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# Latino Catholicism and Indigenous Heritage as a Subfield of Latino Studies: A Critical Evaluation of New Approaches

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Posed through critical theory on "third-space," and a brief history of Latin American Studies, this article pursues analysis of recent interdisciplinary scholarship in English, to delineate the emergence of a new subfield in Latina/o Catholicism, connected to greater understanding of Indigenous legacy. The article also demonstrates the path of study toward creation of a themed academic issue.

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**Elizabeth C. Martínez**  
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Posed through critical theory on "third-space," and a brief history of Latin American Studies, this article pursues analysis of recent interdisciplinary scholarship in English, to delineate the emergence of a new subfield in Latina/o Catholicism, connected to greater understanding of Indigenous legacy. The article also demonstrates the path of study toward creation of a themed academic issue.

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## **1. Introduction:**

“Now that we have a Latin American pope ...” So begin many conversations and discussions among Latin Americanists in consideration of new possibilities of attention (finally) to Latin America. Such conversations are also occurring in Catholic and religious studies programs; academic symposiums are convened at Catholic universities on “the Latin American Pope,” and courses offered on “the Latin American Catholic diaspora.”

But aside from learning that Pope Francis is from Argentina, what is the potential for better understanding of nations and histories of Latin America? The field of Immigration studies does not always pursue the experiences of Latin Americans prior to arrival in the U.S., or research the roots of heritage native to this continent. In fact, outside of minor anthropology courses, longstanding Indigenous inherited practices are seldom addressed in university courses (except for the occasional topics course). This is further complicated by the fact that the U.S. basic educational system does not include a framework for studies on the extensive history of the more than 20 nations of diverse Indigenous roots and extensive Hispanic colonial legacy in the American hemisphere.

Now, conversations and special sessions about the arrival, “finally,” of a pope from Latin America opens helpful terrain for evaluation of the cultural history of Latinos in the U.S., through the lens of Catholicism. Such dialogues have emerged within the interdisciplinary field of Latin American Studies, with scholarship revealing a subfield that can be labeled Latino Catholicism, which includes deconstructing archaic and alternate spiritual practices of Indigenous origin or influence, and the possibilities of valuing Indigenous inherited practices. Factors such as the arrival of a Latin American pope, and attention to new regions through 21<sup>st</sup> century immigration issues, even perhaps the recent surge in U.S. interest in *futbol*/soccer, have helped open awareness of the cultural histories, and religious practices, of Latin American people residing in the U.S. This article examines recent publications reflecting such a genre or subfield, and the response to a Call for a special theme on this topic.

If U.S. understanding can be coached beyond the long-term simplistic view of dictator and non-dictator-run countries (as portrayed in the opening to Oliver Stone’s 2009 documentary *South of the Border*), or the common perception that people “south of the border” are all alike, that all speak Spanish<sup>1</sup> and possess traditions inherited only from Spain, such a genre is necessary.

## **2. Catholicism and Immigration:**

The arrival of the first pope born and raised on the American continent occurs in an era when Latino immigration is a hot topic in U.S. politics and the media. And, the recent global recession, with surges of unemployment in first-world nations, has also put a spotlight on third-world immigration to the U.S. and Europe. Coupled with climate changes, Latin American recessions during the past two decades have led to migrations of previously isolated peoples to outer urban areas, transferring longstanding cultural practices to new regions,<sup>2</sup> which are often then adopted by those communities through festivals organized by church parishes and the expanded new populations. Settlements sprouted at the outer boundaries of major Latin American cities, often called

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<sup>1</sup>A misconception that is notable in the animated character film *Río*, where—despite the setting being Brazil—occasional phrases outside of English occur in Spanish. Also, Latin America Indigenous populations are widely diverse, and various groups speak little or no Spanish (such as extensive populations from the state of Oaxaca, now in California, or certain Mayan groups on the Yucatan peninsula).

<sup>2</sup> From Chile to Venezuela to Mexico, the relocation of Indigenous and mixed heritage peoples to outer or extended urban communities has had an impact on the way pageants and religious festivals are celebrated, including the substitution of different Saints or Virgin figures.

*ciudades jóvenes*, usually begin as shanty towns and grow into second-class municipalities (through the labor of faith-based organizations and the settlers themselves, rather than actions by the government). Once these new districts are noticeable for their accomplishment through popular initiatives, the city government finally proudly touts those communities.<sup>3</sup>

The way festivals for saints and other religious figures are conducted has extensive roots dating to before and during the early colonial era, when a practice of Catholicism incorporated Indigenous (native to the Americas) customs and pageantry. These festivals have been continuously practiced in remote or isolated areas of Latin America, their influence obscured during revolutions toward independence, and then newly discovered during late 20<sup>th</sup> century globalization. Categorized as *folkloric* practices by academic studies, and backward or pagan practices by contemporary perspective, the church and other hierarchies have now begun to appreciate this provincial legacy. As previously remote communities come into contact with urban zones, their cultural-religious preservation of ancient customs (intertwined with colonial Catholic practices) becomes noticeable. In addition, since these populations are usually greater than those remaining in outlying parishes, their arrival enhances existing parishes.

