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Book Review

Contemporary Conversations on Cross-Cultural Exchange

By Jenni L. Shelton

Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamín Valentín, editors

Creating Ourselves: African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression

At the time of its publication in 2001, Anthony B. Pinn's and Benjamin Valentín's *The Ties That Bind* was one of the first collaborative efforts to engage Latino/a and African American religious scholars in a cross-cultural exchange between their scholarly communities. In *Creating Ourselves* (2009) the editors go even further. The latter volume not only encourages the collaboration between Latino/a and African American scholars, it does so through the intellectual framework of popular culture, which has been under-explored by religious scholars.

The authors featured in *Creating Ourselves* explore a wide variety of topics, including the body, literature, music, television, visual arts, and food, and they illustrate how each of these aspects of popular culture serve as cultural signifiers of religion. For each topic, both an African American and Latino/a scholar contribute an essay and a response to their colleague's contribution.

These essays on the intersection of popular culture and religion demonstrate that the use of culture as an analytical category is a viable endeavor. While the authors often disagree on the best ways to examine the diversity of religious experiences they all agree that religion is the substance of culture and that culture can be used to facilitate positive social transformation.

Mayra Rivera and Traci C. West analyze Christian attitudes about the body. In Rivera's view, white men have grossly objectified the bodies of women of color and "white" women of color (Latinas). Rivera also presents evidence to show that a person's race or color has, historically, been defined by their morality rather than actual skin pigment. Rivera urges her readers to resist "the ideologies that objectify our bodies" and instead transcend societal conceptions of race and sex to "create ourselves through our relationships with others and with the divine" (84-5). In her critique of Rivera, West argues that Rivera does not show how the illicit unions of Latina and African American women with white men were oftentimes the result of rape while these women were enslaved or employed by these men. West's essay looks at the lighter/darker issue for women of color, and notes that lighter skinned African American and Latina actresses are popular among white male audiences. To West, this trend to glorify light skin and marginalize darker actresses exasperates racist thought and further objectifies women.

James H. Evans Jr. and Teresa Delgado offer insightful literary analyses on the African and Puerto Rican Diasporas. Evans uses Toni Morrison's *Paradise* in order to enrich the reader's understanding of the African American quest for paradise. Delgado's analysis of novels by Puerto Rican emigrants similarly looks at how paradise can be achieved via the American dream--even for minorities who have to battle racism and prejudice.

Alex Nava's and Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan's essays on hip hop and Jonathan Walton's and Joseph De León's essays about television and religion reveal that music, telenovelas, and televised evangelism are extremely influential in our society. For these authors, media creates a

community of believers outside of the normal church setting and leads to the development of ideas and beliefs about spirituality that are anathema to most conservatives but popular among young people. Suzanne E. Hoeferkamp Segovia's and Sheila F. Winborne's essays also reveal that conservative church leaders are often in conflict with popular culture, especially over issues of sexuality and religion as displayed in the visual arts.

Finally, Lynne Westfield's and Angel F. Méndez Montoya's essays on food and religion reveal how women, relegated to the kitchen because of misogynist attitudes, were able to use the kitchen to negotiate power and authority in their communities. Westfield's mother used peach cobbler to rally neighbors to support local schools. To Montoya, Sor Juana de la Cruz used the convent kitchen as a space of creativity and an outlet for self-expression. Both of these women, though they were born hundreds of years apart, used cooking to impress and influence others.

All of these essays are engaging and important contributions to the field of African American, Latino/a, and religious studies, because they demonstrate how religion has been used to combat racism, fight injustice, and demonstrate individuality.