Traces of Transgressive Traditions
Shifting Liberation Theologies through Jotería Studies

Vincent D. Cervantes


— Marcella Althaus-Reid, The Queer God

Conceptualizing the field of jotería studies within the queer Chicana/o imagination is a sacred act that not only liberates our jotería as a people and an identity but also gestures toward the theological development of sexual minorities within Chicana/o and Mexican contexts. As a queer Chicano activist-theologian, I find myself dissatisfied with current progressive theologies that do not speak to the experiences and embodiment of a jotería identity. My own experiences have left me frustrated by the ways in which conversations within current queer theological thought continue to be filtered through a white masculinist lens, loaded with privilege and levels of access, that does not lend itself to other global or cultural contexts. Likewise, while Latin American liberation theologies have foregrounded issues of race and class difference, these discourses have downplayed, or neglected altogether, the experiences of marginalization and oppression of queer persons, both in their own right and in relation to race and class. I believe, however, that the emergence of jotería studies enables a rethinking of the body and sex in light of Chicana/o experiences that informs and extends my own theological frameworks. I argue that current progressive theologies neglect to develop and imagine understandings of marginalized bodies by considering race, class, and sexuality as categories that shape
Cervantes

one another. In effect, queer Chicana/os are left behind and out of the picture when queer embodied and collective experiences are discussed and interpreted.

Debates about normalizing homosexuality within Christian theology are an exhausted conversation and actually work to the disadvantage of many LGBT and queer individuals. In many ways this discussion recolonizes the homosexual by categorizing homosexuality within the limitations of normative understandings of sexual desire and relationships. Conversations in queer studies have sought to prove the “natural” origins of homosexuality in an attempt to provide a basis for the sanctity of same-sex marriages. However, the topic and language of the debate needs to be altered, since these debates about the normalization of homosexuality and same-sex marriage are not necessarily relevant to transnational contexts. In my own field of Latin American theology and cultural studies, I wrestle with this question: How do we construct and envision a theology of sex and the body for cultural contexts where “homosexuality” as a sexual category is invisible? In other words, how do we categorize same-sex desire in the postcolony?

This essay is a reflection on the evolution of theological frameworks that have worked to foreground and give voice to the racialized, gendered, and sexualized Chicana/o queer subject. I discuss the shift from liberation theology to mujerista frameworks as a springboard for critical engagement and as a critical contributor to the potential for a jotería theology. Thus, use of the term jotería gives a language and a context to describe Chicana/o queerness in ways that traditional queer and ethnic studies have not provided. Furthermore, by building on the legacy of transgressive theologians, jotería theology creates new paradigms within ethnic studies and religious studies for thinking about how queer Chicana/os understand their relationship to spirituality.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time I encountered the term jotería or any of its variations. Perhaps it was on the playground in elementary school, when the words faggot or queer were not harsh enough to describe young brown boys who act differently. Or perhaps it was from my father, who expressed his disdain when I played with my sisters’ muñecas instead of playing soccer outside like my boy cousins. Hearing joto in Spanish from my father and my peers drove home the reality that I was different from

Vincent D. Cervantes is a PhD candidate in Spanish and Latin American studies at the University of Southern California. His research and writing focuses on Latin American religions and theologies, queer identities and performance, religion and literature, the role of religion and sexuality in colonialism and postcolonialism, and comparative liberation theologies.
other Mexican and Chicano men. Regardless of when I first heard it, the term was imprinted upon my identity to describe my differences as a sexual and racial minority. It was a term that burned deep in my gut, because I did not know how to reconcile such a derogative slur with a queer identity.

It was in college that I first began to think about the term as part of a theoretical framework and truly accepted it as my own identity and philosophy. Reading *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) opened my eyes to the necessity of developing and embracing a language to describe our identities as queer Chicana/o individuals. Throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa refers to herself as “jota” while theorizing the significance of being “la nueva mestiza.” Terms like lesbian and queer were never sufficient to describe how she felt as a jota Chicana from the borderlands. A jota mother to many Chicana/os, Anzaldúa instructed us to rethink how we use labels to interpret and identify with the world around us. Inspired by Anzaldúa’s political calling for the jotería to rise up, I bring that same energy and focus, despite all the negative connotations, to my own work as a theologian.

