conversation of Catholic theological ethics, Christian ethics, and religious

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in Dionysium De divinis nominibus*; Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, I, q. 3. See also Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): 20–48; Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2. (Mouton and Warsaw: PWN—Polish Scientific Publishers, 1970): 246–48.

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982): 17–127.

⁷ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 9.

⁸ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 117.

⁹ Although Nichole Flores uses the term “Latine,” I use the term “Latinax” to refer to people of Latin American ancestry. The “a” in Latinax affirms the contributions that have been made by Latina women (often overlooked), and the “x” in Latinax recognizes both the fluidity of sexual orientation and identity, and the limitations to thinking strictly in male/female binary terms, which is also affirmed with the use of Latino/a.

¹⁰ Benjamín Valentín, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference*. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002): xx.

¹¹ Valentín, *Mapping Public Theology*, xx.

ethics.” Through this book she encourages communities, particularly those who find themselves at the margins of power, to undertake practical action to realize a more just world, one in which all voices contribute to the building of public life and democracy. She locates her work in Latine theology, calling it “a work of *teología en conjunto*.” Her book is informed by the work of many “Latine theologians.”¹²

Flores’ work is in every sense a public theology. It is focused primarily on society, and in my judgment, drawing on Duncan Forrester’s definition, her work takes part of “‘the world’s agenda,’ ... as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence,... and reconciliation in the public arena.”¹³ Her work addresses the use and misuse of power, and addresses the realm of *culture* with its attention to the symbolic. Her work implicitly seeks to lay bare the ways that theological discourse, often tacitly, functions to affirm structural injustices and inequalities that have been normalized in a given society rather than to advance the cause of justice.¹⁴ As such, I also locate her work in the tradition of political theology.

In what follows, I examine two themes that appear throughout her book, noting her contribution and indicating how theologians interpreting Guadalupe might further develop Guadalupan theological discourse.

The Living Symbol of Guadalupe and the Unavoidability of Interpretation

Over the last almost five hundred years, diverse interpretations—religious, political, and cultural—of Our Lady of Guadalupe abound. And, since the late 1970s, several US Latinax theologians have written extensively on the meaning of this symbol highlighting its liberatory significance. Yet, the liberatory significance of this symbol varies greatly among US Latinax theologians. Virgilio Elizondo’s rich work launched US Latinax theological interpretations of Guadalupe; he read her as a theological symbol of cultural and social liberation.¹⁵ Roberto Goizueta and Alejandro García-Rivera took Elizondo’s work and

¹² Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 12.

¹³ William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, “Introduction,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 3.

¹⁴ Duncan Forrester, “The Scope of Public Theology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 1 (2004): 6.

¹⁵ Virgilio P. Elizondo, *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1997); Virgilio P. Elizondo, *La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas* (San Antonio, TX: MACC, 1980)

deepened its insights by locating them in the context of theological aesthetics.¹⁶ Nancy Pineda-Madrid built on this work and developed a feminist theological reading of Guadalupe.¹⁷ David Sánchez developed a biblical reading of Guadalupe in dialogue with Revelation 12, attending to the dynamics of power in history.¹⁸ Socorro Castañeda-Liles, Theresa Torres, and Jeanette Rodriguez each used social science tools to foreground women's experience of Guadalupe and then reflected on its theological significance.¹⁹ Timothy Matovina's extensive work and notable books have made available the history of diverse theological readings of Guadalupe across the centuries as well as the history of the devotion to Guadalupe in San Antonio, TX.²⁰ In his 2019 book, the chapter titled, "Divine Providence: Sermons in Colonial Society," examines works dating from 1661 to 1820. This chapter, in particular, makes clear that social emancipatory interpretations have not always been the theological norm. While other Latinx theologians have published books on Guadalupe, Nichole Flores is the first US Latinx *ethicist* to write a book-length work on

¹⁶ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*.

