

INTRODUCTION: LEARNING ACROSS LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

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Among critical intellectual circles in Latin America, especially those of a Marxist inheritance, the question of religion and spirituality more broadly has often been an implicit taboo. For instance, liberation philosophy (*filosofía de la liberación*) has been the most important movement to have emerged out of the continent in the philosophical trenches, and yet it has been the object of constant criticism driven by a tacit secularism. This criticism takes as a problem liberation philosophy's genealogical and intellectual closeness to a theological trend autochthonous to Latin America: liberation theology (*teología de la liberación*)—despite the fact that, unlike liberation theology, liberation philosophy does not presuppose the hermeneutics of religious belief.¹ A quick investigation into this attitude shows the origins of secularism in the colonial foundations of modern sovereignty: secularism mediated Europe's Wars of Religion in order to efficiently facilitate the colonization of the Americas once started by Western Christendom, as well as the now increasing colonial encroachment into Africa and Asia by several Protestant nations.² Ultimately rooted at the crux of the colonialities of power and knowledge, the tacit secularism widespread among Latin American intellectual circles that *a priori* disavows religion and/or spirituality has become, for many of us at the Latin American Philosophy of Education Society (LAPES), more of an obstacle to critical thinking than a shared point of departure. Thus, for the 2020 LAPES annual symposium, we sought to explore the transformative potential of religion and spirituality for theory and praxis. This interest was pedagogical in its own right, perhaps more than anything; we wanted to reach out and learn from liberation theologies so as to continue developing our own critical pedagogies and organizational

1→ For a brief account of this problematic and of a postsecular defense of liberation philosophy's originality, see Rafael Vizcaíno, "Which Secular Grounds? The Atheism of Liberation Philosophy," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2021). See also Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, "Incidencia de la Teología de la Liberación en la filosofía latinoamericana," *Realidad: Revista De Ciencias Sociales Y Humanidades* 78 (2000).

2→ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Timothy Fitzgerald, ed. *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Secularism and Religion in the Modern/Colonial World-System: From Secular Postcoloniality to Postsecular Transmodernity," in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

endeavors.

In the summer of 2019, with the help of the LAPES Events + Conferences Collective, I began to prepare for the LAPES symposium, to be held in the spring of 2020 at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. By the fall of 2019, we had received generous funding commitments from several units at Rutgers that made us hopeful and excited about the significance of such incoming gathering.³ However, as preparations were wrapping up and the date of the symposium approached, we were unexpectedly hit by the first wave of the global coronavirus pandemic. Like the rest of academia (and most of the “non-essential” world), we were obliged to delay our anticipated gathering to the fall of 2020 and accommodate such an event in the virtual world. The present issue of *LÁPIZ* began under these difficult institutional circumstances.

The virtual character of the 2020 LAPES symposium in fact represents a unique moment in the history of LAPES. Previous LAPES symposia were rich and intimate full-day and in-person workshops, with elements of pedagogical wisdom, radical thinking, and community-building. The 2020 LAPES symposium, on the other hand, was conducted as a series of virtual lectures over a period of two weeks. This change accommodated the various time zones of our audience and avoided the much detested “zoom fatigue” that now overwhelmed our minds and bodies. Despite these challenging logistics, the 2020 LAPES symposium gathered participants from across the United States, continental Latin America, the insular Caribbean, and across an array of places around the world (such as London), to learn *about* and *from* liberation theologies. The brilliance of our invited speakers and the liveliness of the conversations that ensued are reflected in the breadth and depth of the essays gathered in this issue of *LÁPIZ*. It is a pleasure and an honor to introduce these interventions to a wider audience.

3 → The original funders for this event were the following units at Rutgers: the Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement; the Advanced Institute for Critical Caribbean Studies; the Center for Latin American Studies; the Center for the Philosophy of Religion; the Department of Religious Studies; the Department of Latino and Caribbean Studies; the Program in Comparative Literature; and the Department of Jewish Studies. In its final virtual modality, the sole funder was the Rutgers Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement. We also thank DePaul University for facilitating the technological aspects needed to host the event.

