

Latina/o Religious Traversals: Sexual and Cultural Travesuras

From Other Shores: Postcolonial Theology and the Caribbean
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There is a remarkable consistency in the strategies of power of modern imperial projects. I found a surprising confirmation of this in the training manuals for US protestant mission in Puerto Rico. The missionaries were reminded, as if to reassure them of their competency for the work at hand: “The Latin mind is essentially oriental.”¹ So, want it or not, the discourse of Orientalism arrived at the shores of the Caribbean island, as closely related to Christianity as the displaced Spanish colonial system had been.

It is thus not surprising if postcolonial theory sounds strangely familiar to me. Despite the abstract language used by some of its most celebrated theorists, I have found in it a discourse that engages and analyzes very mundane, everyday experiences. The ambivalent spaces of political positionality and identity, the slippery dynamics of mimicry and mockery are common themes in songs, novels, popular sayings, and *a lot* of comedy in Puerto Rico, an island that has been described by scholars as “the oldest colony in the world” (José Trias Monges), “Paradox Island” (Francisco Rivera-Batiz and Carlos Santiago), “a cultural anomaly” (Ramón Soto Crespo), to name just a few telling phrases. The broad theoretical framework of postcolonial theory has offered resources to connect the odd realities of this small island to those of distant lands, to connect, at least tentatively, Vieques and Bombay. Their realities are, of course, starkly different. But the dialogue between them continues to be revealing.

The recognition of the seemingly erratic voyages of colonial images and practices has drawn together theologians from very different shores. In addition to exploring the

collusions between Christian doctrine and colonial ideologies, postcolonial theologians have sought to offer alternative visions informed by the critiques of imperialism. The postcolonial in theological studies thus follows a trajectory different from that of the decolonial in other fields, in that, among other things, it seeks to maintain a conversation among very few scholars from very different regions who share an interest in the critical examination and rearticulation of the inherited theological imaginary. The attention to the relationships has been crucial for creating a big enough coalition to claim a space in theology—a *very tiny* space. Yet, having pursued the broad continental connections between various imperialisms, today I return to the Caribbean to explore with you some of the particularities of its own cultural and spiritual formations. This is not a permanent return; I don't think we should abandon the resources of postcolonial theories in their broad international scope. Yet I believe there are crucial insights to be gained from other shores.

What is the Caribbean?

This voyage to the Caribbean presupposes the critiques of the “continental” as it inflects so-called “continental philosophy,” a discourse that has significantly influenced postcolonial theory. According to this critique, the adjective “continental” designates “not only a contingent relation to Europe, but also a certain commitment with European continentality as a project as well as with Eurocentric conceptions of space and time.”² In this critique the term “continentality” suggests the privilege of cultural mindsets “where land is everything and the sea a forgotten memory” (Benitez-Rojo), of ideologies of monolithic nations and the mythologies of space and race. But continental and national

ontologies are not exclusively European. I am quoting Nelson Maldonado Torres, who adds that post-continental philosophy attempts to overcome this mindset through the “decolonization of spatial imaginaries and conceptions of temporalities.” “In post-continental philosophy...decolonial ethics, politics, and theory take priority over a continental ontology of belonging, and a new set of metaphors...begin to acquire existential and epistemological significance, such as the border, the archipelago, and the sea, among other.”³ I am seeking here to engage in such a reorientation of spatial and temporal metaphors. However, these comments may sound more dualistic than what I have in mind. For I am not seeking to consolidate an idea of the Caribbean as the Other of Europe—or the Other of Latin America, for that matter. To be sure, the elements I will discuss are not exclusive to the region, and they co-exist alongside other contrasting imaginary frameworks—including continental ones. In fact, I approach the Caribbean as a network of relationships that extend beyond the archipelago, which have inspired Caribbean thinkers and poets—streams that brought people from Europe, Africa, India, China, Central America, and the US to relate “in a certain kind of way,” as Antonio Benitez Rojo says.

