The Option for the Poor as a Decolonial Option: Latin American Liberation Theology in Conversation with Teología India and Womanist Theology

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Decolonial theorists pose a new challenge to liberation theology: Does its formulation of the option for the poor address the coloniality that distinguishes the modern context? This article argues that an option for the poor within theology, as a decolonial option, has to retrieve and deepen two central concerns of liberation theologians’ early articulation of the option for the poor: (1) the commitment to the poor and the way the divine is manifested historically, and (2) the affirmation of the need for social analysis and the need for this analysis to impact the commitment to God. The article draws on Teología India and womanist theology to indicate how these two interrelated commitments within the option for the poor can strengthen the option for the poor as a decolonial option.

KEYWORDS Option for the poor, Decolonial, Teología India, Womanist theology, Liberation theology

In the 1960s and 1970s, liberation theology emerged in Latin America within a context in which political, economic, social, and existential remnants from the colonizing of the Americas persisted. As a theological discourse, liberation theology sought to respond to the experience of “coloniality,” a term that decolonial theorists only later developed as one way to interpret the historical manifestation of patterns of domination that had their points of origination in the political process of colonialism, yet which did not conclude with political decolonization.1 Whereas colonialism refers to the political domination of one nation-state over another,

Coloniality refers to a logic underlying all modern colonialism—that is, European colonialism since 1492. The decolonial project responds to this historical situation of coloniality. It reveals that coloniality is a matrix, the colonial matrix of power, how it functions, including its constitutive role in Western modernity, and proposes visions of futures liberated from the power of coloniality. The decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo develops one of the basic claims of decolonial theory, related to the proposal of decolonial futures, as the idea that a single system of knowledge “is pernicious to the well-being of the human species and to the life of the planet.” He distinguishes between missions and options. The decolonial option is an “option” that claims its legitimacy among existing political and academic options or projects; it is not a “mission” to which others need to be converted. Here, I question the relationship between the decolonial option, which seeks to de-link from the logic of coloniality, and Latin American liberation theology, with specific reference to liberation theology’s “option for the poor.”

I argue that the intuition that prompted Latin American liberation theologians to articulate the option for the poor can be retrieved and deepened by pushing liberation theology toward a decolonial option on the epistemological level. The option for the poor can be an articulation of a decolonial option when it is manifested as a commitment to the claims, as theological claims, that emerge from those who live within what Frantz Fanon calls the “damnation” or “condemnation” that results from the naturalization of the coloniality of power. The option for the poor that I articulate within a decolonial orientation remains consistent with Latin American theology’s option for the poor in its affirmation of the commitment to God and the way the Christian God self-reveals historically, and in its affirmation of the need for social analysis to impact the commitment to God. In this sense, my argument is based on a process of retrieval. I also maintain that liberation theology can deepen its claim of the option for the poor in such a way that it is strengthened as a decolonial option by engaging Teología India and womanist theologies. Because these theological currents affirm concrete ways of grasping the world and historical situation (which often remain outside of normative epistemologies within Western modernity) as having the capacity to make theological claims, they can help to bring out the decolonial elements within Latin American liberation theology’s option for the poor.

I proceed according to three related steps. First, I indicate key elements of the option for the poor, as it was articulated by early Latin American liberation theology. This will clarify the content of the option for the poor to which I refer when I argue that (decolonial) theology must be grounded in the option for the poor. In the second and third sections, I propose two theological currents that Latin

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1 Walter Mignolo defines decolonial thinking as that thinking which seeks to undermine coloniality: “The analytic of coloniality (decolonial thinking) consists in the relentless work of unveiling how the matrix works. And the decolonial option is the relentless project of getting us all out of the mirage of modernity and the trap of coloniality” (Walter D. Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 2011. p. 17).

2 Ibid., p. xii.

3 Ibid., p. xxvii–xxviii.

4 This concept is evident in the title of Fanon’s Les damnés de la terre. Translated into English as The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press; 1963.
American liberation theologians have not traditionally engaged, yet which would strengthen the option for the poor as a decolonial option. In the second section, I stage a constructive conversation between liberation theology and Teología India, a movement within Latin America that does theology from the claims of indigenous peoples and their worldviews. Then, in the third section, I turn to an early iteration of womanist theology, Delores S. Williams’s articulation of redemption based on the lived experiences of U.S. African American women, to indicate one way forward for a decolonial option for the poor.

The Option for the Poor in Liberation Theology: Commitment and Social Analysis

The option for the poor emerged in the early stages of Latin American theology as a discourse about God, and was grounded in two crucial elements: commitment to God and the poor, on the one hand, and social analysis that clarifies and deepens the nature of this commitment, on the other. I pay particular attention to these two elements because both must remain present in order for the option for the poor to adequately ground (decolonial) theological discourse. The decolonial commitment I find in the option for the poor therefore does not change the basic structure of this option as it was articulated in Latin American liberation theology in the second half of the twentieth century; it rather carries out its implications in our immediate situation of modernity/coloniality.