**Spirit of Culture**

Within Chicana/o and Latin American cultures, sexuality remains a largely hidden concept and one solely based on sexual positionality through a machista-gendered framework. The question of sexual orientation and the affirmation of queer experiences is shunned in ordinary conversation. Chicana/o and Latina/o queer thinkers must work vigorously to undo the damage that comes from leaving homosexuality in the dark in our own cultural contexts. Moreover, religious and theological inquiry into questions of sexuality and the body is also almost nonexistent. So why bring religion and theology into a conversation about Chicana/o sexuality?

I use theology and religious to describe the ways in which people understand and interpret the world around them through ritual, text, and performance. Spirituality is woven into the cultural fabric of Latin America. The cosmovision and ceremonial centers of Mesoamerican religious histories, practices, and theologies are very much a part of Latin American and Chicano cultural production and cannot be overlooked in our discussion. Davíd Carrasco writes, “It is a special gift of the religious imagination that allows a people, after 500 years of colonialism, dependency, oppression, and resistance, to turn to the ancient Mesoamerican past for symbols, stories, and messages that help make a world meaningful, give it a standing center,
and provide for social and spiritual renewal” (2013, 187). While Aztlán remains the cosmovision for the Chicana/o people, it is most importantly a symbol of decolonial meaning. It opens a space in which to extend understandings of religious experience, though not without being problematic in terms of its masculinist frameworks, as Cherríe Moraga (2004) asserts in her famous essay “Queer Aztlán.” Nonetheless, how I come to understand my own queerness as a Chicano is informed by my religious understandings and vice versa. I therefore implore us to draw on a history already embedded in the cultural makeup to find a space to decolonize sexual and religious experiences, but also to describe and untangle the complexities of being la jotería. What I raise is a unique conversation about the blending of seemingly incompatible identities. Moraga describes Aztlán as tierra sagrada, sacred land that gave rise to revolution; but in our sexualized context today, “‘Aztlán’ as our imagined homeland begins to take on renewed importance” (Moraga 2004, 235). How, then, do we work within a cultural context in order to reconceptualize the categories of theology, sex, and body on the grounds of the Chicana/o experience?

The shortcomings of current progressive theologies are what bring jotería studies to the forefront of queer Chicana/o theological thought. Queer theology remains the product of white homonormative thinking, while liberation theology does not empower and emphasize queer voices in ways that would truly liberate our communities. I am interested in reflecting on jotería not only as a category of identity but also as a method of theological inquiry that enables us to think within the borderlands of interdisciplinarity, intertextuality, and intersexuality. I posit that there is a space for jotería studies within theological and religious discourses and that this is a necessary point of entry for understanding race, sexuality, and religion as intersectional categories. When we reflect on the evolution of progressive theologies that have attempted to theologically liberate oppressed minorities, I believe we will see how jotería studies is the next step in thinking about queerness as it relates to Chicana/o sexual experiences. This account is also a reflection on my own theological development and how I arrive at the opening of a new language in theology to describe Chicana/o queerness in terms that liberate, translate, and represent the diversity of our experiences.
Liberating the Oppressed

When I told mentors and colleagues that I wanted to study theology, I was consistently met with the response, “You must want to study liberation theology, then.” Because of my Chicano identity, it was expected that I would work within the frameworks of liberation theology and Latin American religion. It is an expectation I resented, because while I worked within the context of queer Latin America, I did not think I needed to be categorized as a “liberationist” in order to be considered a Latin American theologian. But as a theologian interested in conveying the struggles and experiences of oppressed groups living on the margins of societal norms, I knew that liberation theology could not be neglected in my journey toward the development a queer theology within Latin American frameworks.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Christian groups began to politicize theology on the basis of class differences. Interpreting the teachings of Jesus Christ in terms of liberation from unjust economic, political, and social conditions gave rise to new ways of thinking about and doing theology. Liberation theology, a term coined in 1971 by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, emerged as a movement among Latin American and black theologians, many drawing on the Exodus narrative of the Israelites being freed from slavery in Egypt. In his introduction to queer theology, Patrick Cheng describes how liberation theology is part of the evolutionary history of queer theology. He writes, “The primary concern of this strand was not just acceptance of queer people by the church, but also the demonstration of how queer liberation—that is, freedom from heterosexism and homophobia, as well as the freedom to be one’s own authentic self—is at the very heart of the gospel message and Christian theology” (Cheng 2011, 30). Liberation theology raises the issues of oppressed groups and class subjugation, which have long been part of the Chicana/o experience but which also, as Cheng points out, remain at the heart of queer discourses. Like the liberation theologies of key figures like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and James Cone, “the liberation strand of queer theology argued that God was not neutral and in fact had a preferential option for the poor and oppressed” (Cheng 2011, 30).