Politically, the Caribbean displaces the centrality of the colonial/national dyad so often assumed in postcolonial discourses. Some of its islands have anomalous political statuses—Martinique, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin islands. Their people perform a version of what Laura Pérez describes among Chicanas: we “occupy a nation that does and doesn’t exist. We practice a nationalism that we do and don’t believe in” (5). Sometimes doing so where there is not even a nation. Postcolonial theory has consistently challenged nationalisms for mimicking the strategies of colonial powers, such as the construction of

myths of origin to ground claims to racial and/or cultural purity. But I think a Caribbean critique would be slightly different, even while presupposing the postcolonial critique of nationalisms. Note the different approaches to the question of essentialism, for instance. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously called for the use of strategic essentialism, which she defined as “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”⁴ In a playful displacement of the celebrated phrase, Puerto Rican Ramón Soto Crespo calls to embrace a “strategic *anti*-essentialism,” that is, “a nonnational praxis and a hybrid sense of political belonging.”⁵ Taking such challenges to national frameworks into consideration, I am wondering what shape would postcoloniality take if it began from something other than a nation, with islands that, despite their close geographical and historical connections, don’t share a unifying identity. Would this allow us to de-center the ideal of nation, the assumption that all peoples naturally belong to nations, and attend to the rhythmic patterns that emerge in the movements between shores, back and forth, perhaps propelled by, but not subservient to national projects? The possibility and effects of such a change in focus are still open questions for me.

Geographically, the Caribbean evokes discontinuous land and turbulent seas, an area without a frame, a boundary, or a center. “A sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts,” as Édouard Glissant describes it. Repetition and difference characterize the movements of the sea which are quick and immediate—more perceptible and seemingly chaotic than those of lands. A watery region is visibly affected by fluidity, erosion, and corrosion, as well as by far-reaching connections. In the Caribbean, streams from distant regions converge and disperse; different cultures and

languages mix and interrupt one another in polyrhythmic waves that move the bodies of the racially and nationally diverse people. Benitez Rojo called its population the Peoples of the Sea.

Despite its associations with pleasures offered for tourist consumption, including promises of sexual bounty, the Sea is a site of deep ambiguity, which Glissant describes with poetic sensibility. The depths of the sea contain what remains of the slaves who were discarded there: the balls and chains weighing them down. “I salute you, Ocean! Writes Glissant. “You still preserve on your crest the silent boat of our birth, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories.”⁶ Today we may add the forgotten remains of the failed attempts at unauthorized Caribbean migrations in yola or balsa. Indeed, as Jacqui Alexander puts it, “Water overflows with memory. Emotional memory. Bodily memory. Sacred memory.”⁷

The vision of the Caribbean as an aquatic region has been questioned for allegedly lacking a critique of the imperial forces operating at sea.⁸ How could we forget the threats of imperialist intervention memorably captured in the song “Tiburón”, written by Tite Curet Alonso and made famous by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades’s : “Shark, what are you looking for in our shores?”⁹ (And everyone knew who the shark was!) These are important issues, as are the persistent internal conflicts (as, for instance, between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.) But I read these Caribbean critical works not as simple representations of what is, but as alternative visions what it may become, beyond exclusively continental imaginaries. “Analysis helps us imagine better,” argues Glissant.¹⁰ (A constructive theologian can hardly dismiss such works, or the productive power of symbols, visions, or mythology.)

Puertorrican poet Luz María Umpierre's critique of nationalism and its hierarchical ordering of bodies illustrates the aquatic sensibility. It focuses on a well-known symbol of the island: the walls of the city of San Juan.¹¹ Built to protect the city against foreign invasion during the Spanish colonial period, the old walls are today proudly displayed in souvenirs and tourism propaganda. That a fortified city may signify Puertorrican identity provokes Umpierre, who sees in it an appropriate symbol of the traps of the closed ideals of national identity and its compulsory heteronationalism. The walls of the city lock bodies in restrictive scripts; the walls of the city isolate the island from the sea. To allow for the needed contact between island and sea, Umpierre calls for words: "... for the sea to come/ to touch that island's ground/ one needs/ your words."¹² These words are needed not to impose order on the unruly sea, but to liberate the island from the wall. To be sure, these are not the seemingly disembodied words commonly associated with creation myths; this is not a version of logocentrism. These are body-words that emerge from the islanders' bodies, from their mouths, stomachs, esophaguses, she adds. Such words can erode the oppressive walls of nationalism and heteronormativity and expose identities to the touch of the sea.

