
Embodying La Fiesta: A Tribute

Patricia Cuyatti-Chavez

*Faculty at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
Pastor in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA*

Horizons and thresholds

Recall the image of a beautiful threshold built on a mountain in a small Andean town in Peru. Made of mud and wood, its long roof was covered with straw and tiles. The first time I and my brothers arrived there was after a walking adventure together. We sat observing the shape of the other mountains facing us and the silhouette of the main road to the capital city built along the “Mantaro” river. The threshold connected paths toward a farm and roads up to the town. In the evenings, we could see the reflected and illuminated figures of the imposing hills surrounding the area in goldish yellow, a magical image filled with life, a door to beginnings and new destinies.

The threshold image will help capture the heritage of José David Rodríguez and Javier (Jay) Alanis and their pastoral, theological, and educational legacies that value hope and celebrate achievements amid struggles. Each has formally retired from academia but their charisma and commitment to the Latiné/Latinx communities are inspirational. José and Jay live their faith actively in communal relationships with God, their neighbors, students, and strangers. José and Jay embrace the present through the vision of a future entering history in Christ. That incarnational event is a continuous experience of hope, eschatological promises into the present impregnated life in the community.

Golden horizons on the thresholds of orality and migration

When thinking of people who have access to education, I rejoice for the privilege to code and decode their language and even learn a second or third language. People who come from oral cultures learn to decipher language through the power of speech and listening. Beyond comparisons, I affirm the “other”¹ as people radically different within the so-called underdeveloped cultures. The

1. The “other” is the people that confront—in the sense of challenge—the notion of Western modernity and superiority, using systems for total control. Cf. Daniel Jara J. *Enrique Dussel’s “Otherness” and the Problem of the Euro-centric Totalized Epistemological System in Academic Theology*. (Revista Teología, Tomo LVII, N° 133 – Diciembre 2020), 159-182.

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“other,” as Dussel asserts, is made by singular people who reveal inequalities, resist systems of disparities through oral narratives, and learn colonial languages to survive the controlling schemes.

People from ancestral oral traditions learned to be subjects of their history and faith. Learning the colonizer’s language, they ventured to understand particular expressions of the Christian faith. Orality has the power to master knowledge and communicate it. The educator Freire promoted dialogue between people who shared their life experiences. That sharing produced learning. It followed an action-reflection transformative practice and promoted education for all.² Jay and José experienced tables where family, friends, and neighbors’ dialogue enriched life.

As an immigrant “born in *Nepantla* [Rio Bravo], the middle land of cultural and religious intersections, which is too the locus of the Hispanic/Latina community of migrant people,”³ Jay lived between two worlds and transitioned from Spanish to English and vice-versa. His parents’ families struggled for a dignified life. His mother was born to Mexican immigrants who crossed the border in 1913, escaping political and economic instability. His father and grandparents arrived in the U.S. in 1918 because of

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia del Oprimido* (Uruguay: Siglo XXI: 1970), 93-95, 101.

3. Javier Alanis, “Dignity for the Foreigner: The *Imago Dei* from a Latino Lutheran Perspective” (Chapter 1, Thesis accessed online on 10/07/2024 <https://javalanis.com/dissertation/>), ix.

the Mexican Revolution.⁴ The Southern context was a reality of racial violence, therefore, Jay's father motivated him to "tell the story of the immigrant."⁵

Jay's family, moved by the love of Lutheran immigrants from Germany, learned about the fallen and restored truth of faithful people. This refreshed spirituality helped them to live in the excluding reality of the border as the people were denied the image of God in them. Becoming the "others," Jay's faith moved him to see the dissonances practiced in a Christian nation. The hospitality of the Mellenbruch family from Germany showed concrete compassion. "Their compassion for the Latino or Hispanic people means *to suffer with* and includes the notion of justice in the sense of a re-ordering of relationships with the neighbor."⁶ That empathy moved Jay to embrace his migrant roots and to seek dignity.

The grocery store run by Jay's parents was a place of support for people who spoke the foreign Spanish language. Living in the diaspora in Spain, Jay studied his Mexican culture and mestizo roots through history and literature and traveled to various European countries. That served him to use decolonizing tools reshaping his understanding of why the Anglo world dehumanized and denied children at school to speak Spanish.