The Commitment within the Option for the Poor

It is important to be clear about who liberation theologians refer to when they speak of “the poor.” In the early stages of liberation theology, liberation theologians defined the poor primarily in economic terms. This is a result, as I will indicate below, of the influence of dependency theory within liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez responds to ambiguities in the term “poverty” by distinguishing material poverty as a basis in relation to which all other uses of the term “poverty” should be defined. Concretely, Gutiérrez argues that ultimately “poverty means death.” It is an all-encompassing reality: “to be poor is a way of life. It is a way of thinking, of loving, of praying, of believing and hoping, of spending free time, of struggling for a livelihood.” Gutiérrez interprets the biblical meaning of poverty as a “scandalous condition.” Across scripture, the existential situation of people living in material poverty is presented in tandem with a denunciation of poverty as antithetical to the Reign of God and an identification of its causes.

Gutiérrez gives another meaning to poverty, which stands in relation to this understanding of poverty as a “scandalous condition,” and which moves us to an

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7 Ibid., p. 236.
understanding of the option for the poor. Christians cannot aspire to material poverty, as the Bible insists this is something to be denounced and rejected, and what has been called “spiritual poverty” is something wholly different from the poverty to which Gutiérrez refers, as it indicates an attitude of the human person in relation to God. Gutiérrez conceives of a “Christian witness to poverty” as “poverty as a commitment of solidarity and protest.” He turns to the incarnation, which Paul presents “as an act of voluntary impoverishment” (cf. 2 Cor 2:8) in order to explain this. Like the incarnation, which is not an act of idealizing the human condition but an expression of love and solidarity “with others who suffer in it,” poverty is an act of solidarity with those who expose the limits of our society’s material aspirations. As solidarity and protest, poverty is lived as an act of love, in response to Christian faith. The option for the poor emerges out of this faith as a discourse on the divine reality.

The option for the poor, as it was articulated by the first generation of liberation theologians, contained a simultaneous commitment to God and the oppressed. The God revealed in Jesus Christ opts absolutely for justice and against injustice. This option, as José María Vigil argues, is fundamental to who God is: “God opts for justice, not preferentially but rather in a partial and exclusive manner.” Vigil thus rejects the idea of a “preferential” option for the poor — and Jon Sobrino admits the option for the poor “had to be qualified into ‘preferential’ so as to make the option less radical” because such a qualifier fails to accurately indicate the way scripture presents God, as selectively and exclusively opting for the poor. Within God’s universal call for salvation, God opts exclusively for the poor as poor, and exclusively against the injustices that create poverty. For Vigil, the option for those oppressed by, for example, economic structures, hetronormativity, patriarchy, and white supremacy are ways that the option for the victims of injustice, the most basic option, can be concretized.

While I maintain Vigil’s rejection of the word “preferential,” a rejection Sobrino echoes in a less polemical way, I also affirm Gutiérrez’s similar understanding of the divine, even as he uses the language of a “preferential” option for the poor. Gutiérrez interprets the “new presence” of the poor, who previously had little social significance, as “an irruption of God into our lives.” The reason Gutiérrez calls for an option for those who lack the material necessities of life, and who live a marginalized and inhumane existence due to material poverty and discriminations, is because this option exists as God’s self-offer. It is ultimately a “theocentric” option, a statement made about our commitment to God, not most fundamentally
about social analysis or compassion.\(^\text{18}\) Precisely because of its theocentricity, its being grounded in the way God has self-revealed, the option for the poor is not optional to Christianity; “option” only points to the free choice to opt against injustice, and consequently for the poor, and to the reality that one must make a choice to be in solidarity with the poor.\(^\text{19}\) There is thus a “mission” character to the option for the poor within liberation theology—unless, that is, there are options within the understanding of “the poor” and God’s self-revelation in relation to the poor. Below, I will show that *Teología India* and womanist theology make clear that these options exist.

The theocentricity of the option for the poor is clear in Gutiérrez’s insistence that “the face of Christ” emerges in the poor.\(^\text{20}\) This explicit connection between the irruption of the poor and the irruption of the divine implies a commitment that goes beyond speaking for the poor or acting on the poor’s behalf. For the non-poor, it implies making specific commitments to and having relationships with concrete people.\(^\text{21}\) In the Christian understanding of divinity, God does not enter history in an abstract way. This call to enter into relationship with those who inhabit a world that does not benefit from Western modernity indicates that while the option for the poor is a theoretical discourse on God, it is also a praxis and a commitment lived out by those who seek to live in a relationship to that God.

The Analysis of the Social Situation

The commitment the option for the poor entails, based on the way Christians understand the divine to self-reveal, is clarified by social analysis that remains connected to theological understanding. Vigil argues that justice is a theological mediation that influences our understanding of God. Discrepancies found on the level of mediations, or regarding how we understand justice, influence our “choice of God.”\(^\text{22}\) Social analysis functions within this context as a means to clarify our understandings of justice, but in doing so, also clarifies the Christian understanding of God, who self-reveals as siding with the oppressed.