The Caribbean interruption of continental reason entails such questioning of nationalism as well as of the totalizing narratives of Christianity, History, and the homogenizing impulses of ontotheology. However, it does not proceed by simply multiplying of individual factors, but rather by developing attentiveness to the relationships among differing, even opposing elements, perceiving patterns in what appears as erratic or chaotic. Both Glissant and Benitez-Rojo rely on chaos theory to develop their analyses. Yet they emphasize that chaos is not to be identified with what we

commonly call the chaotic as that which is devoid of order. Indeed, the main concern for Glissant is what he calls (capital R) Relation: “the entanglement of Relation.” The aesthetic and political project of the poetics of Relation that the Caribbean illustrates for Glissant, is not unlike the polyrhythmic density that Benitez Rojo describes. The people of the sea, in Benitez-Rojo’s view, share neither a common culture, nor race, nor language, but a certain kind of rhythm. Rhythms bring together and interrupt different rhythms, and fragments, seeking affinities and allowing them to be further interrupted by other rhythms. Its movements are not linear or projective, but complex patterns of change and repetition—like those of the breaking waves.

Polyrhythmic Creations

If the images of the sea highlight the multiplicity of fluid historical connections that mark the Caribbean, the attention to rhythm leads us to explore its creative energies, which are no less elemental, historical, and embodied. Although most recognizable in music, polyrhythmic patterns characterize also language and bodies. They are forms of connection that do not tend to sameness. Indeed, Caribbean dance traditions express these polyrhythms as *polycentric* movements—where different parts of the body adopt their own beat.¹³ A rhythm is neither a substance nor an ideal. Léopold Senghor describes it as “the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of life force.” Rhythm precedes being; multiplicity precedes oneness. “Only rhythm gives the word its effective fullness,” Senghor adds, rhythm “is the word of God, that is, the rhythmic word that created the world.”¹⁴

For theologians steeped in Western philosophy, and in the repeating confluences of God and being, such an image of rhythmic becoming may sound eccentric. Are we supposed to imagine the unmoved mover tapping his feet to follow the beat? An odd proposal in the world of Greek metaphysics. But there are also objections coming from our shores. For some decolonial thinkers, the very idea of creation is considered problematic. For instance, Glissant argues that creation narratives (even scientific ones) imply a totalizing view of history; they have served to legitimize filiation and thus support the science of conquest. And some of us might choose to denounce and reject any such stories. Yet I believe there is potential in rewriting or retelling otherwise, moving, like the waves, back to the deep before reaching the shore again—differently.¹⁵ Polyrythms and the sea could guide us to a good Caribbean rendition of the Genesis creation story, which, like all interpretations, entails both memory and improvisation, entangling the performer in the creative articulation.

We remember that when the divine word was uttered in Genesis 1:3, the spirit was vibrating over the face of the waters. The assumed privilege of the Word often silences these primordial pulsations, replacing them with nothing--with no water and no beat. Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep* traces the history of the "lost chaos of creation." The darkness of chaos, she explains, became the intolerable trace of otherness for a "Christian imaginary of mastery" where the ideal was to command from a distance, absolutely. This imaginary of mastery turned out to be quite popular. As we know, the delusion of creating from absolutely nothing was a common theme in colonial discourses, expressed in recurrent appeals to the myth of the empty land and that of pure origin. Furthermore, the Caribbean often represented the very chaos the colonial powers sought

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to eliminate in order to impose its own system, claimed as completely new. The feminization of the water was implicit in the nickname given to the Caribbean region: “the ladies’ gulf.”¹⁶

In contrast to such images of controlling power, Keller argues that the wisdom of the Genesis narrative lies on a model of creativity that emerges on the edge of chaos, through the interaction between the watery depths and the gentle and persistent movements of the spirit. “Non-Being does not precede Relation,” Glissant argues, “it is not expressed on the basis of any break.”¹⁷ Certainly not a break with ancestral spirits and their rhythms. Thus, the Caribbean affirmation of irreducible creolization, of internally multiple peoples, of open-ended syncretic processes or states (Benitez Rojo) cannot entertain such dreams of beginnings from nothing without risking its own extinction.