First, however, a few general words on liberation theology to help contextualize the individual interventions gathered here. Liberation theology is a movement that emerged in the late 1960's Latin America as a critique of the social, political, and economic conditions of domination that plagued the continent.⁴ This was the time of social and political revolutions in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, and the religious sphere was no exception. In the Christian context (and let us remember that, at the time, Latin America was almost 100% Christian – and today's 88% is not insignificant),⁵ the Roman Catholic Church had just emerged from an internal process of reform (the Second Vatican Council) that aimed to make the Church closer to the people. Enabled by such initiative, those individuals inside the institution that sought to support the people in their demands for social and political change began to develop a theological justification for their actions. Such intellectual framework is what came to be known as liberation theology.⁶

The leading (European) theological discourses of the time saw in economic poverty the seed for a spiritual reward in the afterlife.⁷ Against such discourses, (Latin American) liberation theology put forth a critical analysis of poverty that encompassed the categories of economic exploitation and political domination. From this standpoint, liberation theologians saw in orthodox theologies an unspoken endorsement of the unjust status quo. Their work as liberationists, on the other hand, was to re-articulate what they thought was the fundamental function of theology: liberation from forms of “fetishism and idolatry,” even if those forms are to be found inside religious

4 → Juan José Tamayo, *Teologías del sur: El giro descolonizador* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2017).

5 → See the 2014 Pew Research Center's analysis on “Religion in Latin America.” <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/#history-of-religious-change>.

6 → Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). Some of the early publications are: Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington, DC: Corpus Publications, 1969); Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1973); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas*, 7th ed. (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1975).

7 → See Enrique Dussel, *Teología de la liberación: Un panorama de su desarrollo* (Mexico City: Potrerillos Editores, 1995).

institutions themselves.⁸ Liberation theology decenters dogma—“often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation,” as Gustavo Gutiérrez puts it—in order to re-center the struggling poor and their demands for liberation against domination.⁹ In this way, liberation theology radically transforms the form and content of theology. It also entails an *orthopraxis*: a practical action towards liberation summarized in the famous motto of “the preferential option for the poor.”¹⁰

There are two specific elements in Latin American liberation theology that made it imperative for us at LAPES to engage in a deep study of this tradition. First is the question of liberation theology’s embracing of the secular social sciences, particularly Marxism and dependency theory—features that uniquely facilitate a dialogue with theology from non-theological or even from irreligious points of departure. Liberation theology is perhaps most well-known outside of theological circles for its open adoption of critical social theory, a position that infamously resulted in the Vatican’s 1984 indictment of the “terrible contradictions” of liberation theology.¹¹ As a group largely influenced by the legacies of Marxism in both theory and practice (as evidenced in our previous symposia on neoliberalism, resistance, social movements, and related topics), we at LAPES found an entryway to liberation theology through its critique of economic dependency and capitalist accumulation (as a form of idolatry), as well as its

8 → Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 10.

9 → Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 8.

10 → Daniel G. Groody and Gustavo A. Gutiérrez, eds., *The Preferential Option for the Poor Beyond Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

11 → This Instruction was penned by Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and future Pontiff Benedict XVI. The assumption in such critique is that the conceptual framework of Marxism is inherently secularist, atheist, and anti-religious. Defenders of liberation theology range from anti-Marxist positions (claiming that the Marxist influence is superficial and therefore negligible) to those that argue that Marxism is neither secularist, atheist, nor anti-religious (that Marx’s work is, in fact, an implicit theology). For a powerful example of the latter defense, see Enrique Dussel, *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* (Navarra, Spain: Verbo Divino, 1993). For an expanded inquiry of the place of liberation theology in the development of liberation philosophy, and for an account of their shared critique of the secular-religious complex, see my forthcoming book tentatively titled *Decolonizing the Postsecular*.

epistemic critique of disciplinary fetishism.

Lesser known than its purported acceptance of Marxism, however, is liberation theology's embrace of yet another autochthonous current of Latin American thought: dependency theory (*teoría de la dependencia*). It is through its engagement with dependency theory that liberation theology, in fact, goes beyond the Eurocentrism of both liberal *and* Marxist theories of economic development that take for granted the colonialist plunder of the Americas as the precondition for modern development. Against such Eurocentric prescriptions, dependency theorists sought to "delink" from the modern capitalist world system in a way that decoupled development from the stageism of a colonialist modernization.¹² In the work of figures such as Aníbal Quijano, the heart of dependency theory has been subsumed in the "decolonial turn" across the humanities and social sciences, yet another vital perspective that structures our work at LAPES.¹³

The second element in liberation theology that sparked our attention was the influence of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy on the entire movement.¹⁴ In many ways, the emergence of critical pedagogy and liberation theology are strikingly similar: both emerge in Latin America (especially the Southern Cone) as products of the mid-to-late 1960's. There are, in fact, very concrete connections between the two. Scholars such as James Kirylo have noted how the notion of consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) and Freire's notion of hope

12 → Samir Amin, "A Note on the Concept of Delinking," *Review* 10, no. 3 (1987).