In the U.S., the recent influx of new Latin American immigrants, especially from Mexico and Central America, has begun to make visible such hybrid practices, transported by region-specific immigrants whose beliefs demonstrate Indigenous influence and inherited factors. Coupled with the fact that a new Pope Francis has brought the *other* of contemporary society—less recognized peoples and histories—front and center, such migrations afford the opportunity to value ancient heritage. Currently, within the U.S. Catholic Church, Mexican-origin members begin to outnumber older generation European-origin members,<sup>4</sup> and in less populous U.S. communities, Latin American-origin presence has had

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<sup>3</sup> A positive example is that of Villa El Salvador, just south of Lima, Perú, which was self-organized, homes built, principal streets paved, and public transportation provided by the residents, long before the city agreed to provide water and electricity city services (the neighborhood is now a source of pride for the city government). Similar popular endeavors are underway on the outer periphery of Santiago, Chile, which like the hilltop *favelas* in Río, Brazil, has a negative reputation for crime and drug activity.

<sup>4</sup> Similar changes are evident in some Midwestern cities, where the traditions and practices of more recent Eastern European immigrants are also different from contemporary Catholicism, and churches (Greek, Romanian, etc.) are dedicated to the practice of Orthodox religion.

an impact on social and civic participation, as will be noted in the sources that follow. Most scholarship making connections between institutionalized religious practice and Indigenous contribution is evident only in Latin America-related topics. The U.S. has never devoted attention to the impact of Indigenous practices on either U.S. or Latin American culture, much less to underlying details of the practice of Catholicism. But recently, extensive studies on Indigenous legacy in the U.S. heartland (and their squelched histories), are currently being published by historians and other scholars.

In addition to the appeal of Pope Francis, and possibly popular interest in Latin American *fútbol*, or soccer,<sup>5</sup> the increasing recent influx of Latin American immigrants has garnered scholarly attention. Twenty-first century interdisciplinary studies are more likely to examine hybrid community and social factors than disciplinary scholars did decades ago, and to analyze lived experiences, economic impact on communities, and human rights issues. Through examination of popular religious practices present in relocated communities, academic scholars begin to *dis*-cover (and *un*cover) such long-term histories. Although time will tell whether Pope Francis' words and actions inspire deeper understanding of Latin America in the U.S., his arrival at least brings ideas for scholarship and conferences in both religious and interdisciplinary Latin American Studies connected to the current presence of new immigrants.

### **2.1. U.S. Latino Catholic Population:**

According to a report in 2013 by the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 68% of U.S. Hispanics consider themselves Catholic (with 64% attending church services regularly), a group that constitutes a remarkable 39% of all U.S. Catholics. The report further stated that 54% of the Millennials generation (born 1982 or later) are Catholic. In both cases—total U.S. Catholics, and Hispanic Catholics under age 25—this represented a four percent increase in just two years, based on a similar study conducted by the USCCB in 2011. (Papal Transition Report)

The percentage results were similar in a study conducted a few years earlier by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, based on a review of data from public surveys compiled between 1995 and 2003, and the 2004 U.S. Census data. This report assessed possible faulty methodology due to the way questions were

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<sup>5</sup> With the U.S. in semi-finalist rounds for the 2014 World Cup, and two Latin American countries (Brazil and Argentina) as finalists, with the games being held in various cities of Brazil, Latin America was in the limelight.

asked,<sup>6</sup> demonstrating that statistics can vary from a rendering of greatest change (departure from Catholicism) occurring between first and second generations, and a more balanced decrease between first, second and third generations (Perl, et al.). It is reported from time to time that Latinos are becoming *former* Catholics (especially in Latin American countries), and declaring Protestant or Evangelical affiliation, but studies conducted in the U.S. show increased numbers indicating unaffiliated status.

In 2014 the results of a comprehensive National Survey of Latinos conducted by the think tank Pew Research Center in Washington D.C. hit the national press, with headlines of a decline in the number of Hispanic Catholics, stating that one in four Hispanics (24%) are *former* Catholics. However, the Pew report (conducted during the summer of 2013) was also confusing. Although indicating that Hispanic Catholic affiliation had been decreasing “for decades,” the Pew reported that in 2010 fully two-thirds (67%) of U.S. Hispanics were Catholic (similar to the other studies). Despite the suggestion of a slight decline, and noting that their results were “broad-based,” this report asserted that Hispanics continue to make up an increasingly large share of all U.S. Catholics, concluding that if this trend and the increasing population of Hispanics in the U.S. both continue, Latinos would soon constitute a majority of U.S. Catholics. (Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos, SSRS, Pew).

