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A Flor de Piel. Exploring Latin American Decolonial Aesthetics for Religious Studies. Sensing Puerto Rican Media

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A Flor de Piel

Exploring Latin American Decolonial Aesthetics for Religious Studies: Sensing Puerto Rican Media

Abstract

A current opening for research in the field of religion, film, and media is the interpretation of cultural production through the sensing and knowing that stems from decolonial approaches. In this article, I argue for the use of a Latin American decolonial aesthetics in this field of study, specifically in exploring examples from Puerto Rican art and media that incite community-making practices in association with a religious/theological imagination. I provide a list of eight key characteristics of decolonial aesthetics and introduce the expression *a flor de piel* (brought to, or sensed on, the surface) to describe the type of sensing that these works of art produce in an embodied dialectics between the medium and its audience.

Keywords

Decolonial, Aesthetics, Puerto Rico, Art, National Identity, Latin America, Sensing

Biography

Yara González-Justiniano is Assistant Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture with emphasis in Latinx Studies at Vanderbilt University, USA. Her most recent book, *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice: Esperanza en Práctica* (2022), wrestles with the issue of how hope can look in the midst of socioeconomic crises.

Introduction

A starting point for reflection that is characteristic of Latinx theologies and of decolonial theory/theology is *lo cotidiano*, everyday's repetition which is "an amalgamation of experiences in the quest for human fulfillment".¹ Many of these quotidian experiences and practices are captured in Latin American artistic productions, some of which are deemed decolonial when they paint,

1 Varela Ríos 2021, 98–99.

denounce, expose, critique, and/or reform colonial oppression and its histories. When describing something as “decolonial” within this article, I refer to the “relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality.”²

A current opening for research in the field of religion, film, and media is interpretation of cultural production in light of the sensing and knowing that stems from decolonial approaches. In this article, I argue for the use of Latin American decolonial aesthetics in this field of study, specifically examples from Puerto Rican art and media that incite community-making practices associated with a religious/theological imagination. Art tells us something about society, but not every artistic expression articulates decoloniality. Puerto Rican theologian Luis N. Rivera Pagán claims that there cannot be any academic integrity in research on Latin American identities and spiritualities if the research does not consider the importance of cultural and artistic productions in the collective religious imagination of the people.³ He says,

We need to learn to perceive in the different cultural creations those that express with aesthetic excellence and existential depth a community's anguish and aspirations, those that *bring to the surface* [*traen a flor de piel*] the atrocious and terrifying wrinkles of the historical expression of religiosity and, simultaneously, the exceptional reserves of faith, hope, and love that arise from the spiritualities of our people.⁴

The phrase *a flor de piel* can be translated here as brought “to the surface”. However, this translation misses the nuances in the Spanish, which conveys the idea of something revealed, raw, and sensitive seeping out of one's skin/flesh. It is this type of sensing, knowing, and being in one's experience that a decolonial aesthetics brings to the study of religion and spiritual practices. Rivera Pagán states that the writers who unearth coloniality and provide alternatives to its imagination have been “sharper and cleverer than social scientists, who have been slower with stripping themselves from European epistemological and hermeneutical paradigms.”⁵ Rivera Pagán focuses on literature; in this essay I discuss a plurality of art forms.

2 Mignolo 2011, 10. See also Isasi-Díaz/Mendieta 2012.

3 Rivera Pagán 2017, 47.

4 Rivera Pagán 2017, 48 (my translation and emphasis).

5 Rivera Pagán 1999, 94.

Decolonial Aesthetics Functioning a *Flor de Piel*

In this section, I consider four examples from Puerto Rican art and media where decolonial knowing sits a *flor de piel*.⁶ These examples integrate Walter Mignolo's call for a decolonial aesthesis, where the emphasis is on sensing and questioning the ways we organize how we think. Mignolo writes,

decolonial art (or literature, architecture, and so on) enacts these critiques, using techniques like juxtaposition, parody, or simple disobedience to the rules of art and polite society, to expose the contradictions of coloniality. Its goal, then, is not to produce feelings of beauty or sublimity, but *ones of sadness, indignation, repentance, hope, and determination to change things in the future*.⁷

To aid with the identification of decolonial aesthetics in works of art and cultural productions I highlight here eight key characteristics. These features are a product of my assessment of recurring approaches to decolonial theory and aesthetics. Their identification has been partly inspired by the works I engage with in this article.⁸

Decolonial aesthetics

- critiques and/or names colonial oppression,
- stays close to the lived practices of people/nature,
- challenges hierarchy and propriety,
- is accessible and intelligible to the subject being represented,
- articulates a message which is not hidden,⁹
- generates affect in the recipient,
- reveals and/or favors connection and complexities,
- reaches for alternative worlds, cosmovisions, and/or realities.