¹⁷ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "Holy Guadalupe ... Shameful Malinche?: Excavating the Problem of 'Female Dualism,' Doing Theological Spade Work," *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 44 no. 2 (Spring, 2009): 71–87; Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "Traditioning: The Formation of Community, The Transmission of Faith," in *Futuring Our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition*, eds. Orlando Espín and Gary Macy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 204–26; Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "Guadalupe's Challenge to Rahner's Theology of Symbol," in *Rahner Beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, ed. Paul Crowley (Kansas City, MO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 73–85; Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "La Guadalupe, The Bible, Pentecost," in *Latino/a Theology and the Bible: Ethnic-Racial Reflections on Interpretation*, ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando Segovia (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 151–68.

¹⁸ David A. Sánchez, *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

¹⁹ María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Theresa L. Torres, *The Paradox of Latina Religious Leadership in the Catholic Church: Las Guadalupanas of Kansas City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994).

²⁰ Timothy Matovina, *Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Era of Conquest to Pope Francis*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; Timothy Matovina, *Guadalupe and Her Faithful: Latino Catholics in San Antonio from Colonial Origins to the Present*. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2005).

Guadalupe. What all these works together underscore is the fecundity of this theological symbol.

Repeatedly throughout her book, Flores identifies Guadalupe as a symbol, often as a public symbol. She draws out characteristics and dimensions that clearly reflect her recognition of Guadalupe's symbolic nature. For example, Flores writes, "It is too simplistic to interpret the Virgin of Guadalupe as merely religious. She has been leveraged by groups representing various religious, political, and economic interests in their effort to make public claims about justice." In addition: "The range of values and visions mapped onto her image underscore her contested meaning for both religion and politics."²¹ She notes that the symbol of Guadalupe is perceived as significant by diverse people who interpret her meaning very differently, and accordingly, the symbol of Guadalupe can function to create connections across difference. Indeed, herein lies the potency of this Guadalupan symbol. Flores' instincts here, and this line of thought as it appears throughout her book, serve her and her readers well.

The fecundity of Guadalupan interpretations, produced by scholars across a wide range of academic disciplines, offers a rich yet complex body of scholarly literature relating to the phenomenon of Guadalupe. But this same fecundity can become a curse as well as a blessing. The complexity of so many varied readings can encourage the notion that these varied interpretations are of roughly equal value. Does this conundrum create a theological imperative for us? Although Guadalupe will always carry multivalent significance, the question for theologians is to what extent does a given interpretation bear theological integrity? What criteria come into play for determining the relative theological adequacy of an interpretation? This is not a function of separating out the theological from the cultural or political or economic or social, but, rather, it is a function of advancing the authenticity of theological readings, which almost always carry other dimensions.

As an example, Flores and I share much in common. We share a Latine/Latinax perspective, that is, a lens from the margins. But more importantly, given the context of both her book and this article, we also share a deep concern about the dominance in our time of an individualized, privatized understanding of faith. We, she an ethicist and I a systematician, believe deeply in theological interpretations that prioritize a more communal, public understanding of faith. It is not enough that the appeal of our interpretations of Guadalupe—shared also by others, of course—be an appeal based on how compelling each of our readers subjectively find our writing. That is, if the reader *prefers* our interpretation, if they like our arguments, then they may

²¹ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 20–21.

find it compelling. Given our times combined with the wide-ranging power of the Guadalupan symbol, we need firmer ground.

First, it is crucial to appreciate the power of symbols. Ricoeur defines “symbols” as opaque signs (as contrasted with transparent signs that represent meaning only in a literal manner) that bear meaning both literally and analogically. Ricoeur observes that “unlike a comparison that we consider from outside, the symbol is the movement of the primary meaning which makes us participate in the latent meaning and thus assimilates us to that which is symbolized without our being able to master the similitude intellectually.”²² Because of the enigmatic character of the meaning borne by symbols, we discover their meaning only through analogy. Symbols precede yet necessitate interpretation, largely because they engage us on multiple levels. We lack a full consciousness of all the ways in which symbols engage us. “The symbol gives rise to thought” is a phrase that captures the essence of Ricoeur’s insight. First, symbols *give*, by which he means that symbols bear an excess of meaning. Second, symbols provoke and evoke *thought*. This poses a challenge. How does one develop a meaningful interpretation that both takes advantage of the abundance of meaning pregnant in the symbol and honors the quest to understand.