Connecting the Mexico-U.S. border to the island of Puerto Rico and Chicago, Jay recognized in José an outstanding mentor, loving guide, and unconditional friend who championed applying ethics and faith for consciousness and change. José grew up in an "independentist" family.⁷ He had the opportunity to study in Argentina.

That was my diaspora. In 1959, Fidel Castro overcame dictator Batista through the Cuban revolution. In 1960, my father went to Argentina as a professor of Theology and Systematic Theology, bringing the thoughts of the theology of the revolution in the context of military dictatorship and liberation movements. I learned to read the scriptures through questions like how God acts in contexts of the death and vanishing of human beings.⁸

José was exposed to rethinking imperial history and militarism at table conversations with friends, and intellectuals, including Luis Rivera Pagán, a professor at the Seminary of Puerto Rico who nurtured his commitment to social change. The "other," Puerto Rico, a colony of two empires led José to solidarity with the "other" surviving military regime in Argentina. The liberating gospel led José to seek justice while resisting the hegemony of dominant groups.⁹

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and the Latin American Lutheran Church. Trinidad was organized by his father in 1972 after a Danish church donated the building to the synod. José served in the Latin American Lutheran Church, initiated by the American Lutheran Church, during his doctoral studies as a student in 1981. After members discovered he was ordained in 1983, they made the necessary changes for the position.¹⁰ Later, the parish name changed to "Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey" but was closed after three years. People moved to Trinidad where José filled the vacancy as an interim pastor. Seminary students were invited to provide pastoral ministry, and a member was ordained after completing theological studies.

The tables full of oral interactions moved José to read, interpret, and contextualize the Bible in Spanish, collectively—"En conjunto," with people in the academy, church, and community. A commitment to theology linked to ethics, history, and social sciences was inherited by José from his father, who taught him that theology is done with the community of faith. José practiced this as a pastor, educator, and president of the Committee for Community Leadership of Humboldt Park for nearly twenty years. Most of the projects focused on leadership, health, housing, etc., helping to instruct leaders involved in the political-social life to advocate for their rights as a form of resistance and change.

Later, engaged in the oral history of the people, José wrote the history of the Lutheran Church in Puerto Rico by analyzing the existing narratives, weaving new information through the voices of women, lay leaders, teachers, religious leaders, and through music and poetry. As a "threshold of how to engage in different approaches to Lutheran missionary work,"¹¹ José acknowledged the relevance of the shift from English to Spanish, which gave the church identity, taking charge of the mission started by missionaries from the U.S.

Grace and faith, grounding threshold

Confessing faith in Christ after receiving it in grace by God is distinctive to Lutheran theology and spirituality. All believers are affirmed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and express faith publicly

4. Javier Alanis, "Immigrants—They Are Us! Blog accessed on 12/07/2024 <https://javalanis.com/blog/>

5. Conversation with Javier Alanis (via Zoom), August 2024.

6. Alanis. "Immigrants."

7. "Independentista" is a politically organized group in Puerto Rico that favors independence. The information in this section has been noted from a conversation with José on August 28, 2024.

8. Conversation with José, August 28, 2024.

9. Conversation with José, August 28, 2024.

10. Conversation with José, August 28, 2024.

11. John Potter. "Living Lutheran: Recovering a Lost Caribbean Lutheran History, an interview with José David Rodríguez." August 28, 2024.

through words and actions.¹² Faith sources and sustains the community “to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor.”¹³ The line between personal faith and faith lived in a community explains communal ecclesiology where people engage in God’s mission.

José and Jay developed and contextualized that vocation using the bridge image. José pays attention to vocation, the call of God to all that is lived faithfully in concrete contexts for the fulfillment of their needs. Identifying Hispanic people in the U.S. as the ones fulfilling this mission, they become “bridge people.”¹⁴ They are connectors that encourage communication between people in various countries. The connectivity task entails carefully listening to people’s struggles. It drives them to seek peace with justice involving their presence in public actions while protecting people’s rights.¹⁵ Advocacy, emanating from the Gospels awakens the spirituality of resistance and hope before actions that dishonor life.

