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Claiming a Space of Empowerment: Exploring Hispanic Feminist Theology and the Struggle towards Justice and Liberation

Sarah R. Pyle

Empowerment, as it is explored in this paper, is highly complex. Simplified, the word empowerment means liberation. Empowerment, and so liberation, can only be achieved once space is claimed. It is a lack of space which defines the experience of oppression. Space is the area in which we claim and validate our identity, an identity which is an expression of full humanity. Space is the location from which we can establish community and solidarity with others. To have a space is to have the ability to give shape to one’s reality. Space is where we find self-knowledge and self-affirmation. One’s own space implies that there is a separation between that one and another and this separation indicates one’s ability to differentiate one’s self and honor one’s uniqueness, but this does not symbolize one’s exclusion of others. Claiming one’s space allows one to claim dignity and demand justice but also requires that one look beyond one’s space to establish community.

If one is robbed of a space to call one’s own, power relations are implicit. To render one “space-less” is to exert power, authority, privilege and dominance over another; this is the act of oppression. Without a space the oppressed have less, perhaps no, leverage in giving definition to the reality which surrounds them. Without space it seems that all one can do is submit and obey the imposed, oppressive reality. This oppression is an oppression of marginalization which deprives people of essential humanity. Those without space are voiceless and disenfranchised; they suffer without voice to complain. This is the true experience of powerlessness. So, as we look at a situation of oppression, reinforced by thousands of years, pervasive in our every institution, we ask: how can we incite change in a reality which seems irreversibly damaged and perpetually unjust.

The desire of this paper is to answer the question of spacelessness from a theological standpoint. Theology has the ability to define reality; it is a powerful resource which must be utilized. Theology has been an instrument in the maintenance of oppression, but it can be a tool of liberation. Theology can create a space for the oppressed, and once this space is claimed, the process
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towards liberation and justice can begin. This is a space, it should also be said, which demands unity and cohesive community. Theological discourse provides a space for empowerment which Hispanic feminist theologians are seizing and claiming as their own in an ultimate act of empowerment.

Sallie McFague, a feminist theologian, asserts that our language and metaphors for God define our reality. If a patriarchal God is fashioned, so is a patriarchal society. To indoctrinate religious institutions with patriarchal rhetoric is to establish widespread, pervasive oppression of women within a culture. Our language and metaphors are profoundly important to our society. Thus, when women are robbed of any space and voice within a culture, they have no participation in the language and metaphors that will create their reality. Language and metaphor instead become weapons of oppression, tools used to build the borders that tyrannize women. To work for social justice is to unearth the language and the metaphors that have become deeply embedded within a culture. Once unearthed, language and metaphor must be deconstructed, examined and scrutinized, then reimagined in a way that creates a just society—reimagined in a way that creates a space of empowerment for women. Religion and justice, therefore, are integrally and inextricably related. And because God can only be accessed through metaphor and language, both of which fall short of encapsulating God fully, truthfully and accurately, metaphor and language become the target for getting to the root of socio-cultural, ideological injustice. The prophet of the theological task reimagines language and metaphor, reinterprets reality, and envisions a revolutionary future. This is the start place from which all motion towards social justice must spring. To reimagine language and metaphor is to incite rebellion and the process of liberation. René Marqués, a Puerto Rican writer, reiterates in vital significance that one who works with language in a creative way, reshaping it, reconceiving it, reimagining it, has to the spirit of revolution, rebellion, and liberty. Reworking language is a primal step in rejecting repressive culture. Marqués claims that the writer has to be free to be able to struggle against the web which others fashion to impede [her] search for the truth. And, in effect, [she] feels free, [she] knows [her]self to be free. This is a natural feeling, since [she] has the experience of creation; [she] knows, because [she] has experienced it in [her] own flesh and spirit, that the act of artistic creation is an act of supreme liberty... The writer who knows freedom not as a political concept or as a philosophical abstraction, but as a vital experience, will love liberty for [her]self and, by extension, for others. (Delgado 25)
We must understand language to reinvent it. One must examine Hispanic religious ideology and theology as a means of highlighting social injustice. There is something inherent to current Hispanic language and metaphor that has resulted in the creation of a socio-cultural reality in which there is no real space, no home, for the Hispanic woman. Instead, Latina women inhabit a thin line of barbed wire; they are residents of the borderlands as defined by Gloria Anzaldua in her poem about Hispanic women’s experiences. Their experience is an experience of pain, displacement, isolation, exclusion, objectification, degradation and oppression. The key to their liberation rests in the reimagination of their perception of God and religion manifested in their language and metaphors. Once this is achieved Hispanic women take back their voices which were silenced and reclaim the space from which they were banished. With the power of voice and space they have the ability to empower themselves, work toward self-advocacy, and fully inhabit their own space as complete human beings.