What liberation theology does for jotería theological thought is to open a discussion of the ways in which oppressed bodies relate to the divine and to each other. It also raises issues of racial and class differences, which I see as being at the heart of jotería studies in relation to current queer theologies. The liberationist emphasis on the “preferential option
for the poor” speaks to a universality of God’s love, which excludes no one. Thus, experience and praxis outweigh doctrine as we develop a new way of doing and thinking about theology. For jotería, the ways in which we understand and interpret the world around us—which I take as the basic definition of religious experience—are at the heart of the work we do. Liberation theology has laid a foundation for many marginalized groups to speak up against traditional theological frameworks that have silenced them. I see subversion as a defining element of both liberation theology and jotería studies. Liberation theology was able to problematize class and racial differences within normative doctrines and theologies, while jotería studies has the capacity to push back on homonormative understandings of queer studies and ethnic studies.

Although I came to identify as a liberation theologian, when I am among my fellow liberationists, I often feel like el otro entre los otros, stuck in the liminal space between my embodied realities of being brown and queer. I do not find liminality to be liberating, but rather isolating and segregating. Liberation theology has opened the door for those marginalized by race and class, but I find that queer voices are not at the forefront of liberationist literature. Nor were sexual minorities and other gender deviants a priority for early liberation thinkers. Based heavily on Ricoeurian and Marxist influences on biblical hermeneutics and on ecclesiology, these frameworks contextualized the priorities of early liberationists. Liberation theology was developed across Christian denominations, so church doctrine (including positions on homosexuality) often influenced the agenda and the choice of which minority groups were to be a priority. Queer Argentinean liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, in her work on the relationship between sexual liberation and the canon of liberationist literature, reminds us that the early liberation theologians failed to understand queers’ shared experiences of oppression or their spiritual journeys as minorities. She argues that we should see the early liberationists not necessarily as homophobic, but rather as preoccupied with the urgency of their own agenda (Althaus-Reid 2006). However, through my own engagement, I argue that liberation theology has not worked to undo or interrupt the traditional structures of theology with its critique of class difference. In this sense it continues to be a heterosexist and normative way of doing theology.

As a result, LGBT and queer theologians have sought out liberation elsewhere. In Know My Name: A Gay Liberation Theology, Richard Cleaver argues that the Latin American model of liberation theology does not work for queers; instead it challenges us to come up with a theology of our
own, on our own terms (1995, 12). I concur with Cleaver’s assessment and propose that we think of new ways to conceptualize our queer Chicana/o experiences on a theological level. Latin American liberation theology remains caught up in reflecting the codes of decency and acceptability imposed by society and religious doctrine. Therefore, as a theological and philosophical framework, liberationist thought needs to be criticized for its orderly conduct and its desexualized nature, which in effect invites theologians to think about theology in queer Latina/o America through the lens of an ethics of perversion (Henderson-Espinoza 2013). Jotería theology, on the other hand, does not divorce race and class from sexuality. In this sense it perverts theology in a productive way by countering the invisibility of sexuality in Chicano identities while also foregrounding the racial differences that are not discussed in queer circles. Calls to attend to these intentional intersections often fall on deaf ears among liberation theologians. Thus jotería theology is a way of rethinking and moving beyond liberation. For me it opens a space to rescue liberation theology by turning attention to the neglected voices of brown queer bodies that get left in the margins.