I am suggesting that this image of creation from watery chaos harmonizes with a Caribbean postcolonial beat. But perhaps it shall not be called creation, it might be more appropriate to talk of polyrhythmic creativity—fluid, continuous, multiple. An allegory or a tale of the rhythms that emerge from histories that, like the sea, are constantly changing. The movements of the spirit are seen as the divine powers of creativity that lead to cultural expressions as well as to theological imagination. Rhythm would be the embodied experience of such movements, which also connects us as creatures. In Senghor’s words, rhythm is “the force that grips us at the root of our being.” It is “expressed through corporeal and sensual means; through lines, surfaces, colors, and volumes in architecture, sculpture, or painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movements in the dance.... In the degree to which rhythm is sensuously embodied it illuminates the spirit.”

A spirit revealed in the embodiment of rhythm is not in tension with the flesh. Instead, the more the rhythms are embodied, the more the spirit—or spirits?—awaken. An ancient intuition... The role of Relating that has been traditionally attributed to the spirit incarnates rhythmically, thus suggesting a mode of relationship that does not assimilate into an external oneness. Relating past history and future possibility, elemental currents and corporeal movements, political critique and poetics of relation, entail difference and repetition, patterns, silences, and interruptions.

Moved in the spirit, a polyrhythmic theology would refuse being constrained within the rigid structure of systematics. Instead it allows patterns to emerge in polycentric ways. It does not pretend to begin from nothing, neither needing to eliminate old symbols to welcome new ones, nor to silence rhythms to introduce new ones. It looks for the entanglements between different cultural expression and religious traditions. The expressions of the performers will be different. Yet, Rhythms are not just collections of isolated pieces. Within the chaos of differences and repetitions, of combinations and permutations” a certain kind of harmony may emerge. The possibility of their harmonies depends on a special capacity to turn these elements in creative interplays where all rhythms might coexist.

¹ Robert McLean and Grace Petrie Williams, *Old Spain in New America* (New York: Association Press, 1913), 134.

² Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Post-continental Philosophy: Its Definition, Contours, and Fundamental Sources,” *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*, Fall 2006, 3, 5.

³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Post-continental Philosophy: Its Definition, Contours, and Fundamental Sources,” *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*, Fall 2006, 3, 5.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 205. Spivak seems unsure about the origins of the term, the first use of which she states has been attributed to both Jacques Derrida and Stephen Heath (Swapan Chakravorty, Suzana Milevska, and Tani E. Barlow, *Conversations with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* [London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull, 2006], 63).

⁵ Ramón E. Soto-Crespo, *Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 115.

⁶ Glissant, 7.

⁷ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of the Crossing: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 290.

⁸ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Roots and Routes: Tidalectics in Caribbean Literature,” 163-175, in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, edited by Annie Paul, (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2007).

⁹ 1980. Banned from radio in Miami.

¹⁰ *Poetics of Relation*, 170.

¹¹ My discussion of Luz María Umpierre’s work is based on Lázaro Lima’s insightful reading of her poetry (*The Latino Body*, 130-139).

¹² *Ibid.*, 138.

¹³ Priscilla Renta, 277.

¹⁴ Léopold Senghor, quoted by Benitez Rojo 80f.

¹⁵ “Relation neither deteriorates through nor obliterates any regression. Its patience outdistances depth and sea” (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 186).

¹⁶ Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 117. Quoted by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Roots and Routes,” in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, edited by Annie Paul, 170.

¹⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 187.