To understand the experience of borderland identity there are first several key words from Anzaldua’s poem which bear profound significance in capturing a fuller concept of what contextualizes the identity of those who live on the borderlands. To understand borderland identity is to hear a call for liberation. Yet, how can one who suffers an imposed fractured identity, a “split” be a betrayer when he/she has not been allowed an identity or a space to betray? With no space or identity, Gloria Anzaldúa refers to her home a “thin edge of barbwire” (25). She is describing her experience, the experience of a Mexican woman who is victimized by an inability to create a space, a home of her own. She is the victim of borders. Borders are a theoretical and theological metaphor for the cultural lines which are drawn, lines which carve out and define power relations, lines which shape our realities, our experiences. Borders can confine us to a certain space and to cross borders is a courageous, revolutionary act against cultural and social structures and constructs. Borders confine, define, exclude, ostracize, and oppress. To liberate one’s self from a world defined by one’s boundaries calls for destruction of one’s borders. Ironically, while the borders would seemingly construct a space for one to inhabit, restrictive as it might be, the problem is that this space is created expressly for those who have no ability to create borders. Those who are powerless in the process of building borders become victims of borders. There is no place for them. No home. No space to inhabit. At best, these people can live on the borders themselves, belonging neither within nor outside the borders: theirs is
an existence of profound ambiguity. Others, those who live completely outside the borders, become lost, unknown, forgotten and ignored. What greater injustice is there than to be denied a space to inhabit within this world?

Craig Rimmerman, author of the book From Identity to Politics, theorizes that to attempt an attack on social injustice through mainstream institutions is a tactical, political mistake on the part of an oppressed community because it stunts the ability to see cultural transformation towards social justice. It diminishes and possibly even destroys the ability to seek liberation from oppression because oppressed participation in the mainstream perpetuates oppression. Oppressed cooperation with mainstream institutions translates into oppressed communities permitting their own subjugation due to their denial of self, lack of community cohesion and lack of channels that can effectively incite social change. It is, according to Rimmerman, narrow-minded to see conforming to the dominant order as the oppressed communities only social option. Instead, they must muster self-advocacy via establishment of alliances in order to restructure and unify the international community in a way that includes and empowers women. Once the feminist community is cohesive then they can establish a common progressive movement via grassroots organizing. Rimmerman contends that a liberation movement will only be effective once it breaks away from the mainstream entirely to reclaim its true identity in instituting a broad-based coalition against their social oppression.

Hispanic feminist theology coincides with what Rimmerman is advocating. Feminists need to reach out and form alliances internationally in order to make drastic social changes and improve the condition of women everywhere. No woman is liberated until all are free. Internationally, Hispanic women are victims of fierce patriarchal and structural domination and violence. Sociocultural institutions and the institution of the church have stolen women’s voices and rights to space. Feminists, therefore, cannot rely on institutional channels to bring about the vast changes necessary to liberate women and increase social justice. Instead, feminists must reach out to establish alliances, relationships and coalitions with other feminists, both domestically and internationally, in order to organize on their own terms. By organizing and establishing these alliances they are effectively reclaiming an empowered space for women—they are, by sheer number, repossessing their voices. The struggle to claim this space is the struggle for liberation and to the oppressed, this struggle is life.

In the feminist theologian’s attempts to create a space of justice and liberation one must look at figures which are central to Hispanic feminist theology.
In her article “Ignored Virgin or Unaware Women,” Lozano-Diaz remembers the presence of the Lady of Guadalupe, not in her home immediately, but extensively throughout Mexican culture. The Lady of Guadalupe represents devotion and protection—she is seen everywhere from schools to television commercials. Her image is ubiquitous—but what does it signify? The story of the Lady of Guadalupe, considered to be superstition and mythology to Mexican Protestants, is the story of a woman who called herself “Tlecuahtlacupeuh,” appeared before an indigenous man named Juan Diego and claimed to be his mother. She requested that Juan Diego build a temple in her name after which she promised to offer comfort to all those who suffer. While she is a principle character in the Catholic religion, Lozano-Diaz discussion asserts that the Lady of Guadalupe “has permeated all of Mexican culture in such a way that she is not only present, but she also plays a role in the lives of Mexican and Mexican-American Protestant women” (207). In many ways, she has almost become a pop-culture icon with her image appearing on dashboards, t-shirts and graffiti walls. Much more than a symbol of Catholic devotion, the Lady of Guadalupe has become an emblem of Mexican culture.

Essential to the task of understanding Hispanic women in a theological context is the examination of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The profusion of her presence is evidence of her profound and pervasive influence upon cultural and religious realities, particularly in Mexico. She is a fusion of Aztec and Spanish Catholic religious traditions, making her an exemplar of religious syncretism, a common offshoot of colonialization. Her identity as an amalgamation of two realities, joined as one via colonialization, makes her an interesting study. She is central to Mexican culture due to the sort-of “nationalistic” nature of the legend which describes how God bestowed the Virgin upon the people of Mexico as an indication of God’s favoritism towards them. Papal decrees solidified her place at the heart of Mexican culture by declaring the Virgin of Guadalupe “the queen and patroness of Mexico and the empress of the Americas” (Burkhart 199). In Nahuatl retellings of the legend of Guadalupe it is said that “Through a great miracle appeared the heavenly royal noblewoman Saint Mary, our precious revered mother Guadalupe, her by the great city of Mexico, in the place called Tepeyacac” (Burkhart 200).