Second, the quest to understand, that is, to interpret what a symbol means requires that we appreciate the triadic nature of interpretations. A triadic theory always includes the interpreter, that which is being interpreted (the text, image, poetry, etc.), and, third, to whom it is being interpreted or to what end. Although Flores’ work leans in the direction of a triadic understanding, she could take this further. By way of contrast, much of the theological world presumes and operates as if interpretation is essentially dyadic in nature. Dyadic theories presume that interpretation takes place ahistorically, thus minimizing questions of meaning and significance. Dyadic theories do not account for the will nor for the intent directing the endeavor to interpret and to understand. Consequently, such theories of interpretation are found lacking when one is confronted with the depth questions of life; in other words, questions that necessarily disclose the fundamental life orientation of a person, questions that are inherently spiritual, which is obviously Flores’ focus. Flores is quite clear about what she intends to be the effect of her interpretation, that is, that Guadalupe “inspires a vigorously participatory vision of democracy.”²³ Employing a triadic theory of interpretation could underscore and deepen this intended effect precisely because this conception of interpretation holds that an interpretation remains imprecise, and even unintelligible, absent its intended

²² Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 [1967]), 16.

²³ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 8.

effect.²⁴ If we employed a triadic theory of interpretation to the full, it would frame the development of criteria for judging the relative adequacy of diverse interpretations of Guadalupe, Flores' interpretation, as well as all others.

Indeed, without interpretation life lacks fullness because when it comes to the depth questions of life, to questions related to the spiritual realm, what we seek is meaning and significance. Invariably, meaning is an expression of some mind manifesting itself through signs, the symbol of Guadalupe being a very particular kind of sign. Signs by their very nature demand interpretation, rendering interpretation an inherently social process. In Josiah Royce's words: "The relations of minds are essentially social; so that a world without at least three minds in it—one to be interpreted, one the interpreter, and the third the one for whom or to whom the first is interpreted—would be a world without any real mind in it at all."²⁵

Such attention to the nature of interpretation is vital precisely because Guadalupe is a living symbol, richly fecund. Guadalupe has been a living symbol for centuries. Her vitality is only continuing to grow, which is why it is important to recognize that religious symbols bear an unavoidable, ambiguous nature. They participate in the holy, yet they are not themselves God. There is no doubt that Guadalupe mediates the sacred for ever-increasing numbers of faithful. Even so, due to the ambiguous character of all religious symbols, they can breed both creative and destructive results, which is why I argue that a triadic theory of interpretation is crucial.

Theological Aesthetics

For years now, US Latinax theologians, such as García-Rivera, Goizueta, and Michelle González, have been involved in extended discussions concerning the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, sometimes referred to as beauty and justice.²⁶ Still others have suggested that justice gets shortchanged in the attention to aesthetics, such as Jorge Aquino.²⁷

²⁴ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1913]): 30–31, 286–89, 292.

²⁵ Josiah Royce, "Mind," in *Josiah Royce's Late Writings: A Collection of Unpublished and Scattered Works*, ed. Frank Oppenheim, vol. 1, (Bristol, England: Thommes Press, 2001 [1916]): 75–76.

²⁶ García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*; Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús*; Michelle A. González, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

²⁷ Jorge A. Aquino, "The Prophetic Horizon of Latino Theology," in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre and Gaston Espinosa (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2006): 101–25.

And others have argued that the contemplation of beauty in the everyday offers a grounding for the pursuit of justice, such as Cecilia González-Andrieu and Christopher Tirres.²⁸ Flores' work builds on these works and goes further. She has developed a constructive relational ethics through an examination of the Guadalupe–Juan Diego relationship. Although the book's initial chapter offers a fresh approach to relational ethics, she shapes it ever mindful of the integral relationship between relational ethics and aesthetics; they fuel each other in Flores' work.