## 2.2. The Growth of Latin American Studies:

Before transitioning to examples of a growing body of scholarship in “Latino Catholicism”—pursued at the intersection of culture and faith—let us consider recent theory, and the origins and changes of Latin American interdisciplinary studies. The emergence of such a subfield, straddling both interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences (with studies on food production, social factors, etc.), arises from explorations in Latin American Studies beyond Eurocentric, colonialist, nationalist, and ideological parameters. Although religious studies can be an entirely different field from Latin American Studies, it has also made changes due to rising memberships and community social factors, contributing to research collaborations and crossover.

Disciplinary barriers that broke down in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century paved the way for creation of the academic designation of Latin American Studies,<sup>7</sup> boosted by the passing of the Title VI National Defense

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewees were asked to respond yes or no to: “Are you of Spanish or Hispanic descent?”

<sup>7</sup> The origins and process for studies on Latin America, in Spanish language, i.e., Spanish programs and departments, is a different conversation and history. The U.S. academy in

Education Act in 1958, which provided resources for centers of area and international studies. In 1966, the professional association of Latin American Studies (LASA) was founded, to encourage civic engagement through network building and public debate. Now the flagship organization, with extensive membership for academics in this interdisciplinary field/region, LASA hosts an annual conference, alternating each year between the U.S. and other countries. A field in itself complex, since the 1970s Latin American Studies programs (usually a minor, with classes taught in English) were housed in History, but have blossomed since into departments or centers with majors. For the first few decades studies originated from a European-centered scope; now there are approaches from south to north, from colonial object to diverse subjects, and toward the in-depth nature of the continent's past, to bring critical perspective to its present.

Beginning at the turn of century, LASA leadership sought greater accessibility by and for Latin American scholars, with engagement of theories and approaches from Latin American perspectives, to more adequately represent regional and intricate cultural histories rooted in Indigenous, African, and practices evolved from the early colonial system. Components and discussion groups were added, expanding outside a generalized "Latin America" definition, and leading to new sections in LASA: For specific nations, such as Ecuador; for regions, such as the Hispanic Caribbean, U.S. Latino Studies; and concentrations, such as gender and sexuality studies, Afro-Hispanic studies; and Indigenous ethnic groups or regions (Andean, Mesoamerican), which in turn has opened avenues for the study of Indigenous contemporary production.

The further breaking down of disciplinary barriers has had an impact on scholarly approaches (economic and geopolitical influences, the social impact of migrations, and assessment of European-origin vs. Indigenous-origin customs) and programs: religious studies departments are as likely to announce Latin America-related courses as Latino Studies department courses that focus on faith-based neighborhood organizations or cultural devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. By nature, interdisciplinary studies explores questions from multiple perspectives; now those include critical thought and the perspectives of the *other*, the

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its early history did not teach or offer Spanish language; this was added later to the prominent English, French, and German departments, but with a focus that was "Hispanic" in scope, focusing only on the literature produced by/in Spain, and when considered, its colonial vassals.



subject rendered subaltern since the inception of European colonialism and up to the contemporary era.

### 3. New Theoretical Approaches:

Building on theory since the late 1970s—significantly that of Gayatri Spivak and Edward Saïd—cutting-edge Latin American theorists, such as Argentine-Mexican cultural historian Néstor García Canclini, have influenced contemporary criticism on Latino topics. García Canclini's highly acclaimed work, *Hybrid Cultures* (1990; English translation published in 1995), is oriented from third world perspective. A key concept of this book is that the damaging effects of globalization led to a loss of cultural and national identities. Recent critics expand from this idea to demonstrate that identities are transported to new regions through migrations often forced by globalization.

For García Canclini, “the interactions between hegemonic and subaltern groups are scenes of struggle, but they are also where both dramatize experiences of alterity and recognition” (p. 203). Outside the ruling center of hegemonic powers, peoples rendered “barbaric” and “uncivilized” survived, continue to exist and now move into mainstream consciousness, contesting official histories. García Canclini notes that neither traditionalism nor modernity can exist without confronting, or “involving the other in both directions” (p. 202).

Influential U.S. critic Homi Bhabha finds colonialism (in terms of a closed entity in the past) in certain aspects of cultural *hybridization*, which he declares more relevant to contemporary experience than such terms as multiculturalism or cultural diversity. In his landmark text *The Location of Culture* (1994), he defines a “third space” of cultural *difference*—the point at which two cultures meet and where problems originate—rich terrain for study:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (pp. 54-55)

For Bhabha, a cultural text or system of meaning is not sufficient unto itself; it is only where study begins: One must seek the structure of symbolization in its cultural enunciation, utterance, and performative qualities. “The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other. This ambivalence is emphasized [in the difference, and] ... its temporal dimension” (pp.52-53).