Once it is established that the Lady of Guadalupe is a central and overwhelmingly powerful influence, especially over Mexican culture—irrespective of Catholic or Protestant distinction—Lozano-Diaz feels the next vital step is to determine whether or not she is a source of oppression or of liberation to
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both Mexican and Mexican-American Protestant women. Lozano-Diaz cites writer Octavio Paz’s description of the Virgin Lady of Guadalupe as “a sign of passivity that is an illustration of the feminine condition” (209). Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate describe her as a “sorrowful figure and as an example of perfection, purity and submission” (210). Lozano-Diaz also cites Sandra Messinger Cypress who describes Guadalupe as a “saint” who embodies “virginity, piety, helpfulness, forgiveness, goodness, and devoted and selfless motherhood” (210).

There is evidence of movements to recreate the Virgin Lady of Guadalupe in a way that empowers women. Scholar and theologian Jeanette Rodriguez describes the story of Lady of Guadalupe and Juan Diego as an experience of liberation because the encounter freed Diego in a way that allowed him to relate to God in new ways. Rodriguez argues that only certain parts of the Guadalupe event are stressed and that Mexican women must educate themselves further as a means of finding liberation and empowerment. Lady of Guadalupe, in her exchange with Juan Diego, came to represent life-giving and hope.

Lozano-Diaz feels that endeavors to make Guadalupe a figure of feminist empowerment are not in fact useful. Instead, she proposes that a profound realization must first be made in order for change and transformation to occur for Hispanic women. In order to achieve empowerment and liberation, the difference between a cultural symbol and a religious symbol must be drawn. Mexican American Protestants must no longer ignore the relevance of Guadalupe in their lives as a cultural symbol and embrace her as do Mexican Catholics who embrace her as a religious symbol. There is a difference, but, in both regards, her symbolism bears a significant impact on the lives of all Hispanic women whether Catholic or Protestant. Once the Virgin Lady of Guadalupe is accepted on these grounds, focus can be devoted to determining what type of religious and/or cultural symbol she represents. Lozano-Diaz claims there is plenty of Scriptural text which point to the possibility that Lady of Guadalupe is an image of empowerment rather than a passive object of submitting to patriarchy and embodying the oppressive principles of Marianismo, a cultural structure which upholds, maintains and perpetuates a fierce patriarchy, confines women to a very strict gender-defined role, and is infused and strengthened by a sense of religious and sacred duty.

Hispanic women must, therefore, create a bridge, recognizing their religious differences yet establishing a cultural connection wherein Lady of
Guadalupe is central and influential. Once this bridge is constructed Hispanic women can set about the task of reimagining her capacity as a source of inspiration for liberation. Lozano-Díaz cries out for a new biblical model of womanhood. “Once these women grasp and experience the alternative options that this model presents, they will be able to use it also as a pertinent tool to confront and challenge the oppressive characteristics that have been ascribed to the Lady of Guadalupe” (214).

Catholic theologian Virgilio Elizondo, reaffirms the concept of the Lady of Guadalupe as an icon of liberation for Hispanic women. The Lady of Guadalupe allows Hispanic women to claim dignity and acts as a source of empowerment. Elizondo recontextualizes the Lady of Guadalupe as a liberative figure when he writes:

Spaniards had raped many indigenous women, and the mestizo offspring of this violence were seen as a race of illegitimate children. Through her appartition to Juan Diego, the Lady of Guadalupe radically change this. She legitimized the mestizo race by becoming its mother. Through the Virgin, the indigenous people went from degradation to pride, from rape to purity, dignity, equality and freedom (qtd. in Lozano-Díaz 211)

Elizondo’s contention that Lady of Guadalupe can be used as an instrument of liberation also offers the ability to remedy, assuage and ameliorate the fractured identity which Anzaldúa explores in her notion of borderland identity. As previously asserted, liberation, in part, takes the shape of providing identity and space to those who have been marginalized and robbed of their rights to such things as identity and space. One aspect of liberation is a theology which legitimizes the identity of the oppressed. Once legitimized in one’s humanity and personhood, one begins to feel entitled to claiming a space of empowerment. Thus, the Lady of Guadalupe, liberator and mother who legitimates the truth identity of those who have been marginalized, is vital to the Hispanic feminist theological task.

The task of Hispanic feminist theology reveals that in reinterpreting Scripture and fundamental theological doctrine, language, themes and images, the Church itself is transformed and reborn. The Church becomes the community of the oppressed manifesting a reimagined theology. The Church is the space of empowerment. It is a testament to women’s strength and the power of their communal efforts to transform oppressive metaphors and institutions.
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Works Cited