Revisiting theology in search of the well-being of migrant people, Jay affirms the image of God in them. Bringing meaning and recognizing differences arising from two different worldviews and cultures, Jay becomes the “bridge builder.”¹⁶ As the border is his home and the key component in comprehending the liminal spaces of racial violence, Jay offers theological alternatives to these existential realities by examining the stories of people who cross or transit these borders. His attention to dignity, always a topic in question, has taken a central role in his theology and ministry. In baptism, the person is a child of God and no one can take away what was given by God graciously. This foundation helps resist “against what politics or society may say about my people.”¹⁷ Jay’s committed love and respect invite others to engage his people as equals and find meaning in their cultural, racial, social, or sexual identities.

Dancing in “La Fiesta,” the threshold of celebration of life

“La fiesta” is a way of life for Latin American and Caribbean people. Arriving in a new world pursuing the dream of a better life, the challenges of living or surviving become real. “La fiesta” encompasses the willingness to endure along with hopeful rejoicing even when the hours of birthing new processes bring unimaginable challenges. Migrants have achieved unthinkable dreams, even through painful experiences.

The intrepid journey in the diaspora, filled with hopeful and active resistance, infers community celebrations as high-inflection

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moments to bond and acknowledge the value of mutual support. Celebration means hope for new accomplishments, not as isolated efforts but done together. This stubborn hope, connected to the covenantal promise, has moved José and Jay to achieve goals and celebrate the good news of the transformational work of the Holy Spirit in people’s stories.

Especially in their work with marginal communities (in church and seminary), the use of their language was intentional. It promoted agency and dignity in the enjoyment of the good news. Confessing faith through testimonies affirms how the loving presence of God in everything happening shows God’s self-giving love. It is Christ and the Holy Spirit moving to solidarity, the self-giving to the neighbor.¹⁸ However, one has to consider that faith implying justification entails meaning in contexts of violence and oppression.¹⁹ It calls the faithful to participate in social endeavors seeking justice in specific contexts and history.

Faith in God and the collective witness of that faith are articulated in concrete social and historical realities with tangible actions to the community’s needs.²⁰ Classrooms became pregnant spaces, delivering different meanings of religious traditions and faith matters. Critical thinking helped renew/reform churches where Hispanic communities serve.²¹ From experience to reflection of that faith (in church and class) and back to experience renews the meaning of faith.

The careful work of José and Jay in the education process offers hints of their empathy and openness (vulnerability) to learn. For instance, through a five-day intensive program for lay leaders and lay pastors, over ten years, “people from all over the country came together, focused on themes like borderland and cross-culture ministry. We taught Spanish as a strategy for worship, cross-border theology, and the dynamics of living globalized borders in several languages. Learning to deal with changes and being aware of cultural violence drove participants to consider

12. “...only faith of the heart can do [works]. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian 1520*. The annotated Luther study edition (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2016), 502-503.

13. Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, 520.

14. Rodríguez and Martell-Otero, *Teología en Conjunto*, 17.

15. José D. Rodríguez, *La Vocación* (Nashville: AETH, 2009), 85-86.

16. Conversation with Javier Alanis (via Zoom) in August 2024.

17. Alanis conversation, August 2024.

18. Alanis, “Dignity for the Foreigner,” 273-275.

19. Alanis, “Dignity for the Foreigner,” 178.

20. José D. Rodríguez, *Justicia en nombre de Dios; confesando la fe desde la perspectiva hispanollatina*. (México: El Faro, 2002), 85.

21. Rodríguez, *Justicia en nombre de Dios*, 83-84.

their history and experiences of racism.”²² Besides explicit racism, the “doctrine of manifest destiny [carrying implicit racism in it] supports the expansionist North American ideology. The use of persuasive ways of an apparent protestant and democratic nation hid its controlling ideology, political principles, and institutions planting a military regime in Puerto Rico after its military invasion in 1898 that began a North American colonial project that continues to this day.”²³

Hispanic/Latina theologians are the “other” who live marginality and *mestizaje*. These two elements are key tools for interpretation.²⁴ “En conjunto” decenters the Western theological locus bringing theologies from different centers. Diversity and cohesion helped to build awareness of the disjuncting realities among poor and underprivileged people. It reiterated hope through the hidden stories of the Hispanic/Latina people.²⁵ Their solid presence from various hubs was instrumental in rethinking mission and ministry in changing times.