6 I engage with scholars whose frameworks and interlocutors stem from both decolonial and postcolonial theory; this does not mean I am engaging with these fields interchangeably.

7 Mignolo 2013 (my emphasis).

8 See Alves 2002; Cusicanqui Rivera 2020; Medina 2021.

9 The message is an explicit and understandable response to colonialism and oppression. This does not mean that something that is not intended to generate decolonial sensibilities cannot be used to do that. For example, theologian Héctor Varela Ríos (2021) reads Francisco Oller's painting *El velorio* through a decolonial lens, not to mourn the past or even to remember it but to form a new liberative meaning for the present.

These key characteristics serve a practical approach that enables the researcher to identify decolonial aesthetics in actual artworks. The examples discussed in this article reflect several of these characteristics.

Decolonial aesthetics, which questions colonialism and coloniality, prioritizes collectivity over individualism. A decolonial discourse that remains within the structures of Western cognitive logic, without wrestling with the flesh, place, and experiences of the subjects from which it extracts knowledge, is disingenuous at best. The field's relevance should not be focused on "elevating and dignifying" the colonial subject by moving them from the margins to the center; it must foster the transformation of the problems of centrality, individualism, and upward mobility that decolonial discourse identifies. The struggle for decolonization involves fighting intrinsic individualism practices intertwined with an illusory discourse of community. The task is daunting, for we must search for human/nature's dignity, liberation, and flourishing, which colonialism stifles.

Artists shape and reflect the cultural imagination of the past, present, and future. In examples from Puerto Rican media, artists tie the feeling, representation, and resistance of words and images of socioeconomic and political crisis together with the cry for national identities. Art reveals where the colonial logic lives. Decolonial aesthetics depict the colonial body and mirror it back to us.¹⁰ Sensing happens in the body. In *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Arts*, Juan Ramos looks at the intersections of poetry, music, and film that allow the recipient to "sense otherwise" by challenging/undoing "what we now call coloniality or the distribution of the sensible."¹¹ In her interpretation of feminist decolonial theorist María Lugones, philosopher Denise Meda Calderón writes, "As a coalitional theoretical approach, decolonial aesthesis invokes a cosmological sense to recognize re-creative communal socialities that enliven resistance."¹² I believe this recognition matters for the study of religion in colonial contexts, especially in the subfield that examines the relationship between media and religion.

The sensitivity produced by visual, musical, and literary forms of art not only awakens the senses and creative imagination but also leads people to understand the need to intuit differently. For example, Puerto Rican ethno-

10 Engaging with literature and decolonial theory, Teresa Delgado (2017, 70) says that "literature as a descriptive source for theology demonstrates the 'is'."

11 Ramos 2019, 9.

12 Meda Calderón 2023, 25.

musicologist Julissa Ossorio Bermúdez argues that music is action since it “establishes visions and paradigms” that, when contextualized, transform the crisis in its realities and lay out new paths to follow.¹³ This claim can also be made for other artistic expressions. Emphasizing the 1960s as a temporal framework for decolonial cultural analysis, Juan Ramos proposes that Latin American aesthetics embodies feeling by means of the affective contamination described by theorist Félix Guattari in terms of the transcendence of art. Ramos argues that Latin American artists established the paradigms of these sensibilities (this affective contamination) as practices that enable academic decolonial discourse and through their aesthetics help en flesh it. Ramos says that “[m]oving beyond experiences and encounters with artworks implies exposing ourselves to other geopolitical and temporal ways of knowing and sensing. Our affective response to these encounters cannot just be to sense as we do, or as we are comfortable sensing, but indeed to sense otherwise.”¹⁴ The distance between academic scholarship and on-the-ground practices often leaves scholars of religion and theologians engaging with an imaginary community and poised to identify transcendence in the gaps in practice. Art and media work bridges the gulf between academic discourse and the (missing) body.