Catholicism was the hegemonic, authorized religion instituted at Spanish arrival; it was also merged with or infiltrated by Indigenous beliefs (surreptitiously or purposefully). Throughout the colonial era, disguised, even contestatory Indigenous practices continued in remote regions, practices often subsumed under and labeled Catholicism. Just as the terms used in regions of Latin America for agricultural and other native products have Indigenous origin (examples: tomato, chili, and *aguacate* from Nahuatl, *palta* in South America), but now form part of Spanish (and English) vocabulary, cultural and religious practices have also fallen under the labeling of European origin terms. However, they are contaminated, or influenced, by Indigenous customs (or, perhaps one could state that Indigenous practice is contaminated by Catholic involvement). It can be asserted that “religion” or “Christianity,” and “pagan,” are in themselves terms of several levels of meanings.

### 3.1. Chicana Literary Theory:

A critic of major influence on U.S. Latino studies is Gloria Anzaldúa. Her landmark text, *Borderlands/La Frontera, The New Mestiza*, published in 1987, builds from her experiences and community in southeast Texas, near the border, to exploration of the indigenous origins (in Aztec and greater Nahua deities and philosophy) of the Mexican-American or Chicano, to culminating chapters articulating a new, *mestiza*<sup>8</sup> consciousness that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, constituted through the resistance and memory of people (of the Americas). She describes the borderlands as a grating, “open wound,” difficult to heal in U.S. culture. But she also defines the lived experience of the cultural borderlands as *nepantla*,<sup>9</sup> a “middle space” where the marginalized engage in strategies of survival, much like the Indigenous peoples did in the early colonial era. By connecting Chicano or U.S. Latino experience in the U.S. to that of the Indigenous at junctures of transition and change, her theory transitions to the forced acculturation of Latinos in the southwest and strategies of resistance for the survival of cultures and beliefs.

The recovery of Indigenous cultural legacy was adopted by the Chicano civil rights movement in the 1960s (although evident in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican literature, in both English and Spanish). There are earlier works, but the inception of Chicano literature is generally considered the

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<sup>8</sup> The reason this is “mestiza” with an “a,” and not *mestizo* is because the gender of the term it describes, “conscience”/*conciencia*, is a female gender word.

<sup>9</sup> The term, from Nahuatl language (the official language for commerce and communication in Central Mexico at the time of European arrival, but which dated back hundreds of years—and which is still spoken in several regions of Mexico), connotes “in between,” or the space of the middle.

late 1960s (and by the 1980s, women writers were visible). Anzaldúa's book was the first Latino theoretical text of broad-based impact, and has influenced Chicano and U.S. Latino writing since. She studied the work of the eminent early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican scholar Miguel León Portilla, who translated and interpreted Nahuatl texts. Anzaldúa's analysis is framed outside the binary of Western-Christian vs. "pagan" manifestations, and recovers female deities that were corrupted by the imposition of Catholicism but also previously diminished by the Aztec empire.<sup>10</sup> The Spanish missionaries saw pre-Hispanic female figures as pagan but applied certain elements to their Christian proselytizing (as occurred in the early decades of Christianity in the Roman Empire, upon conquering other nations).

In *The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa references her grandmother's shelf altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe, and her practice of "folk Catholicism" (p. 49). She describes the various manifestations of Aztec/Nahua female deities, showing that the darker, scarier, attributes were removed by the Spanish to favor only the guises or attributes of good mother and mediator. "Because *Coatloapeuh* was homophonous to the Spanish *Guadalupe*, the Spanish identified her with the dark Virgin, Guadalupe, patroness of West Central Spain" (p. 51). Thus, Coatloapeuh<sup>11</sup> was "desexed" by the Spanish (p. 49), and became the chaste virgin Guadalupe. Other female deities, such as Tlazolteotl and Coatlicue, became "putas" in the Western virgin/whore dichotomy (p. 50). In the Nahua world the female was identified with the serpent, both in terms of sexuality and knowledge (likely a scary symbolism to the missionaries, since Christianity connects the serpent with sin). The Spanish objective was to dismiss Indigenous thought by weakening and removing its symbology, but the process was not fully achieved, for Indigenous thought simply went underground. In contemporary socio-religious practice, the manifestation of *Tonantzin* is now interchangeable with Guadalupe, and Chicana/o literature and critical writings frequently explicate Nahua and Maya Indigenous figures and terms.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cast aside by the Aztec regime, which only promoted male, warlike deities.

<sup>11</sup> Coatloapeuh means "she who has dominion over serpents" in Nahuatl. In the Amerindian world, the serpent was a positive symbol, of wisdom and power, and frequent in iconography and writing.

<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s other Chicana academics were developing theories also related to Indigenous connections in Chicano/Mexican heritage, with texts published afterward, such as Tey Diana Rebolledo's *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (1995).