Clodovis Boff most systematically presents liberation theology’s use of mediations, and specifically a socio-analytic mediation. He describes the socio-analytic mediation as the moment in which the theologian analyzes the social-historical situation as a way to determine why the oppressed are oppressed. Boff rigidly separates this mediation from theology as such. He maintains this distinction by positing an “internal regime of autonomy” and an “external regime of dependence” within theological discourse. Theology depends on a particular understanding of reality (the external regime), but within the internal regime,
theological discourse can be judged as true “within its own epistemological perimeter.”\(^\text{23}\) This distinction allows Boff to affirm that liberation theology makes use of social analysis only “instrumentally.”\(^\text{24}\)

Juan Luis Segundo provides a more helpful way of bringing social analysis into theological discourse, which more adequately links the commitment to the oppressed within a particular reality to the commitment to God. Segundo articulates his understanding of the hermeneutic circle as a way to describe the dynamics between the Christian faith and the immediate historical situation. Segundo’s model is important because it calls for a critical analysis of the social situation based on how it comes forth in our experience, which informs an experience of “theological reality,” and then a new interpretation of the social relation based on a new theological hermeneutic.\(^\text{25}\)

The way Segundo puts forth his model of the hermeneutic circle is helpful because it necessitates a commitment to social reality, and specifically those who exist in its underside, on the part of the theologian. Unlike Clodovis Boff, Segundo explicitly rejects “a certain type of academicism which posits ideological neutrality as the ultimate criterion,” and rather affirms the partiality of the theologian.\(^\text{26}\) Segundo allows for, and even encourages, receptivity in Christian revelation from the existential situation of the oppressed.\(^\text{27}\) This move, in Segundo’s work already evident within the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians, will be crucial in articulating a decolonial option for the poor.

Liberation theology’s social analysis within its theological projects has largely taken the form of an analysis of capitalism. It has understood capitalism to be the dominant economic, but also social, cultural, and political force, that defines the nature of oppression in Latin America. Ivan Petrella helpfully narrates liberation theology’s approach to analyzing capitalism in three stages: in a first stage, liberation theology used dependency theory as its theoretical framework; second, it engaged world-systems analysis to analyze capitalism; and in a third and current stage, it suffers from an under-theorization of capitalism.\(^\text{28}\) As Vigil’s claim regarding the relationship between mediations and discourse on God makes clear, these stages are crucially important on a theological level because the choice of social analysis influences the understanding of God. I draw on Petrella’s narrative of liberation theology’s engagement with social analysis with the specific aim of elaborating on how liberation theology’s use of social analysis clarifies or obfuscates its commitment to the poor, relative to its understanding of God.

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\(^{26}\) See ibid., p. 25.

\(^{27}\) Segundo praises this move in James Cone’s work. See ibid., p. 32.

In its early stages, liberation theology relied on dependency theory to analyze the historical context. In the 1960s, dependency theory gained ground in Latin America as a reaction against developmentalist theories and programs imposed by Europe and the United States. Two strands of dependency theory were present in Latin America: the Marxist version, whose main exponent was Andre Gunder Frank, and the reformist version, advanced primarily by Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto. Frank attempts to make clear, on a broad level, that underdevelopment is a necessary product of capitalist development. Cardoso and Faletto, in contrast, attempt to look at local situations outside of an overarching meta-theory of dependence. While suspicious of the capitalist mode of development, they try to find ways Latin America can grow within capitalism and in this growth move toward socialism.

In what Petrella calls “[l]iberation theology’s central statement regarding dependency theory,” Gonzalo Arroyo makes it clear that liberation theologians opt for Frank’s Marxist version of dependency theory. In this talk during a 1972 conference that was one of liberation theology’s earliest articulations, Arroyo rejected a developmentalist option within capitalism, as well as ideological “imported models” that saw underdevelopment in a way that was abstracted from social power. He appealed to Frank, arguing that “underdevelopment is the inevitable result of four centuries of capitalist development and the internal contradictions of monopolistic capitalism.” According to Arroyo, Latin American and Caribbean thinkers had come to the conclusion that development was not possible within the current capitalist system, such that a rupture with the current system, a liberation from it, was needed. This type of analysis that called for a radical break with the current capitalist system, founded on dependency theory, grounds the earliest articulations of liberation theology in Latin America.

In a second stage, liberation theology used world-systems analysis, as formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, to respond to the oppressions caused by capitalism.
Wallerstein argues for the need to see historical phenomena in relation to each other, as a world-system, and focuses on three “important turning points of our modern world-system,” which include the “long sixteenth century,” in which capitalism became a world-economy, the French Revolution in 1798, and the revolutions of 1968 that “undermined the centrist liberal geoculture that was holding the world-system together.” Proponents of world-systems analysis argue that “the separate boxes of analysis — what in the universities are called the disciplines — are an obstacle, not an aid, to understanding the world.” They see the word-system as a matrix, within which historical conflicts emerge.