Decolonial Aesthetics in Puerto Rican Art and Media

In this section, I briefly discuss the novel *Mangle*, the film *LA PECERA* (THE FISHBOWL, Glorimar Marrero, PR 2023), and two music videos, *LATINOAMÉRICA* (Calle 13, PR 2011) and *DESPIERTA BORINQUEÑO* (Vin Ramos, PR 2022), to analyze a decolonial aesthetic where the feelings – those mentioned by Mignolo as previously cited – arise from exposure to colonialism and colonialities and from existential/religious claims that embrace the complexity of life. My research centers on the contexts of faith communities and the diversity of their expressions, leading me to analyze aspects of social groups, such as popular culture or art, that academic discourse has tended to compartmentalize or deny the opportunity to be a dialogue partner. By focusing on popular culture and art we can acknowledge social development in conjunction with the needs and challenges of the macrosocial. The

13 Ossorio Bermúdez 2017, 61.

14 Ramos 2019, 218.

separation of the sacred and the secular in Christendom resists certain expressions of culture through a hegemonic imaginary of divine ascendance, and in coloniality anything that challenges this separation is demonized. For example, aspects of Puerto Rican racial and ethnic identity have been transmitted and shaped by a discourse of the harmonious integration of African, Spanish, and Indian heritage. However, there is no discourse of harmonious integration of these cultures' religious traditions vis-à-vis Christianity. A recent illustration of this tension can be found in the novel *Mangle*. It tells the story of Enrique Collazo, a hero of mythical proportions destined to save the island of Puerto Rico. Author Andrés Sanfeliú Cruz integrates multiple religious traditions when in order to receive full initiation into his powers Enrique must become one with the island spirit of the *Cemí* (Taíno Indian) and Orishas (African Diaspora) while he struggles with his Christian faith (Spanish).¹⁵

In his work *Diálogos y Polifonías*, Luis Rivera Pagán illustrates the struggle for freedom from a spirituality of imperial domination. He shows how academic thought engages with processes of liberation by first identifying the voices that are contained in the historical and religious discourse and then continuing on towards acceptance and embrace of the multiple voices and practices that challenge oppression. Rivera Pagán aims to embrace and reveal the theological polyphony that creates a people, and he argues that culture – in his analysis, Puerto Rican culture – is one of those formative voices. Art and artists reveal what is *a flor de piel* in this polyphony. Rivera Pagán says that “[f]rom their imagination and intelligence arises a bold and tenacious effort to free our religious imagination from colonial vestiges and forge genuine and broad horizons for our community and personal identities.”¹⁶ In *Mangle* this polyphony challenges hierarchy and propriety – one of the characteristics of decolonial aesthetics listed above – revealing the cultural weight of imperial domination, as named by Rivera Pagán.

Another dimension to interpreting the impressions embedded in one's skin through art and brought to light by polyphony is most intimately explored in *Poetics of the Flesh* by Puerto Rican theologian Mayra Rivera. In this book, Rivera traces a theological genealogy of flesh where the body is the primary site of knowledge. She looks at Jesus's “I am” statements, which suggest “patterns of coexistence” because these statements are, she says,

15 Sanfeliú Cruz 2021.

16 Rivera Pagán 2017, 53.

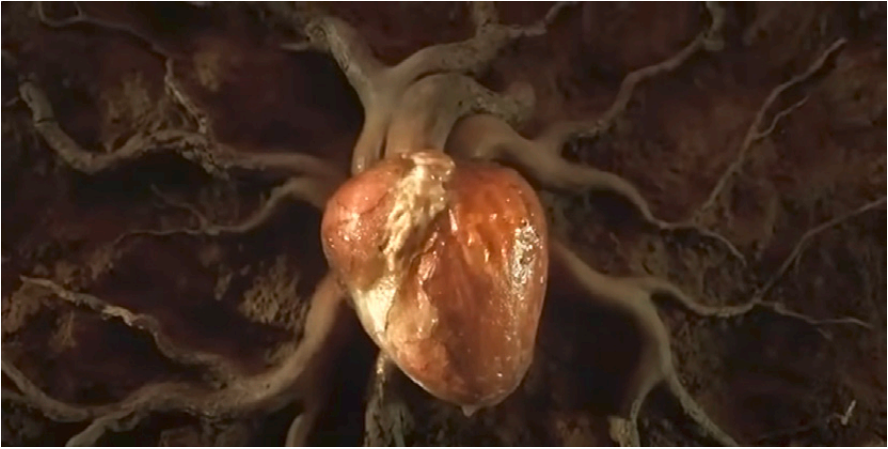


Fig. 1: Buried beating heart. Music video still, LATINOAMÉRICA (Calle 13, PR 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkFJE8ZdeG8>, 00:05:15.