Wanting to show how she derived inspiration for writing through the influence of past native civilizations, Anzaldúa described seeking cosmic harmony through symbolic representations: Through native respect for the four elements, earth, wind, fire, water, and the metaphor of Coatloapeuh, she applied her own reflections to the depictions (she had studied) of the blood-letting sacrifices on ancient Nahua glyphs. Anzaldúa describes what became her ritual, in seeking power/ability in her writing:

I sit here before my computer, *Amiguita*, my altar on top of the monitor with the Virgen de Coatloapeuh candle and copal incense burning. My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body. Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. ... Daily I court it ... This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, are my offerings, are my Aztec blood sacrifices. (p. 97)

The field of Chicana/o Studies is richly imbued with Indigenous symbology, some of which is also evident in Latin American Catholicism. Stages of sacrifice, seeking cosmic harmony, and other rituals, adopt a hybrid nature still common in Latin American communities. Thus some traditions of Latino Catholic rituals are different from contemporary Western Catholicism, often including vestiges of archaic practices brought to the American continent by the early colonial system, as well as crossover Indigenous practices. Although basic education in the Western World has not taught these particular aspects of Latin American experience, they are evident in the arts and the critical world. Contemporary Latin American literary and cultural production, and socio-religious production, are often performed in that third or middle space.

### **3.2. New Scholarship on Latino Catholicism:**

Books and journal articles published since the recent turn of century demonstrate the emergence of a subfield in Latino Catholicism. In fact, 2011 was a significant year for book publications, with the following three diverse interdisciplinary texts:

*Living "Illegal": The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration* is a sociological study, with historical background, on newer immigrant communities in the U.S. Southeast. The four authors, professors in religious studies and political science, study the experiences of Central

American and Mexican-origin residents in several small towns of Georgia and northern Florida, through activities in both Catholic and Protestant parishes. Their analysis follows a series of interviews and observations that demonstrate ongoing collaborations between long term resident church members of diverse ethnicities, and new immigrants. The accounts touch on unique local and regional aspects (such as a church that provides services in English, Spanish, and Korean), and make comparisons to legislative actions taken in other states, like Arizona. The book opens with documentation on local initiatives that recruited undocumented workers to those regions, the labor they fulfilled, and hardships encountered after the 2008 economy downfall and recent national political climate.

*Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (2011), by Ohio State comparative literature professor Theresa Delgadillo, applies the one mention of “spiritual mestizaje” in Gloria Anzaldúa’s book to a study of literary narratives by Chicana writers that enact *alternative spiritualities* and offer new strategies that construct both collective and individual subject formation. Delgadillo’s approach is oriented through political theory, narrative form theory, and social justice: An interdisciplinary context substantiating how Indigenous spirituality, as practiced by those of Latin American heritage, operates within Catholicism.

Finally in 2011, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America’s Largest Church*, by historian and cultural theologian Timothy Matovina, targets Mexican-heritage impact on the U.S. Catholic Church. This book follows the pattern of his earlier work, a co-edited collection of essays based on research conducted in the Midwest and south Texas, *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism* (2002). The recent text collects examples that show how Latino immigrants bring their longstanding indigenous-Catholic customs and alternative practices of spiritual communion to the U.S. Church. He further argues that a change in focus has occurred, with the Church appealing to the working class and popularism, in a manner more akin to European immigrant parishes of yesteryear than to those of present-day middle-class Euro-Americans. Matovina foresees that Mexican (origin) orientation to rituals and faith will likely continue to influence the U.S. Church. His statistics are that 68% of U.S. Latinos are Catholic, and 40% of U.S. Catholics are Latinos; and further, that one-fourth of newborns and one-fifth of schoolchildren currently residing in the U.S. are of Latin American-origin.

Matovina’s book was not the first to examine U.S. neighborhoods and Latino-Catholic experience. A few years earlier, Roberto Treviño published *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (2006), describing the founding of immigrant

parishes in Houston during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Treviño discusses how the intertwining of ethnic identity and Catholic faith helped this extensive community overcome adversity and racism (the latter term is not strongly employed). Various other studies are underway on connections between Mexican-origin communities and their cultural practices and beliefs.

In 2008, *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism and Culture* broke ground as a cultural approach to the significance of religious practice in the U.S. Mexican-American community, studying from Spanish colonial origins in the Southwest and California to the contemporary, post-Chicano Movement era. The editors, Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, provide a rich introduction for the collection of essays: Oriented from anthropology, sociology, literary and performance studies, the chapters examine the influence of colonial-based Catholic practice on literature, popular culture, art and activism, and community group activities. This book was preceded by an edited collection focused through justice and religious practice, *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice* (2002). Compiled by María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, the authors of the twelve original essays are emerging and established Latina feminist theologians. This text brings the perspectives, struggles and spiritualities of U.S. Latinas to a larger feminist theological discourse, describing both Roman Catholic and Protestant practices in specific regions of the U.S. by women of Caribbean, Mexican, and European origin. The authors reveal a wide swath of topics, including popular religious practices, denominational attraction and methodology, lived experiences, and nationalism.