Ivan Petrella claims that liberation theology’s entanglement with world-system analysis is fruitless, as its totalizing character cannot lead to any meaningful historical project of liberation. Engaging decolonial analysis, however, reveals that the modern world-system is a matrix constituted by several parts that can each be combated. As I will show in the final two sections, Teología India and womanist theology provide two avenues by which theology can work against the coloniality that grounds the modern experience on an epistemological level.

Petrella indicates the third stage in liberation theology’s attempt to understand capitalism as a lack of serious social analysis. Liberation theologians have stepped back from dependency theory and world-systems analysis, he argues, yet have in general not developed any adequate alternative form of social analysis: “This distancing from social theory is often linked to a trend away from a focus on sociopolitical critique and towards more traditional theological concerns such as ecclesiology, spirituality and faith.” As Vigil makes clear, this lack of social analysis also obfuscates the understanding of the Christian understanding of divinity.

Petrella suggests that there are three current responses among liberation theologians to the fall of socialism, all of which can be seen as displaying a lack of serious social analysis. Petrella describes one response as a reassertion of core ideas. Liberation theologians do this by, for example, separating the “revealed content” of Christian faith from “the socioanalytical tools used to explicate that content.” Petrella affirms this move theologically, but finds that it problematically divests liberation theology of its critical capacity. In this first approach, liberation theologians use concepts that depend on what Boff described as mediations, yet offer no such mediations, thus demonstrating a lack of social analysis.

Second, liberation theologians have revised some of liberation theology’s basic concepts. This generally occurs in the context of liberation theologians’ rejection of the reform-revolution dichotomy crucial to early liberation theology, their rejection of the poor as a unified revolutionary subject, and their turn to civil society.

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39 Ibid.
41 Ibid., p. 80.
42 Ibid., p. 3.
43 See ibid., p. 4.
Petrella finds this trend to be problematic because of, first, the increasing lack of revolutionary consciousness within civil society, and second, a lack of focus on structural, political, and economic analysis and transformation.  

A third response that indicates liberation theology’s lack of adequate social analysis in its current phase, according to Petrella, is a generalized critique of capitalism as idolatrous. An example of this tendency is Franz Hinkelammert’s critique of the utopian character of the market economy. The problem Petrella finds with this type of critique is that it does not develop its criteria, such as “life,” in a way that is nuanced and rigorous enough to distinguish liberation theology’s position from those who support market economies.

Liberation theology’s engagement with social scientific analyses in its early stages as a means to better articulate who God is, which it then loses, demonstrates a seriousness in early liberation theology on two levels. First, it indicates an intense effort to ground a commitment to God and the oppressed. Second, it demonstrates an attention to the question of how to speak about God in a historical context of suffering without concealing or discounting that suffering. The attention to both of these aspects of theological discourse has to be renewed, as Petrella indicates by pointing to the current lack of a concrete social analysis. My argument is that a decolonial response to modernity/coloniality has to maintain both of the central concerns of early liberation theology with respect to the option for the poor: the commitment to the way Christians believe the divine to be manifested historically, and the affirmation of the need for social analysis to impact the understanding of and commitment to God.

**Teología India and Liberation Theology**

Teología India makes a significant contribution to the articulation of the option for the poor as a decolonial option because it offers a response to modernity, which is experienced as coloniality; it is not merely representative of a paradigm shift in liberation theology toward a postmodern or cultural analysis. A decolonial perspective recognizes a basic continuity in the matrix of coloniality that is constitutive of Western modernity and remains as its darker side. In recognizing this basic continuity in the matrix of coloniality, a decolonial perspective does not separate economic and cultural analyses, such that the former is relevant before 1989 and the fall of European socialism and the latter only afterwards.

Those thinkers who situate themselves within indigenous or Native theology have articulated this decolonial sensibility in different ways. Vine Deloria,
Jr. started much of the discussion between indigenous religions and Christian liberation theology. Deloria argues that the spatial orientation common to indigenous communities’ worldviews is fundamentally distinct from the temporal orientation that grounds the Christian worldview, and he thus sees a difficulty in bringing together indigenous and Christian worldviews. 49 Robert Allen Warrior continues this line of thought in arguing that “[t]he inclusion of Native Americans in Christian political praxis is difficult — even dangerous.” He describes liberation theologies’ focus on the Exodus as a paradigm as “an enormous stumbling block” in putting indigenous and Christian liberation worldviews in relationship. 50 Tink Tinker, likewise, affirms indigenous worldviews over and against Christian ones, arguing that “liberation for Indian peoples may ultimately and necessarily involve Indian people saying no to Jesus in favor of reclaiming the ancient traditions of our peoples.” 51 He questions the legitimacy of even speaking of Native theology: “The question may be whether liberation theology is the focus on liberation or freedom that can best capture the liberatory needs of our folk. Does theology name a category that can be useful in our decolonization struggle? Or is the category so co-opted by colonial Christianity (in its postmodern liberal manifestation) as to disallow its use outside of that religious community?” 52 By recognizing an important distinction between Native and non-Native worldviews, Deloria, Warrior, and Tinker clear the way for a turn from (Christian) liberation theology.