Latina Voices of Experience

The masculinist and heterosexist nature of liberation theology presents a number of problems that require further consideration. I believe that it is the voices of Latina women in theology that have established the necessary links between liberation and queer theology that define a jotería that I identify with. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the founding mother of mujerista theology, argues that “liberation is not something one person can give another but . . . is a process in which the oppressed are protagonists, participants in creating a reality different from the present oppressive one” (1996, 1). Mujerista theology was developed in response to the Latin American liberation theologies that excluded the voices of Latina women, but also in response to the broader feminist movement that excluded the voices of racial minorities. Isasi-Díaz and her colleagues worked to contextualize the Latina experience in feminism; it is for that reason that religion and theology remain important to the conceptualizations of mujerista advancements. I believe that as a theological framework, jotería studies finds its roots in mujerista theology. The work of the Latina feminist theological project presents us with the skills and resources to subvert the normative ways of doing theology and thinking about the body and sexuality.
Mujerista theology poses a challenge to traditional theological frameworks. In her seminal work, Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century, Isasi-Díaz writes,

As a liberative praxis mujerista theology is a process of enablement for Latina women which insists on the development of a strong sense of moral agency and clarifies the importance and value of who we are, what we think, and what we do. Second, as a liberative praxis, mujerista theology seeks to impact mainline theologies, those theologies which support what is normative in church and, to a large degree, in society—what is normative having been set by non-Hispanics and to the exclusion of Latinas and Latinos, particularly Latinas. (1996, 62)

These goals of mujerista theology resonate with what I understand to be the goals of a jotería theology: that is, enabling the voices of queer Chicana/os in order to change normative ideologies that are imposed upon us as sexual and racial minorities. Mujeristas challenge us to think about the oppressive structures in place within our own cultures and societies that affect our day-to-day functions. Isasi-Díaz’s mujerista theology takes us out of a theology based on doctrine and focuses instead on a lived theology based on our daily experiences.

Mujerista theology develops the role of lo cotidiano, which I argue is also an aspect of jotería studies. As Isasi-Díaz explains, “Lo cotidiano is a way of referring to Latinas’ efforts to understand and express how and why their lives are the way they are, how and why they function as they do” (1996, 68). I read lo cotidiano as a theological category insofar as we experience the divine through how we understand and interpret the world around us. “The valuing of lo cotidiano,” Isasi-Díaz states, “means that we appreciate the fact that Latinas see reality in a different way from the way it is seen by non-Latinas” (68). It is because of this focus on everyday experience that jotería studies and jotería theology find their roots in the mujerista movement. Lo cotidiano points to the fact that we jotería, racialized sexual deviants who struggle from the underside of history, constitute ourselves and our world through an ongoing lived process. In other words, lo cotidiano becomes an embodied epistemological framework for jotería studies.

I draw on decolonial feminism and the mujerista movement in my exploration of jotería studies as a concept and theological method because I identify with the feminist emphasis on bodies and gender as they relate to religion and society. The question of how bodies and gender are regulated by the normative ideologies and erotics of power imposed by white masculinist discourses is of deep importance both to feminist theory and, in my view, to
jotería thinking. If mujerista theology refocuses liberation theology in order to center the everyday experiences of oppression we embody, then why not find a home for queer Chicana/os within these ideologies? Many queer Latina/os, myself included, have indeed done so. Feminist and mujerista theory and theology challenge how we think about gender performance and gender deviance as they relate to the body. I understand jotería to be even more than that, however. Jotería is a claiming of sexual experience and identity, which extends beyond gender deviance. Mujerista theology embraces difference as a moral option, which serves as a springboard for the critical engagement of other areas and groups that resist the normative trajectories of what defines decency and acceptability. It has extended the field of liberation theology and has challenged traditional theological thinking in order to bring the perspectives of other oppressed people into theology and religious studies, an academic discipline that continuously omits and silences the voices of women and LGBTQs (Isasi-Díaz 1996, 2).

The Latina/Chicana feminist theological project presents a method of critical reflection that jotería studies needs to engage. So what skills must we develop in order to construct a jotería theological framework that follows this critical method? Latina feminist theologians have equipped us to develop dexterity with transdisciplinarity, sensitivity to intersectionality, creative appreciation of bodies, and tolerance of repeated discomfort at epistemological levels. As a jotería theologian, I do not expect the mujeristas to lift up issues of queerness; rather, I think their project is to empower us to find our own space and develop our own ethics of body and sexuality on our own terms. They are the necessary allies in our efforts to move forward.