José and Jay appreciate the Lutheran confessions but are conscious of the struggles that minority ethnic groups face in the church’s mission and ministries.²⁶ The theological classrooms were exploratory. Traveling to the borders of Laredo and El Paso, participants met religious people and organizations advocating with and for the people ecumenically. These activities helped participants think of how they would develop ministry in their specific contexts and social locations²⁷ completely different from the reformation time.

Justification confessed within the Hispanic/Latine communities happens in light of principles of justice and equity. It engages the task of changing the political, economic, racial, and unequal systems constructed to discriminate and dehumanize. Jay and José agreed that “the confession compels us to retrieve those elements of the early church that made the Christian movement a prophetic voice.”²⁸ Through their long years of teaching, preaching, and pastoral work, José and Jay accompanied students and people from diverse backgrounds, international students, and from various parts of the U.S. in a white-dominated country.

Holding the promise of life, both theologians resisted audaciously and creatively. Their classes offered beautiful and inspirational navigation of invisible spaces in the experience of migrant churches with the strong articulation of liberation theologies and decolonial/postcolonial theologies done by African American, Asian, African, Latin American, Indigenous, and Native American theologians. “We do it with hope, offering theological, cultural, and linguistic tools with the participation of speakers who are, for

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instance, a former DACA teacher, a Latino pastor doing mission, or a person from TEXAS IMPAC—a legislative group of the church doing advocacy in the capitol.”²⁹ Formative experiences bring vocabulary and critical analysis to socio-historical implications and prejudices behind the confessional documents and the interpretation of the gospel in Spanish.³⁰

The Bible read in Spanish gives access to discover particular perspectives. It is a book that liberates.³¹ It also moves people to reflect on their challenging realities and seek changes, reorganizing the displacement in which people live. Through critical thinking, people learn to ask questions without fear, although they have been taught to be cautious in asking questions. When people listen and analyze the roots of violence, poverty, and numerous social challenges, their effort is valued even when there are no clear answers. Their collective processes lead to finding meaning and new actions. “What makes you uncomfortable? Examine and try to find answers because there is a need to be critical thinkers.”³² Personal and communal hopes, dreams, and projects intersect with the struggles. The witness of faith sustains dignity to dignify others. “Their redemption and vocation in salvation history move people to be Christ to the neighbor.”³³

The community that boldly connects to the means of grace finds fresh waters watering communities. Baptism is a constant affirmation of dignity and hope. However, facing forces opposing God’s will, to “abuse the dignity of human beings, destroys the beauty and value of all creation.”³⁴ People live in eschatological hope, appreciating the future (kingdom inaugurated) present among them. This conviction echoes God’s solidarity and helps to name painful experiences. Encouraged by the gospels they engage with women and BIPOC in solidarity work, analyzing and

22. Conversation with Javier Alanis (Zoom) in August 2024.

23. Rodríguez, *Justicia*, 160-161 (My translation).

24. José D. Rodríguez. *De ‘apuntes’ a ‘esbozo’: Diez años de reflexión*, “Apuntes 10/3 (Winter 1990), 78-81.

25. José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, eds. *Teología en Conjunto. A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 15.

26. Rodríguez, *Justicia*, 89.

27. Conversation with Javier Alanis (Zoom) in August 2024.

28. Javier Alanis, “Dignity for the Foreigner,” 187-188.

29. Conversation with Javier Alanis (via Zoom) in August 2024.

30. Rodríguez, *Justicia*, 95-96.

31. Rodríguez, *Justicia*, 107-100.

32. Conversation with Javier Alanis (via Zoom) in August 2024.

33. Alanis, “Dignity for the Foreigner,” 211. Jay asserts this truth following Luther’s explanation of becoming servants (*imago Christi*) and empowering servanthood spirituality to others.

34. Rodríguez, *Justicia*, 106.

bringing proposals to inequities, sexism, racism, discrimination, and exclusion.