13 → Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, "Americanness as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System," *International Social Science Journal* 29 (1992); "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-Continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique – an Introduction," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011). Within the decolonial turn, Walter D. Mignolo has moreover usefully applied Amin's framework of "delinking" to the level of epistemology. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

14 → Dussel, *Teología de la liberación*, 95; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Berman Ramos, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

are analogous to the “preferential option for the poor.”¹⁵ Similarly, the practical-organizational aspects of Freire’s literacy campaigns showed liberation theologians a concrete model under which to build their basic ecclesial communities in the region. And yet, despite these clear overlaps, the relation between critical pedagogy and liberation theology remains largely understudied today.¹⁶ We at LAPES wanted to break from this tendency by learning from liberation theologies.

The pluralization from the singular “liberation theology” to “liberation theologies”—manifest in the title of this issue of *LÁPIZ*—took place as the Latin American Christian movement spread across the continent, and subsequently the world at large. This phenomenon started with the political persecution of liberation theologians in the Southern Cone, followed by a period of exile during which the movement encountered new interlocutors and different cultural *and* inter-religious contexts. The encounters nourished the movement as all of these contexts were, in various ways, already searching for a politically committed religious engagement in their own circumstances.¹⁷ This confrontation organically resulted in the development of liberation theologies from distinct corners of the world that diagnosed the locus of oppression in their given contexts, from Black liberation theology in the United States¹⁸ to *minjung* theology in Korea,¹⁹ and even theologies in Jewish,²⁰ Islamic,²¹ Indigenous,²² and

15 → James D. Kirylo, "Chapter Seven: Liberation Theology and Paulo Freire," *Counterpoints* 385 (2011).

16 → An important exception remains the work of Peter McLaren, himself a close collaborator of Freire. See Peter McLaren and Petar Jandrić, "From Liberation to Salvation: Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Meets Liberation Theology," *Policy Futures in Education* 15, no. 5 (2017).

17 → Dussel, *Teología de la liberación*, 153.

18 → James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 50th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

19 → Cyris H. Moon, *A Korean Minjung Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

20 → Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, 3rd expanded ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004).

21 → Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

22 → Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 30th anniversary ed. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003).

queer²³ contexts, among others. Liberation theologies have continued to develop ever since, pushing the boundaries of the critique of domination and fetishism and radically questioning the form of theological inquiry and the space of the religious towards new *post-theological* and/or *post-religious* horizons.²⁴

The essays gathered in this issue of *LÁPIZ* embody the promise of a politically-committed scholarship that takes seriously the transformative potential of religion and spirituality for theory and praxis.

The liberation theologian and critical theorist Mark Lewis Taylor offers a biographical account of his involvement with the Black radical struggle, in particular the movement for the liberation of the journalist-activist Mumia Abu-Jamal, commonly known as the world's "most famous" death-row inmate. In his account, Taylor makes a conceptual use of Enrique Dussel's notion of "interpellation," which Taylor understands as part of Dussel's broader "pedagogics of liberation."²⁵ Taylor thus talks about the interpellation that Mumia's case made on Taylor's lifeworld, articulating what it entailed for a white academic at an elite university to respond to such a call. It is an interpellation that hails, haunts, re-situates, and ruptures—a dynamic that changes one's subjectivity and, in Taylor's case, his routine practices, such as thinking, writing, and teaching. As the founder of the organization "Educators for Mumia Abu-Jamal" and Mumia's own "religious advisor," Taylor's testimony is one example of what is at stake in the political and pedagogical affirmation of a liberating spiritual praxis.

We are also delighted to publish a short personal response to Taylor's essay written by Mumia Abu-Jamal himself directly from the

23 → Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

24 → Ivan Petrella, ed. *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Thia Cooper, *The Re-Emergence of Liberation Theologies: Models for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Mark L. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); Ary Fernández Albán, "Des-Colonialidad y teología de la liberación: Una exploración del desarrollo del "pensamiento des-colonial" y sus implicaciones para las teologías latino-americanas de la liberación," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* (2013)

25 → Enrique Dussel, "A Brief Note on Pedagogics," *LÁPIZ* 3 (2018); *Pedagogics of Liberation: A Latin American Philosophy of Education*, trans. David I. Backer and Cecilia Diego (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2019).