In 2010, Kathleen J. Martin published *Indigenous Symbols and Practices in the Catholic Church: Visual Culture, Missionization and Appropriation*, a collection of chapters focused on contemporary practices among Native American (U.S. and Hawaii) groups. This text (which has seen few reviews) was part of a collaboration between publishers in Edinburgh and California, a special series on the “Vitality of Indigenous Religions,” to explore contemporary expression, experience and understanding of particular Indigenous peoples globally, addressing key issues such as the sacredness of land, exile from lands, diasporic and survival, and the indigenization of Christianity and other missionary religions.

Turning now to academic journals, a few articles challenge earlier scholarship suggesting that from the inception of colonialism, practices were absorbed or merged in such a way that original native beliefs or practices are no longer discernible—in other words, that all Indigenous customs have been influenced or corrupted by the Catholic hierarchy. The

recent articles meticulously study aspects of Indigenous practices that continued in isolated regions, which have been passed down through generations, for their authenticity. A few examples:

- Sylvia Marcos' "Mesoamerican Women's Indigenous Spirituality: Decolonizing Religious Beliefs" (in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* in 2009);
- Susan Fitzpatrick Behrens' "Maryknoll Sisters, Faith, Healing, and the Maya Construction of Catholic Communities in Guatemala" (in *Latin American Research Review*, also in 2009);
- Mary Jane Suero-Elliott's "Challenging Catholicism: Hagar vs. the Virgin in Graciela Limón's *The Memories of Ana Calderón*" (in the 2007 book, *The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers: Critical Essays*, 2007).
- Jorge Larrain's "Identidad latinoamericana: Crítica del discurso esencialista católico" (in *Contracorriente: A Journal of Social History and Literature*, in 2007).

The above discussions dispute syncretic readings of spiritual practices and rituals, while others pursue evidence in terms of the mixing of customs, with continued Indigenous process promulgated through Catholic ritual:

- Peter S. Cahn's "A Standoffish Priest and Sticky Catholics: Questioning the Religious Marketplace in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico" (in the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, in 2005);
- Chad E. Seales' "Parades and Processions: Protestant and Catholic Ritual Performances in a Nuevo/New South Town" (in *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions*, in 2008);
- Daniel M. Goldstein's "The Customs of the Faithful: Evangelicals and the Politics of Catholic Fiesta in Bolivia" (in the *Journal of Latin American Lore*, in 2003);
- and in the same journal a few years earlier, Peter T. Furst's "Assimilation and Transformation of Some Catholic Icons in Huichol Myth and Ritual" (in 1997).

Another category, less frequent, encompasses studies on the history of Catholic publishing ventures, centered in Latin American regions:

- *The U.S. Catholic Press on Central America: From Cold War Anticommunism to Social Justice* (U of Notre Dame P, 2003), by Edward T. Brett;
- and the article, "The Struggle over the Printed Word: The Catholic Church in Brazil and Social Discourse," by Aparecida Paiva (in volume I, *Literary Cultures of Latin America, A Comparative History*, editors Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir. Vervuert, 2004;

pp. 401-409. This is an extensive, three-volume series on the “literary cultures” of Latin America.

These examples point to a niche that is not entirely “religious studies,” but a significant representation of Latin American studies. Whether challenging or reinforcing the continuous influence of Catholicism, discussing colonialism and social practices in Latin America, drawing a contrast between Catholic and Pentecostal practice (less articles), or making cultural-religious arguments, these studies published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have opened new discussions on historical context, cultural and ethnic identity, and socio-religious inherited practices.

Earlier publications, even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, were often focused through or from religious frames, more specifically-oriented to religious mores, and seldom considered Indigenous influence. A few examples:

- the grandiously titled book, *Teología en América Latina, Desde los orígenes a la Guerra de Sucesión, 1493-1715* (1999);
- *More Than Opium: An Anthropological Approach to Latin American and Caribbean Pentecostal Praxis* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1998), where chapters consider, “Family, Sexuality, and Family Planning: A Comparative Study of Pentecostals and Charismatic Catholics in Río de Janeiro,” and “A Farewell to Mary? Women, Pentecostal Faith, and the Roman Catholic Church on Curacao;”
- “Religious Ethnic Identity: A Socio-Religious Portrait of Latinos and Latinas in the Catholic Church,” by Gilbert R. Cadena, in the book, *Old Masks, New Faces: Religion and Latino Identities* (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1995).

#### **4. A Special Call on “Latino Catholicism:”**

Now to the response to our call. Working with a specialist in Catholic Studies who chose the title of “Cosmic Liturgy: Latino Catholicism Today,” we sought cutting-edge research, oriented from any discipline. The thematic editor was also interested in publishing selected scholars’ perspectives in homage, *homenaje*, to prolific writer and Cuban-American philosopher-theologian, Alejandro García Rivera. The response was widely diverse, both in terms of disciplinary approaches and regions. In fact, the extensive response led to a decision to create two successive issues on this special theme.