While I find this move convincing, and in its own way generative for a renewed understanding of the option for the poor, I turn to Teología India because of its attempt to respond to the experience of coloniality that resides underneath modernity without giving up a theological perspective, and in doing so re-frames the way Christian concepts are arrived at and how they are articulated. In some ways, Teología India shares in the perspective to which Native feminist theologian Andrea Smith holds. Smith argues that whether Native peoples call themselves Christian or not, “they are theologizing because they are articulating what they perceive to be the relationship between spirituality, liberation, and the vision of the world they hope to co-create.” 53 Teología India works from a similar intuition, which it includes in a Christian theological discourse. Thus, while I value the move away from Christian (liberation) theology that Deloria, Warrior, and Tinker make, and maintain that this should be developed as a decolonial option, I also want to affirm the option for the poor within Christian liberation theology as a decolonial option. The generative potentials of the commitment to God and the poor and the use of social analysis to deepen these commitments prompt my choice to deepen Latin American liberation theologians’ original articulation of the option for the poor as a decolonial option.

52 Ibid., 119.
One of the first attempts to elaborate and systematize the theology present among indigenous peoples in Latin America came forth at a workshop in Mexico in 1990. In this workshop the participants, which included Protestant pastors, Catholic Bishops, indigenous religious leaders, and men and women from across Latin America that served indigenous communities, describe Teología India as a process of giving meaning to their faith “in the God of life,” which is rooted in “the revelation of God’s love and designs in the course of history and that the cultures of our peoples and grandparents have been carefully conserving in their ancestral traditions.” While the participants in this workshop lament that the religious language they use to speak of their hope contrasts with some of the discourses of other oppressed groups, particularly “revolutionary” discourses, I maintain that Teología India has a radical element within it that can bring out the option for the poor as a decolonial option. I do so by focusing on a particular development of Teología India that has emerged within the indigenous Mayan communities in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Bishop Don Samuel Ruiz and the scholar of religions Sylvia Marcos have done much of the work of articulating how the indigenous peoples in San Cristobal de las Casas have lived out their faith.

Ruiz holds to the sensibility that was expressed in the first workshop on Teología India in Mexico, namely that “Christopher Columbus did not bring God in his three caravels; God was already present in indigenous communities.” This is a realization that forced Ruiz to change his theological paradigm. He became more aware, as José Álvarez Icaza shares, of the “relationship between colonialism, dispossession, marginalization, and cultural aggression.” This awareness made present the difficulties of transplanting a Catholic ecclesial framework onto indigenous communities.

Ruiz notes the difficulty of describing the diverse expression of faith that he became aware of when he arrived in Chiapas. The term “Teología India” is used, according to Ruiz, as a term to facilitate communication. It would in fact be more appropriate to speak of “Sabiduría India,” as “teología” carries connotations that are antithetical to the actual phenomenon of Teología India. Bringing out some of the ways that Teología India differs from “theology,” as it is generally understood in the West, can help to clarify its goals.

Unlike theology as an academic discipline, which distinguishes theologians from the community, Teología India is communitarian. It is “a reflection from the community.” Teología India attempts a systematization, but does not center itself on this task. Rather, in Teología India thought emerges from myths and is “performed” in a way that allows the entire community to partake in reflection.
Systematization is also difficult because those thinking within the paradigm of Teología India think in a trans-religious way. Reflection on and discourse about the divine is not limited to any single religious tradition.⁶²

Due to its affirmation that neither God nor a way of thinking that allowed access to God only arrived in the Americas with Columbus, Ruiz indicates that the movement of Teología India is not simply a “version” of liberation theology.⁶³ For Ruiz, liberation theology is a theological phenomenon that uses conceptual frameworks from Europe (e.g., those found within the discipline of “systematic theology,” or within Marxism) that are then applied to the Latin American reality; Teología India, on the other hand, emerges indigenously from the Latin American reality.

Ruiz emphasizes that Teología India is a “third moment.” The theological reflection it produces is not something that indigenous people start with, but a conclusion. First, there is “the committed and involved (comprometido) encounter with the poor, with the marginalized, the option.”⁶⁴ Second, there is a moment of action. Only in a third moment comes “reflection on the situation and its causes, leading to a systematization of the situation in order to make it known.”⁶⁵ Teología India starts, then, with the option for the poor as a praxis, which Ruiz rightly sees as something fundamental to Christianity, not as the specific property of liberation theology.⁶⁶

Marcos describes the Teología India of which Ruiz became aware as “a constellation of practices.”⁶⁷ Marcos’s ethnographic research on Mesoamerican religions is crucial in understanding these practices.⁶⁸ Nelson Maldonado-Torres describes Marcos’s ethnographic work as coming out of “a post-secularizing, transmodern, and de-colonial methodology.”⁶⁹ All three of these descriptors are important, as they indicate how Teología India, itself as a post-secularizing, transmodern, and decolonial orientation, can impact liberation theology’s option for the poor.