Latina and lay women played stunning roles in José and Jay's ministry and theological work. As collaborators and creative thinkers, women were at the forefront of the self-understanding of a wider and more diverse church. Women fought to find equal opportunities. That effort came with their bold rethinking of Lutheran themes. José and Jay acknowledge and celebrate how women on the margins crossed the church-imposed border, building bridges to teach and preach the gospel. Women are the visible presence of Christ in the community. "Laura and Irene taught me to celebrate faith and tradition in our language and culture, they introduced the Lutheran tradition to many Latinas like my aunts who became confessing Lutherans because of their ministry."³⁵ Lay women opened paths for new Latina theologians, "The first leaders of Puerto Rican origin who took on ministerial functions in the development of missionary work were women [developing] models for their functions, especially those that contrasted with a church and theology transplanted from North American."³⁶

The togetherness and cooperation, supporting ministries of equals, and the active role of lay women, women in leadership and decision-making are outstanding gifts to José and Jay. Women's transit between cultures, languages, and identities grounded in faith has strengthened and encouraged their work. Women's prophetic voices, engagement in mission, ministry, and theology paying attention to their life experiences, the people's lives in the community, and embodiment have been fundamental in promoting solidarity change.

To celebrate what happens among Hispanics/Latinas in their contexts means giving meaning to the renewed understanding of the gospel, capturing the spirit of the times in the face of injustice, oppression, racism, and sexism.³⁷ It involves practicing the reforming spirit (constant transformation) and celebrating that the radicality of the good news of God is developed together through prophetic ministries, from the people, and with the people.

Transitioning the thresholds, finding new horizons

Theologian Elsa Tamez encourages us to embrace our emotions especially when we face challenges. Using the notion of immensity,³⁸ Elsa helps us embrace the mystery: the Divine Spirit that is present when the sky is dark. As we observe the immensity of God's merciful actions today, I am grateful for José and Jay's ministries providing us with opportunities to look toward new thresholds and future horizons for theology and ministry.

35. Alanis. "Immigrants—They Are Us!" Blog <https://jyalanis.com/blog/> accessed on 07/12/2024.

36. Rodríguez. Justicia, 163.

37. Conversation with José on August 28, 2024. See also José David Rodríguez. *Caribbean Lutherans. The History of the Church in Puerto Rico* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 160-170.

38. Elsa Tamez. *Bajo un Cielo sin Estrellas. Lecturas y Meditaciones Biblicas* (San José: DEI, 2001), 17-19.

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Still, a confessing church, José and Jay invite us to continue finding meaning in relationships mediated by God's grace and promoting active faith. Through their ministries, they move us to reconnect diverse centers of knowledge and recognize the ongoing reform movement in which the Holy Spirit helps respond to specific historical and social challenges. José and Jay invite us to constant transformation, confessing in our languages and inspiring people to see the uniqueness of God's loving grace, the promise of resurrection, and life affirmed in and through the community.

Still on the borders... The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America affirms "that walking alongside refugees and migrants is a matter of faith."³⁹ By opening their eyes and ears to what happens at the borders, José and Jay inspire us to continue developing theological reflections. For instance, the intentional articulation of ecclesiology connected with anthropology, economics, and religion promotes daily transitions and changes. Weaving networks for cohesion is relational, like the Great Fiesta, with dissonances and harmonies trying to become neighbors to all.

Still surrounded by polarizing tensions, José and Jay recognize that the contexts in which faith is proclaimed are ones of polarization and indecision. They develop theologies that nurture the church and ministries to be in undefined transitions.⁴⁰ Like impurity in the Bible, mostly linked to women and servant men, being in the borders/margins is a sort of contagious illness. However, contact with something that will not endanger life implies power.⁴¹ José and Jay move us to practice that radical power through acceptance, inclusion, and equity for mutual enrichment.

Still resisting... José and Jay's pilgrimage shows us the liberating blow of the Holy Spirit. This solid ground for peaceful and active resistance motivates us to reconstruct meaning in life while being

39. ELCA. "Sanctuary Denomination, Talking Points." <https://www.elca.org/sanctuarychurch> Accessed 09/11/2024.

40. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2004), 119.

41. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 120.

persuaded by the gospel to resist injustices.⁴² Theology and ministry are always under the threshold of new beginnings. With José and Jay, we remain encouraged to walk toward the intersections of the unknown. Here we may walk together, learning from the spiritualities practiced by Indigenous peoples and Aboriginal nations, their faith and wisdom would perhaps serve to reconnect with centers already existing and enrich our theologies and ministries.

42. José David Rodríguez, *Caribbean Lutherans*, 17-24.

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