Among the studies selected for publication, a Brazilian scholar discussed the social sensibility of Chicago-born Dorothy Day, making comparisons between her beliefs and Latin American Liberation Theology. A little-recognized early 20<sup>th</sup> century figure (perhaps due to the fact that she did not seek out national attention), Day took vows of poverty and



dedicated her life to those marginalized by society, writing about their experiences for a New York-based Catholic newspaper. The Brazilian scholar compares Day's philosophy of the sacrificing "Catholic Worker" to César Chávez's work in the 1960s, as well as the 1970s Liberation Theology movement in Brazil. She draws conclusions that Dorothy Day is a forerunner of total-commitment service.

Other articles were based in U.S. experience, from diverse regions. A historian discussed the process of creating critical consciousness through spiritual activism in Chicago's Mexican Pilsen neighborhood during the 1990s, practices that were formed through an expansive view of popular religion. Another contributor redacted excerpts from the diary of a young Mexican-American woman during her journey from Texas to Chicago in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the neighborhoods where she lived, and her church involvement, including efforts to establish a *La virgencita* Guadalupe parish. Each of these articles shows how a Latino parish is constructed by a community, rather than top down, by church hierarchy.

Two articles by younger scholars were especially interesting. Assessing the practices of *Cursillo* and creation of a permanent Latino male Diaconate in cities of the Midwest during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this study revealed an evocative account of male sensibilities and the significant role played by deacons in neighborhood stability. After conducting numerous interviews and consulting church records and community newspaper and obituary accounts, the author paints a picture of thriving Latino communities mostly invisible in official city histories. The other, by a historian who is also a dancer in the ancient *Conchero* (conch shell) tradition, deconstructed the process and legacy of divergent performances of *Danza azteca*, and *tradición conchera*. She demonstrates that those viewing each dance style may not recognize subtle differences: The literature (in folklore) will state they are the same, of syncretic nature and influenced, or tainted, by colonial Catholic presence.

These two articles were initially dismissed by outside blind reviewers (due to their discussions outside usual parameters in "the literature"), but with editorial coaching, the authors added sources and interviews, and strengthened their own scholarly observations and arguments. Their approaches revealed promising ideas and research, which simply needed further guidance. The cultural dance scholar argued with the literature in the field, meticulously demonstrating details of continuous Indigenous teachings in a community based in Coyoacán, on the outskirts of Mexico City, where a style of native dance (that differs from *Danza azteca*) is performed. As with the previous article, on *Cursillo* teachings and practices, this scholar conducted interviews with community expert authorities, and consulted earlier oral histories and

other evidence, to build arguments offering new terrain for discussion. After development and revisions, the two articles became strong features of our two issues. In fact, the second article was selected for a significant award by a national professional association, for work by younger scholars in history that critically explored Indigenous heritage and presence.

Also on the topic of Indigenous-Catholic culture, an article studied the short narratives of Chicana writer/poet Demetria Martínez, collected in her book *Confessions of a Berlitz-Tape Chicana* (2005)—her columns published over 20 years in *The Catholic Reporter* newspaper—for her engagement with layered dimensions of Indigenous influence on Latino Catholic customs. Martínez divulges issues of personal illness, offers concerns about global human rights, and contemplates family and neighborhood interactions. The impetus for her world outlook rests in the cultural values of the Latino/Hispanic community. She highlights the inspiration she derives from female role models, in prayer, and through the craft of writing. Martínez says: “My muse is not Greek ... the spirit that guides me is *La Llorona*” (p. 64). The wailing, or “hollering” woman (as referenced by Sandra Cisneros in a short story) has roots in Indigenous lore, where, as in many cultures, women ritually exhibit public wailing for the sadness felt upon the loss of a child or loved one. Anzaldúa cited the wailing or mourning rites performed by a woman in Nahua society as an act of protest when she has no other recourse (p. 55), noting that the Spanish missionaries classified *La Llorona* in the “bad” women category. Martínez calls her “a woman who will not be silenced” (p. 65). For Chicana writers, female figures of Indigenous legacy become symbolic role models in critical and literary explorations.

Theresa Delgadillo provided an excerpt from the introduction to her book, demonstrating how she arrived at her ideas, after studying Anzaldúa, to explore spiritual attitudes and resolutions in fiction by Chicana writers. A short article by an artist born and raised in a Hispanic community of northern New Mexico reflected on the process of preparation for an exhibit: Having been invited by the Student Intercultural Programs Center at a Catholic University to reflect on his personal religious faith and community experience through art, he narrates how he contemplated the space provided (the obstructions, pillars, walls and windows) before choosing and describing each item for the exhibit. The cartoonish, vibrantly colorful images that accompany the article illustrate political undertones, his understanding of Indigenous and Spanish colonial history, and U.S. experience including Vietnam. The result was a unique article.