Mahanoy State Correctional Institution in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. Abu-Jamal's letter, like much of the prison writings that catapulted him to global attention, is a succinct and powerful testimony of our times. Writing from COVID-19 quarantine, Abu-Jamal reads Dussel's notion of interpellation as accounting for the "real costs" of freedom. He writes: "In the land that claims 'freedom for all' there are costs for those who actively try to pursue the damned thing—real costs—for real freedom, no? I am reminded of that old adage 'Rome wasn't built in a day'; but isn't it also true that it didn't fall in a day? But didn't it fall?" Today, Abu-Jamal's health is in decline. He is recovering from a coronavirus infection while dealing with a congestive heart disease, Hepatitis-C, and a serious skin condition for which he does not receive adequate medical care.²⁶ He remains a tireless beacon in the struggle for Black liberation.²⁷

The next essay, from the anthropologist of religion Sylvia Marcos, turns to a different cultural and historical context to outline an Indigenous theology (or perhaps better, Indigenous *wisdom*) as a challenge to traditionally Christian liberation theologies. Building on over four decades of ethnographic fieldwork in Chiapas, Mexico, Marcos argues that Indigenous theology/wisdom goes beyond the possibilities opened by Christian liberation theology because the former departs from the "practices and reflections on faith emerging from Mesoamerican philosophical heritages." The outline of an Indigenous theology/wisdom is then an illustration of a potential intercultural (and I would add "ecumenical," in Sylvia Wynter's sense) pathway to decolonize theology and religious experience beyond the coloniality of knowledge.²⁸

Returning to the U.S. American context, Rashad Raymond Moore, philosopher of education and pastor at the First Baptist Church of Crown Heights, offers a profound biographical and theological

26 → For an update on Abu-Jamal's health, see this news report from *The Philadelphia Tribune*: https://www.phillytrib.com/news/local_news/mumia-abu-jamal-loses-30-pounds-while-recovering-from-covid-19/article_c5d1e74-7639-5161-8558-57a7d68a2dd8.html.

27 → For information on the "Free Mumia" campaign, see: <https://letmumiaout.com/>.

28 → Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Auto-poetic Turn/Overtturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 191.

meditation on the question of Black education in the United States, paying special attention to children. Building on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Moore dwells on the cracks between liberation theology and philosophy of education, where children are hardly considered in their respective disciplinary analyses. A deeply personal meditation (as a doctoral candidate in philosophy of education, a pastor, and former student of James Cone, the eminent father of Black liberation theology), Moore's analyses of suffering in school in contradistinction to the joy of liberation, offer a seed to revitalize and enrich both philosophy of education's prescriptive critiques of schooling, as well as Black liberation theology's conception of freedom in an anti-Black world.

And concluding our pathway by returning to the Chiapaneca borderlands, the Afro-Cuban feminist non-binary activistx historian A. Tito Mitjans Alayón offers some methodological reflections on interrogating what they call "the instrumentalist discourses of the cis-colonial, heterosexist logics of the mostly White-mestizo academy in Latin America." Also geographically situated in Chiapas, Mexico, Mitjans Alayón recounts what it was like to develop a "feminist, antiracist, queer, and transfeminist" critical method that could "recuperate Afrodiasporic epistemologies and relocate them on the epistemic plane whereupon one encounters Western knowledge"—all while challenging Mexico's White-aspiring, anti-Black, and anti-Indigenous discourse of *mestizaje*. Mitjans Alayón ultimately shows a way to learn from the religious formations of *América*, such as Regla de Ocha, Candomblé, and Vodou, as a decolonization of knowledge that can also affirm feminist, antiracist, queer, and transfeminist ways of being in the world.

It is my hope that these essays can help the reader to "enter the Serpent," as Gloria Anzaldúa would have put it, which is to say, to enter the "path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*."²⁹ For if these pieces show one thing in common, it is that such a path of knowing and learning must eschew

29 → Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 2007), 41. For an elaboration on this formulation as a moment in the decolonization of knowledge that entails a critique of coloniality of the secular, see Rafael Vizcaíno, "Secular Decolonial Woes," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2021).

the tacit secularist disavowal of religion and spirituality that continues to reign supreme among radical and critical circles in philosophy, especially philosophy of education. ■