A New Era of Queer Thinking

Jotería studies as a concept builds on a long history of oppressed minority groups coming to the frontlines to challenge institutions and ideologies that have silenced those who are “different.” Liberation and mujerista thinkers offer interventions in the field of theology that enable queer Chicana/os to develop their own language with which to talk about their experiences of living in the borderlands of otherness. I believe that the development of jotería studies is relevant to my own field of theology through this very understanding of living in the borderlands. For me, jotería means claiming our sexual experiences as part of our identity. It challenges the continuing invisibility of homosexuality in Latin American and Chicana/o cultural contexts. Because of our embodied realities as
jotería, our access and privileges are always in tension with the normative strictures in place. Jotería studies enables queer Chicana/os to speak up and have a voice, not to assimilate or blend into normative society but to radically change it through critical reflection on our brown sexualities. On a theological level, this means that jotería theology helps queer Chicana/os discover and affirm the presence of the divine in the midst of our communities and in our daily lives. Religion and theology continue to heavily influence our communities, homes, and lives, and for that reason it is imperative that we use jotería studies to challenge and rethink how theology is done.

Queer theology is a new and developing area of study. As Cheng recalls, the field effectively came into being in 2000 with the publication of Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*: “In that book, Althaus-Reid set forth a shocking ‘indecent theology’ . . . that unmasked the heterosexual and patriarchal assumptions of traditional liberation theologies” (Cheng 2011, 37). Being a queer liberation theologian herself, Althaus-Reid endeavored to find a continuation of liberation and feminist theologies through her development of an “indecent theology” that reflected on sexual experiences as theological metaphors. In other words, it is our sexual transgressions that create a space for queer theological inquiry. She writes,

> Transgressions have always been with us. Sexual theologies are the opposite of idealistic processes. They are materialist theologies which have their starting points in people’s actions, or sexual acts without polarising the social from the symbolic. It is from human sexuality that theology starts to search and understand the sacred, and not vice versa. Indecent theologies are sexual theologies without pages cut from the books of our sexual experiences. (Althaus-Reid 2000, 146)

Althaus-Reid opened the door for queer theology in a raw and radical way. She drew on her experiences as a queer Argentinean woman and related those experiences to her thoughts on theology. What does it mean to think about theology from the vantage point of a working-class Latin American woman, a lemon vendor with no underwear, as she so eloquently describes? What if that embodied and performed reality becomes the site where theology is written? In many ways, though, I feel that the spirit of Althaus-Reid’s work has been lost in queer theology.

Queer theology today remains dedicated to naturalizing homosexuality and sanctifying same-sex marriage. Queer theology has become redundant over the past decades in its attempts to make sense of same-sex
orientations through a relationship to the divine. However, while these issues are important from the standpoint of equal human rights, they do not always have much to do with the racialized and class conflicts that shape our experiences as queer Chicana/os. The ways in which I relate to the divine and my own theological understandings of how we experience God’s love are heavily influenced by my queerness and chicanidad. I cannot separate the two, because they also influence each other. Jotería studies offers a language and space to talk about the interconnectedness of identities that we embody and how those identities affect other ways of thinking.

Jotería studies is a transdisciplinary project. I find myself turning to literary analysis and literature to find the intersection of liberation theology, queer theology, and racialized sexualities. Althaus-Reid writes, “It is from human sexuality that theology starts to search and understand the sacred, and not vice versa” (2000, 146). I argue that the Latina/o queer interacts, participates, and embodies the sexualized incarnational space that Althaus-Reid constructs in her work. I am interested in the ways that queerness in Latin American literature and culture problematizes and extends the theological meaning of incarnation by considering the decolonial work of scholars who have attempted to make sense of embodied differences.

Queer people of color are aware that mainstream queer theory and queer theology remain dominated by white male voices. However, it is important to acknowledge how people of color are challenging these areas of study. Individuals like Patrick Cheng, Laura Elisa Pérez, Irene Monroe, and even the late Peter Gomes have all raised up the experiences of queer people of color in theology and religious studies. A jotería understanding of theology is necessary in order to counter the homonormative queer theologies that silence our own experiences. It is a method of liberating our voices from the margins so that we too can participate in discourses that affect our daily lives. Not only does jotería studies enable a theology for queer Chicana/os, it also creates a theological language from the perspective of queer Chicana/os. This is a fundamental element of both Latin American theology and queer theology that should be taken into consideration by all progressive theologians.
Works Cited