“woven with otherness. The ‘I am’ is one and many.”¹⁷ She argues that the “flesh is conceived as formless and impermanent, crossing the boundaries between the individual body and the world.”¹⁸ The lyrics of the song “Latinoamérica” by the music group Calle 13 resemble such a sequence of “I am” statements as well as ways in which these crossings of flesh are embodied across Latin America. In the song, the word “soy” is associated with different cultural, social, or religious references in Latin America. The video for the song portrays people in different places in Latin America performing the same action, though the lyrics speak in the singular, “I am” Latin America. An image of a beating heart accompanies the initial beats of the song, and then we see the first face looking into the mirror and saying “soy”. The video ends with the same heart beating beneath the earth, now sprouting roots (fig. 1). This song has several characteristics of decolonial aesthetics, including drawing from the lived experiences of people, critiquing colonial oppression, and generating affect on the recipient by showing the “patterns of coexistence” in its images rooted in people and land.

Mayra Rivera recognizes that the body produces/has knowledge and argues that the effects of colonialism can be traced in the genealogy of the body and flesh. She writes,

17 Rivera 2015, 26.

18 Rivera 2015, 2.

The world shapes me without my knowledge or consent. Touching flesh yields no unmediated sense or knowledge, however. The dynamic, evolving multiplicity of all the elements that constitute my flesh are never fully present to me. But their long histories – which are always already social and material – leave their marks in my body. The socio-material elements of my own history interlace with the sediments of my ancestral past. Indirectly, obscurely, and partially – my flesh remembers things I never knew and will never know. I can never fully grasp flesh. It is dynamic, indeterminate. Not knowing is not a weakness, I remember Glissant saying. But not wanting to sense the entanglements of our relations is. We cannot fully know it, but “we imagine it through poetics.”¹⁹

Puerto Rican scholar Roberta Hurtado works with the themes of flesh and body similarly to Rivera. She talks about scars as communicating coloniality – its visible effects – and describes flesh, *la piel*, as “the physical experience [that] pulsates with sentience.”²⁰ This embodiment is also reflected in the film *LA PECERA*, in which writer and director Glorimar Marrero tells the story of Noelia, a young woman who is dying of cancer. The film is set in Puerto Rico in 2017, in the weeks before Hurricane María. “This film is painful”, was my first and lasting reaction when I saw it, an affective response that characterizes decolonial aesthetics. It depicts the pain of the character, but her constant pain, given its context and the film’s visceral visuals, provokes pain in the spectator throughout the film. Noelia’s body represents the island of Puerto Rico and is a metaphor for the relationship between colonialism, ecological violence, and the sick body. Noelia is dying days before the greatest natural catastrophe in recent Puerto Rican history (fig. 2). The final scene is her funeral. Her naked body is lying in a bathtub in a beautiful backyard, then the film cuts to black, and the credits begin to roll accompanied by the violent sound of the hurricane winds. At the movie theater, no one moved; we sat in silence as if waiting for the feelings that were *a flor de piel* to leave our bodies, so that they would not follow us back home.

Scholars of religion and media will look at video and other media where a religious world unfolds and almost instinctively begin identifying themes and systems with existential and theological implications. Art creates and

19 Rivera 2015, 110, referencing Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

20 Hurtado 2019, 44.



Fig. 2: Noelia on the floor. Film still from the trailer for LA PECERA (THE FISHBOWL, Glorimar Marrero, PR 2023), <https://youtu.be/Yyvi8RePYt4?si=fHeoxs64DQnymqJj>, 00:00:24.

re-creates the networks of our complex realities and imaginaries and by creating an external space and temporality it allows the beholder to experience a sense of self and community. In decolonial aesthetics, religion cannot be relegated to a personal experience without acknowledgement of how it organizes structures and cosmovision. Meda Calderón, following María Lugones's work on decolonial aesthetics, says that “[i]t is precisely through seeing coloniality that we can track the concealed social arrangements and see the worlds of sense that do not conform to the colonial/modern system.”²¹ This characteristic of decolonial aesthetics is also apparent in the music video DESPIERTA BORINQUEÑO (Wake up Puerto Rican), curated in 2020 by the artist Vin Ramos (fig. 3). “Despierta borinqueño” is a line from Puerto Rico’s revolutionary anthem written by Lola Rodríguez de Tió in 1868. The lyrics urge the Puerto Rican people to wake up from the Spanish colonial grip. The video, released during the Covid-19 pandemic, shows artists, dancers, and teachers mimicking the lyrics (many of them are in tears), pleading *wake up*, because Puerto Rico is dying and Puerto Ricans are being displaced. The different people shown represent a sector of Puerto Rico’s population, all singing the same song but with only one voice. The video urges people to see the signs and warns them not to let fear rob them of their liberty and a dignified life. Though institutional religion is not an explicit theme in this video, the “concealed social arrangements” Calderón points to are implicit in the song, since Puerto Rican colonial history

