

Theologizing while brown

Haunted by the past. Dreaming about another America.

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December 13, 2016



For me, to theologize while brown means that I theologize with a divided heart, a heart that is scattered across the Americas. It's a divided heart that grows up in the United States but whose roots are hauntingly buried in the soil of Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain, and Africa.

It is a search for the sacred beyond the categories of the Conquerors who called certain things, like whiteness, holy and other things demonic (not their own theft or assaults). It is looking in the mirror and realizing we can't escape the story of conquest because it's written in our flesh and blood.

Perhaps Latin@ theologizing is distinctly American because it gives context to the lies told about "America" and is always imagining another one, the one José Martí called "Nuestra América." Like Langston Hughes who said, "America was never America to me," we dream of a new América unlike the America that hates us and exploits us.

As a Latino, I believe our theology at its best is haunted in the same way that Junot Díaz's characters are haunted in his novels. You hear about the kids speaking Spanglish in New Jersey but this is always interrupted by and interspersed with flashbacks to the Dominican Republic. We may grow up in the States, but we are forever formed by our motherlands, by what has happened there and what continues to happen. Although we are often pressured to assimilate in the U.S., we shouldn't disown our history and our roots. We carry all types of historical and communal traumas that make it easier to forget. There are forces that want to condition us into being apolitical subjects of consumption. It's okay to be Latin@ as long as it's about buying products or filling somebody else's quota in which "the

Hispanic community” is some type of pawn. To take up agency, to remember, to reclaim our roots and maintain solidarity with our motherlands is subversive.

Theologizing while brown, for me, means I belong to traditions that are often erased and overlooked. But I’m proud of my particular inheritance. My theology is formed by abuelitas. My faith was raised on coritos, on vigiliass that go too long, on pupusa and arroz con leche fundraisers, on Marcos Witt as musical canon, on healing, on seeing everyone as hermano y hermana, on the fire of the Spirit, on theology done in community. This is an inheritance that higher education did not give to me and that higher education cannot take away.

Lastly, theologizing while brown in this country comes with a responsibility and beautiful burden. Ada María Isasi-Díaz put it nicely:

Liberation for us, therefore, has to do with more than better participation in the benefits that accrue to us because we live in the U.S.A. It demands much more. It means that we have to struggle to bring about radical sociopolitical change so we will not continue to live at the expense of our sisters and brothers in our countries or communities of origin. (*En La Lucha*, p.2)

I cannot make it if all of us don’t make it.

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