Marcos’s work is transdisciplinary in that “it does not seek to combine existing disciplines, but rather questions their ontological status and seeks to forge conceptual tools that are adequate to the problems and questions addressed.”⁷⁰ Marcos works through various disciplines in order to address problems as they emerge in history. It is post-secular because Marcos does not differentiate between the sacred and secular, and thus stands against the secularization thesis that with

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⁶² See ibid., p. 35.
⁶³ When Marcos asks Ruiz to compare and contrast Teología India with liberation theology, he responds without much ambiguity: “I do not think there are points of contact. I think the approach of looking for possible similarities is an unrealistic approach. That is, the reflection on pre-Columbian faith has nothing to do with the theological systematization that is done in a third moment in Latin America. There is no point of contact” (ibid., p. 41).
⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 44.
⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 44.
⁶⁶ See ibid., p. 42.
⁶⁸ See Sylvia Marcos, Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions, Lieden: Brill; 2006.
⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 268.
modernity comes less public religion. And it is transmodern “because it recognizes Mesoamerican practices and epistemology as viable discourses and forms of life that not only have endured through time, but that also can keep enduring and have much to offer to those who are born in that universe of thought and practices and to others.” In taking this transmodern constellation of thought and practices seriously as a ground, *Teologı́a India* makes a decolonial intervention similar to what Deloria, Warrior, Tinker, and Smith make, yet within the discourse of Christian theology.

Through her ethnographic research, Marcos acknowledges that “Catholicism — as a colonizing enterprise — has deeply permeated the indigenous traditions of the Americas, making it almost impossible to separate ‘pure’ indigenous religious traditions from Catholic images, rites, and symbols,” yet at the same time searches for “the epistemic characteristics of native religions that set them radically apart from contemporary Christianity.” These include, for example, an understanding of the fluidity or permeability of the body with respect to cosmic currents, fluid rather than oppositional dualities kept open through a principle of equilibrium, symbolic representations, and nonhierarchical organization. Here, Marcos shares in the distinction of Native from non-Native worldviews that Deloria, Tinker, Warrior, and Smith also make. By showing how indigenous peoples reject the call to self-identify with the categories of Western modernity, and instead work from their own cosmologies, Marcos opens up the possibility for *Teologı́a India* to pose a challenge to liberation theology on the epistemological level.

While there is certainly overlap in the concerns of liberation theologians and theologians who affirm *Teologı́a India*, Marcos’s ethnographic research on Mesoamerican spirituality shows, for two reasons, that Don Samuel Ruiz has a case for making a sharp distinction. One crucial part of the distinction shows up along the lines of epistemology. *Teologı́a India* makes a decolonial option in its option for ways of thinking on the borders and underside of Western modernity, as seen in its starting point in indigenous culture and thought. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is still in the process of making this type of decolonial turn on the epistemological level, as it continues to rely, in some important respects, on the conceptual tools of Western theology and social sciences in order to interpret a historical reality that is the product of Western domination. While these tools no doubt help liberation theology to more fully analyze a historical situation, and should not be rejected only on the basis of their origination in Europe, Marcos and *Teologı́a India* indicate a need to analyze Western modernity by primarily thinking about it from the claims of those who inhabit its darker side.

While Clodovis Boff is certainly not a representative of all liberation theology, his articulation of a method of liberation theology shows how liberation theology can fail to realize the type of epistemic shift that *Teologı́a India* makes.

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71 See ibid., p. 269.
72 Ibid., p. 270.
74 See Marcos, *Taken from the Lips*, p. 13–30.
In his articulation of the epistemology of liberation theology, Boff makes liberation theology’s commitment to Western resources clear, and does so in an affirmative rather than critical way. The process of scientific cognition begins with the broad ideological notions encountered in the social world, the “raw material,” which constitutes the “first generality” of theoretical practice. This raw material is then worked upon by the corpus of concepts of a particular discipline, which makes up the “second generality.” The product of this encounter, the concrete scientific theory, constitutes the “third generality.”

In the case of liberation theology, the first generality consists of a body of social analysis, which is the third generality of theoretical schools of the social sciences within Europe. Liberation theology draws on those theorists who deepened the understanding of the conflictual nature of history that thinkers in Latin America were able to recognize based on historical experience. The second generality for liberation theology, the system of concepts within its own discipline, is taken from the third generality, the concrete scientific theory, produced by traditional European theology. The third generality of liberation theology is the articulation of a concept within theological discourse, for example, the option for the poor. In this scheme, liberation theology’s third generality, which includes the option for the poor, depends on the third generalities of European social analysis and theology. Don Samuel Ruiz interprets the implications of this scheme differently than Boff. Whereas Boff affirms such a method because of its ability to produce a non-ideological theology, Ruiz, and Teología India more generally, questions such a method because it covers over indigenous ways of knowing the world.