21 Meda Calderón 2023, 23.



Fig. 3: The actress playing Mariana Bracetti is sewing the black Puerto Rican flag; in the corner a sign language interpreter is translating the song. Music video still, DESPIERTA BORINQUEÑO (Vin Ramos, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEcAe4mYfGM>, 00:03:16.

dates to the Spanish project of political and religious conquest. The video takes a century-old anthem that still carries vestiges of colonial struggle and applies it to the contemporary moment, thus reflecting decolonial aesthetics' capacity to critique colonial oppression. The combination of visual elements, music, and the memory of cultural history tingles one's skin, a sensing *a flor de piel*.

In contexts of social displacement, visual art and music help people connect and heal the wounds that the disruption of colonialism has left in the community. The displacement and separation from the communal bond caused by colonialism has ruptured social, psychological, and spiritual ties. My aim in engaging with decolonial aesthetics is to recognize where an illustration of sustainable hope converges at the communal level with the scaffoldings of society and material conditions. When this scaffolding converses with others institutions that shape society, it shows that artistic expressions not only point out but also promote ways of organizing society equitably and fairly.²² Juan G. Ramos warns against falling into the melancholia of an unfulfilled promise of decolonialization, referring specifically to Latin American

22 Though I am not able to explore the nuances of religion, hope, and community within this article, this is work I have done at more length in my book *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice. Esperanza en Práctica* (2022).

literature of the 1960s.²³ I would add a warning against the temptation to fall into a sense of despair and apathy. The examples discussed in this article show glimpses of the decolonial future that exists within the colonial realities. An aim of decolonial aesthetics is to allow for the imagination of practices of agency and social participation that evoke a collective approach. Such an approach would point toward social and creative reform through the embodiment of existential and transcendental ideals of community. Moving forward and generating life and change while experiencing the weight of injustice and its saturation of all aspects of life can seem a hopeless task. Understanding the world that is, while also dreaming of a world that could be, can create a generative and creative space. To resist this type of apathy we must create structures and strategies where the work carried out by the community is psychologically, physically, spiritually, and economically sustainable.

Implications

Decolonial aesthetics open spaces, both discursive and physical. Though art and artists exist in a world of contradictions, the examples we find in artistic imagery and imagination offer constructive paradigms for liberating change. Art and artists function as curators of practices and casters of portents. Theorist and artist Adolfo Albán Achinte, in response to Latin American art being mediated by the universalized categories of Western aesthetics which coloniality imposed, frames Westernization as an alleged emancipation of beliefs with a quasi-salvific character.²⁴ Therefore, the only response to this emancipation, in order to awaken Latin America's creativity, is to take back the pre-modern beliefs that the certainty of modernity took, "so that the telluric constructs meanings, emotions flutter without pre-established limits, imagination penetrates us to the core, and the enigmatic becomes a possibility of peering into other ways of existing."²⁵ The application of a decolonial perspective on religious aesthetics not only identifies which existential or theological concerns are depicted but also shows the ways in which art re-creates our present and claims a future by disrupting colonial restraints. Ramos understands that

23 Ramos 2019, 219.

24 Albán Achinte 2013, 447–449.

25 Albán Achinte 2013, 449–450 (my translation).

decolonial aesthetics emerges from practice, from an investment in linking *poiesis* (as doing) to *aisthesis* (as sensing). In this vein, decolonial aesthetics is simultaneously a way of understanding decolonial thinking through artistic practice and artistic practice through decolonial thinking.²⁶

In considering sensing through the lens of decolonial aesthetics, the field of religious studies and media studies will be able to understand the scaffolding of colonialism by interrogating the structures of spiritual and religious oppressive discourse and practices. There is a substantial and material difference between the communities we tangibly build and those we extract from the imaginary or the imagined community. Though easily abstracted, *a flor de piel* describes a knowing from a sensation on the body, in its flesh. Knowing arises onto that first layer of skin and is not only felt but also visible. It orients. Following Mayra Rivera's line of thinking, decolonial aesthetics demands scholarship that obliges us to sense the entanglements of our relationships.

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26 Ramos 2019, 29.

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