#### 4.1. A Second Issue:

Our theme was expanded to a second issue to feature an *homenaje* to Alejandro García Rivera, who, before his untimely death in late 2010, had been a faculty member of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley (now part of Santa Clara University), and since 1992 had directed more dissertations by Latino/a theologians than any other scholar at a Catholic University. His history is interesting: After working as a physicist for Boeing in Seattle, assigned to the Air Launch Cruise Missile project, he came suddenly to the realization that the nature of that work was designed only to kill. He left, studied at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, was ordained to the ministry and became a pastor in a Pennsylvania community before returning to the Catholic Church and emerging as a preeminent Latino theologian. A prolific writer with five unique philosophical books, his work bridged the disciplines of science, art, religion, and philosophy. Our thematic editor called him “a liberation theologian who unshackled us from feudal, colonial, and Americanist bonds to exercise a new kind of Latino/a creativity.” In the eight thoughtful essays saluting García Rivera, he is remembered poignantly by both former students and prominent writers for the spiritual impact he had on all who knew him.

One of these contributors was Michelle A. González, who had been his Ph.D. student. She has just published a book, *A Critical Introduction to Religion in the Americas: Bridging the Liberation Theology and Religious Studies Divide* (2014), where she argues that religious practice in the Americas—how religion is actually experienced—cannot be understood without meticulous study of marginalized populations. Her approach is hemispheric, examining ethnographic and historical sources to identify lived religious movements. Then, without dismissing 20<sup>th</sup> century liberation theology, she challenges the need for a new scope of liberation theologies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Because our publication is a full-color journal, we feature artists whose work may connect to each theme. The first issue for this theme highlighted the work of El Salvadoran artist and community activist Fernando Llorca, whose geometric shapes recall Picasso’s art, and his bright colors the work of various Latin American artists including Colombian Fernando Botero. The second issue featured the rich landscape scenes of Camaldolese hermit monk and artist Arthur Poulin, resident of the Incarnation Monastery in Berkeley and a close friend of García Rivera’s.

The interviews and book reviews in the two issues also kept to the theme: An interview with Timothy Matovina on the forces and spiritual power of community influence, and in the second issue, with theologian Angel Méndez Montoya on food and the Eucharist, physical and spiritual

hunger. A second timely interview, with a prominent historian, was prompted by the arrival in theaters of the film *For Greater Glory: The True Story of the Cristiada*, and discusses the arrival of *Criatero* immigrants in the U.S. before and during that short-lived war. She describes the fundraising and other efforts organized through parishes and faith communities to support the revolutionary cause. In our final section for creative work, short stories explored and debated Catholic and Latino identity.

No submissions were about Pope Francis' influence or teachings (but then, we did not include his name in the thematic Call); yet, connections were drawn to Indigenous and colonial Spanish heritage, community service, neighborhood parish building, poverty and marginalization, historical trajectories, art and philosophy, women who will not be silenced, and the influence of male deacons on other males. Most articles were centered in U.S. experience, likely because our Call was titled "Latino" Catholicism.

## 5. Conclusions:

These examples of recent scholarship within the interdisciplinary field of Latin American Studies demonstrate critical engagement at the heart of Latin American experience: Where and how people live, how they worship and continue customs, including dance and the arts, their migrations, the activism of neighborhoods and parishes, and which images influence guidance and philosophic orientations. The subject of Latin American life and history lies at the intersection of culture and faith. Latino/a Catholicism is neither static nor entity specific, but rather a rich and significant terrain for study, where the *other* is considered through new theory, perspectives, and understanding of "hybrid" rather than syncretic or multicultural form.

García Canclini has made the observation that 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentine writer Domingo Sarmiento's "motto [of] 'civilization or barbarism' differentiates the indigenous-mestizo—uncultured—pole of society from the progressive and educated development (defined by the Creole groups) that made possible the nation's existence" (p. 112). Such notions are now etched into our foundational histories and basic educational system (whether in the U.S. or Latin America), dismissing not only the contributions native to the continent, but also that third or middle spaces where culture and community survive (and thrive).

Borders matter not because they exist, but rather when and because they are transgressed. The "in-between" spaces where cultural values are negotiated and transferred often carry the history of marginalized peoples: To the outside gaze, it is the record disappeared into the interstices of

community experience and history, but for those within, it can be the experience of an “open wound” (Anzaldúa), or the invisibility of those communities.

The location of newly migrated Latino populations is also the “location of culture,” to steal or adapt the title of Bhabha’s famous book. He asserts that cultural representations move, not simply from specific to generalized conceptions, or from homogenous nationalities to multicultural dimensions, but instead to new formulations in the concept of human community. For Bhabha, the boundary is the place from which something begins its *presencing* (see his Introduction). As a new subfield, “Latino Catholicism” can open understanding of overlooked and deeper cultural contexts. This paper has been limited to North America (the U.S. and Mexico), but many more studies are being published on recent creative and philosophical thought by South American Indigenous peoples, as well as various dimensions of Afrodescendant (this term has supplanted Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean) cultural practices and populations. There are studies on Caribbean Catholic and other socio-religious practices being published, and new interpretations and readings of cultural history, even on Afro-Caribbean music. As an interdisciplinary field, U.S. Latino and Latin American Studies is enriched through the expansion of new research subfields and new perspectives.

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