A second part of the distinction Ruiz makes between liberation theology and Teología India is related to Mignolo’s distinction between missions and options. Because of the theocentricity of the option for the poor within liberation theology, the option for the poor can become a “mission” — that is, a single conceptual framework to which all must be converted—when there is not receptivity in divinity. Teología India — and as I will show in the following section, womanist theology as well — recognizes that a multiplicity of epistemologies can describe divinity that is understood to be incarnate in history. As a consequence, the option for the poor, as a theocentric option, still contains options.

Because of these differences, Sylvia Marcos has a reason to affirm that the commitment of Teología India “goes beyond liberation theology” and makes a “commitment far beyond the ‘preferential option for the poor.’” I interpret Marcos to be indicating that “moving beyond” the option for the poor is linked to a movement into the claims of those people groups who inhabit the darker side of Western modernity as having theological import. In its focus on how indigenous peoples clarify God’s self-revelation, Teología India helps to bring out the decolonial orientation of the commitments within the option for the poor. This focus on the part of Teología India is consistent with, and at the same time a

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77 See Boff, Theology and Praxis, p. 80–1.
radicalization of, the two moments that I argued to be crucial to the option for the poor as it was articulated by the early generation of Latin American liberation theologians. The option for the poor is a commitment to oppressed and marginalized peoples, which includes a commitment to their rationalities and religiosities. It is also a commitment to using social analysis, which includes an intellectual and theological valuation of the analyses that emerge from the worldviews of people groups who experience oppression, as a way to clarify that commitment. Ways of thinking divinity that do not limit social analysis to what Boff would call the “third generalities” of the Western discipline of the social sciences, like Teología India and, as I will show, womanist theology, call for a retrieval and deepening of the original insights of liberation theology.

The Option for the Poor as a Decolonial Option

In asserting the necessity to not only disclose, but also think from, another way of grasping the world, Teología India can bring out the more radical elements within liberation theology’s option for the poor. It challenges liberation theology to make an epistemic shift, a shift in where theologians ground their claims. Teología India is, like decolonial thought, a “paradigma otro,” in the sense that it questions, on a fundamental level, the way thought is produced, and in doing so opens up options for futures de-linked from the logic of coloniality. Decolonial thought and Teología India both change not only the content of the conversation, but also the terms of the conversation. Within the decolonial turn, knowledges suppressed by the forms of domination enacted by modernity and the colonial matrix of power come to the fore and prompt a “double critique” of modernity: both a critique from within Western modernity and a critique from its exteriority, from what is imagined as “outside” of Western modernity, but is in actuality its darker side.

Bringing out the decolonial option within the option for the poor requires emphasizing the commitment to God and the oppressed and to a form of social analysis that clarifies and deepens that commitment within the option for the poor. In these two moments, theologians who make an option for the poor that is also a decolonial option take the claims made by those who dwell outside the modern/colonial center as foundational for an articulation of divinity. Teología India reveals that if this decolonial attitude, the readiness to let go of dominant rational frameworks and enter into an “other” rationality, does not accompany the option for the poor, then its ability to ground theological discourse is compromised. Decolonial thinkers have doubted whether liberation theology and the option for the poor in fact constitute a “paradigma otro.” Marcos, as I have shown, is suspicious of the possibility for Christian liberation theology, and particularly the option for the poor, to contribute to the decolonial turn. Walter D. Mignolo makes a similar point in this regard. He uses theology, including liberation theology, as an example of a discourse that maintains the coloniality that persists within the order of knowing. He argues:

While there is a history of theology obviously linked to imperial designs and interests, the papacy being an obvious example, there are theologies of liberation in South America, North America, and Africa, as well as a Jewish theology of liberation. My claim is that, as in the disputes between (neo)liberalism and (neo)Marxism, both sides of the coin belong to the same bank: the disputes are entrenched within the same rules of the game, where the contenders defend different positions but do not question the terms of the conversation. 80

In making this claim, Mignolo, like Marcos, questions whether liberation theology in fact makes an epistemic shift. I maintain that it does — that the option for the poor in fact reflects a decolonial option when its fundamental commitments are pushed to their limits. Teología India shows that this requires extending the commitment to “the poor” to an epistemological commitment and the commitment to social analysis to entering into the ways of thinking and knowing that those on the borders and underside of Western modernity have made sense of the world. A second theological current, womanist theology, indicates how theologians can still make decolonial claims about salvation, a term decolonial theorists are suspicious of because of its “mission”-like scent, when they take the commitments within the option for the poor seriously.