Building on Goizueta's interpretation of the relationship between Guadalupe and Juan Diego, Flores claims:

A political theology of Guadalupe and Juan Diego helps us to identify the significance of their relationship for the twenty-first century. This is not a story strictly about personal conversion either of Juan Diego or Bishop Zumárraga. It is a story of political empowerment of the oppressed within the context of colonization. The encounter made evident Juan Diego's capacity for self-governance, an autonomy that is essential for liberty, as well as his fundamental dignity, which is the foundation to claims of human equality. This empowerment was central to cultivating his agency to confront the colonial ecclesial powers. In this way the story is relevant in a US democratic context, where the oppressed and marginalized resist the legacies of colonization, slavery, and segregation that still fester in our common life.²⁹

The aesthetic dimension, in the form of aesthetic solidarity, comes to the fore through her development of García-Rivera's notions of lifting up the lowly and of narrative interlacing of little stories and the big story, along with her own artful use of the Denver-based theo-drama, *The Miracle at Tepeyac*. Through her relational ethics, Flores makes a credible case for Juan Diego as a political actor, as one who experiences a transformed "vision of personhood that is amenable to the project of democracy."³⁰ Her US Latinax political theology makes a long awaited, vital contribution. Her attention to difference throughout forges a vision that decidedly transcends the particularity of the US Latinax experience from which it emerges.

Early in the history of theology, and in every subsequent period, the problem of the human perception of divine beauty has emerged. Theologians have asked, How do we conceive the possibility of human

²⁸ Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); Christopher D. Tirres, *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith: A Dialogue Between Liberationist and Pragmatic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

²⁹ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 37.

³⁰ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 37.

recognition of divine beauty in the experience of the beautiful? Beauty is vital to the human condition. Without beauty the good loses its appeal. The pursuit of what is good, just, and true is no longer a self-evident choice without beauty. Absent beauty the pursuit of evil is plausible. Flores affirms, "Aesthetic engagement can shape the imaginative and affective capacities necessary for cultivating a just society."³¹ Her aesthetic solidarity is distinguished by communal aesthetic engagement (a shared experience of beauty) in a manner that "forms imagination and affections," that promotes justice for "human flourishing and the common good," and that develops "relationships of mutuality, equality, and participation that foster human dignity." Aesthetic solidarity ... operates on both the interpersonal and the social levels to promote justice."³² In her work on aesthetic engagement, Flores acknowledges that aesthetic experience can fall prey to manipulation, can become objectified and consumed, can function insidiously.³³ Beauty is seductive. It lures us and draws us, stirring our affections and our imagination. We must ask, What is drawing us? What is stirring our affections? Where are we being led? Without critically considering these questions, we fall prey to manipulation, which is acknowledged in Flores' book. To think more deeply about the distinction between theological aesthetics and aesthetic experience or engagement is necessary if justice is the goal. Theological aesthetics takes us to the heart of the problem of human perception.

Human perception is the theological problem. We are provoked by that which stimulates our passions, by that which stirs our hearts. In short, the beautiful moves us, it draws us beyond ourselves. Such experience, some theologians claim, can hold open the possibility of our perception of divine beauty. If we are not focused on the perception of divine beauty as the goal, then we will not be advancing a more just world. Above all, theological aesthetics is an exploration of the possibility of such perception. Theological aesthetics is not primarily concerned with the principles that guide the perception of the beautiful, namely a study of philosophical aesthetics. Nor is it primarily concerned with the nature of divine beauty in itself. Theological aesthetics focuses on how theologians and philosophers have understood how human beings perceive divine beauty in the experience of the beautiful. This dynamic correlation of divine beauty and the experience of the beautiful is the central concern of theological aesthetics. One cannot understand US Latinax theological aesthetics without appreciating the significant imprint of

³¹ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 120.

³² Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 141–42.

³³ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 136–41.

von Balthasar. One can also find elements of theological aesthetics in the work of Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino. Sobrino's contribution is found in his Christological work, in his discussion of "orthopathy," right desiring. He invites us to consider what encourages right desiring.³⁴ The point is not simply the experience of beauty that encourages a desiring but rather what orients our desires and how are they cultivated in a particular direction that has to do with more than an "aesthetic experience of beauty." Flores points to this challenge in her reflection on aesthetic formation,³⁵ and I look forward to many of us building on Flores' rich contribution and deepening of these lines of thought.

The Aesthetics of Solidarity invites us to ponder the power of the symbol of Guadalupe, to bring a critical eye to our theological interpretations, and to join the communal, aesthetic feast that feeds the creation of a more just world.

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³⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001): 209–10.

³⁵ Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 144–45.