Delores S. Williams’s womanist theology engages the lived situation of U.S. African American women as a basis for making theological claims. In this move, her work can strengthen the decolonial option within the option for the poor. Williams writes her major theological work, Sisters in the Wilderness (1993), with an attention to the “wilderness experience,” the experience of “standing utterly alone, in the midst of serious trouble, with only God’s support to rely upon,” seen through the lens of black women’s experience. 81 From this perspective, Williams engages core theological issues, focusing on the relationship between the human person within a wilderness experience and Jesus Christ or God. Using the way black women have described their encounters with divinity as her basis, she draws particular attention to how an emphasis on Jesus’ suffering on the cross, while empowering for the ways other people groups, including black males, have articulated a theological vision, has been problematic for black women. Historically, African American women have been pushed into surrogacy roles, “roles that ordinarily would have been filled by someone else.” 82 During slavery, black women were forced into nursing and raising white children (standing in the place of white parents), satisfying the desires of the slave master (standing in the place of his wife), and doing physical labor (standing in the place of male labor). While these roles changed after slavery, the fundamental experience of surrogacy remained. Seeing Jesus Christ as the ultimate surrogate, as varieties of atonement theology see Jesus Christ to stand in humans’ place for our salvation, gives divine legitimacy to social-historical roles of surrogacy. Inspired by the nature of this historical experience and black women’s claims regarding how they encounter God,

80 Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity, p. 92.
82 Ibid., p. 60.
Williams is led to focus on Jesus’ life-affirming praxis, rather than Jesus’ cross. As a result of black women’s experiences and how they have made sense of those experiences, Williams argues that it is in the encounter with divinity in the wilderness, and particularly with the divine who is always for life and for survival, that sin begins to be conquered and the nature of redemption is clarified. In other words, Jesus’ resistance to the anti-Kingdom in light of his affirmation of life, not in light of his surrogacy, is what is salvific. When Williams ultimately argues that we are “redeemed through Jesus’ ministerial vision of life and not through his death,” it is the lived experiences of black women that motivate the argument, rather than an apologetic impulse to find meaning in the cross. In other words, the ways African American women experience and interpret reality open up options within Jesus’ salvific act. Ways of experiencing reality on the underside of Western modernity open up alternatives to the way divinity and salvation, are named.

Williams builds a theoretical framework for an understanding of the Christian God that is not dependent, as Mignolo suggested liberation theologies to be, on the “language game” of Western modernity. The content of Williams’s theological claims is not necessarily significant for my own argument for making explicit the decolonial elements in the option for the poor. Rather, I focus on the reason that she makes her theological claims as having the capacity to provide a path toward a decolonial option for the poor within liberation theology. Without using the language of the option for the poor, Williams makes an option for those condemned by Western modernity by committing to the lived experience of the oppressed, and the ways they have made sense of that experience, as a generative theological site. Williams engages in God-talk by drawing on both black women’s articulations of their experiences in the wilderness and the Christian tradition of the encounter with God in the wilderness. In this way, she values the epistemology of a subjugated people group, U.S. African American women, as the starting point for making theological claims. Williams, in effect, brings the two elements I found crucial in the articulation of the option for the poor together: in committing to the oppressed as subjects who have the capacity to make theological claims, she engages the ways they have made sense of their lived realities as a type of social analysis that emerges from the underside of Western modernity. In these two commitments, Williams theologizes in a way that addresses my interpretation of Marcos’s critique of liberation theology, and also theologizes in a way that shares in Teología India’s loyalty to concrete peoples and the worldviews within which they articulate their experience. Because she sees “other” epistemologies as having theological value, Williams ultimately opens up options within the option for the poor, without giving up its theocentric weight.

Conclusion

As the liberation theology articulated in Latin America during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s indicated, the option for the poor is fundamental to Christian theology.

83 Ibid., p. 167.
84 Williams give equal weight to these two loci: “In the African-American denominational churches’ liturgies, these stories [of living their faith in the midst of both bondage and liberation] should be scripture just as vital as the Bible” (ibid., p. 218).
The fundamental insight of the option for the poor within liberation theology, I argued, can be a means by which (liberation) theology can counter the matrix of coloniality: there are decolonial elements within the option for the poor, as it was articulated by the early generations of Latin American liberation theologians, that can be drawn out. The commitment to God and the poor and a social analysis that clarifies this commitment, are the two principle elements I find that are necessary to carry forward. The encounter between liberation theology, Teología India, and womanist theology is productive in this regard. Without giving up the commitment to material oppression and liberation that the early generation of liberation theologians exemplified, Teología India catalyzes the liberation theologian to retrieve the epistemic shift that is crucial to both the commitment to God and the oppressed and the social analysis that clarifies and deepens this commitment that ground the option for the poor. Womanist theology demonstrates the theological articulation of this retrieval. The option for the poor becomes explicit as a decolonial option when a commitment to God motivates a commitment to marginalized peoples as subjects who have the capacity to make sense of the social situation from its underside, and in that process, also name the divinity. This allows the option for the poor to remain theocentric, but also to be an “option” within the project of articulating decolonial futures.

Notes on contributor

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