

Transcript TSV 008:

The Home We Carry: The Beautiful Agony of Diasporic Identity w/ Jessica Vazquez Torres

Axis Mundi: [00:00:00] Axis Mundi.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Welcome to Teología Sin Vergüenza, Queer and feminist theology from Latin America and its diaspora to get those spiritual justice juices flowing. I'm your host, Reverend Sex. You may not have heard from a lot of folks who live shamelessly as both queer trans feministas and people of faith, but you're about to!

Even if you don't know it, we are everywhere. We do our work in the academy, in the church, in our homes, and on the streets. We fight for our communities and for our own lives. We are not macho, but we are many. We're irreverent Queer feminists who are shamelessly faithful, and we're faithful [00:01:00] theologians who are shamelessly activistas. We are shamelessly, las sinvergüenzas.

We pluck the ripest fruit from the Bible to make juicy, queer feminist Latine theology that refreshes your spirit and quenches your thirst for liberation. In this episode, you'll find delicious decolonial theology for the real world, right now. So get your cup of coffee, pull up a chair 'cause you belong here.

Now let's get down to pleasure.

Welcome to this week's episode of Teología Sin Vergüenza. Buckle up and get ready, 'cause today I have the pleasure of speaking with Jessica Vasquez Torres. She's a 1.5 generation queer Latina of Puerto Rican descent, who's been shaped by 30 years of living and working in the southern and Midwestern United States. Based in Moo-wak-ma Oooo-lone tribal land, most commonly known as Oakland, [00:02:00] California, she brings over 20 years of experience organizing for racial justice with a particular focus and expertise in religious institutions. Her lived experience, religious formation, and intersectional lens fuel, a beautiful and powerful conversation on identity diaspora, home, and ultimately transformation and healing.

I can't wait.

Hi, beloved, welcome to Teología Sin Vergüenza.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Thank you. Thank you. It's good to be here.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): I'm so glad that you are spending some time with us today. We always start at the same place, so let's just jump right in. Do you identify as una persona sinvergüenza, yes or no, and why or why not? And, because the season is in English, I would love for you to give a little bit of intro.

What does sinvergüenza mean to you? Do, what [00:03:00] experiences do you have with that word? Uh, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: So sinvergüenza to me will always be connected to my uncle Elias, who, um, who would, like, whenever he would greet you, he would give you his term of endearment for you. In his case, my term, his term of endearment for me was la gordita.

And then he would be like, he would be like, ah, you're such a sinvergüenza. Right, you're so smart. You're like, so like shameless in a, in a way of sort of signifying you do not lack in pride. And so I have this, my relationship with this term in so many ways really. It's connected to him in a lot of ways. Mm. Certainly in my family, sinvergüenza meant many things.

It meant, ah, you sinvergüenza like you have no shame about this thing that you did, and you're standing there so prideful. [00:04:00] My mom, uh, uses sinvergüenza a lot with like her pets. When her pets do something really funny and just like, ah, look at the sinvergüenza like, ha ha ha. They're so funny. They're so cute. I have associations with that term that are about someone that's sitting strong and without shame in something that they've done.

And I, I may not agree with the thing that they've done. Like it is not a question of whether do I have agreement or disagreement about it, but I am denoting that what you are experiencing relative to that word, is connected to some form of shamelessness.

Mm-hmm.

And that, that shamelessness can be a thing you achieve, I have achieved shamelessness.

I am standing without shame in a, in a stance of like strength. Mm-hmm. Um, and it could be, um, interpreted as I have done something and I have transgressed something and I am not shamed. I will not be shamed. [00:05:00]

And I have no shame in my transgression. I I may be facing consequences because of that transgression, but I am standing without shame in the, in the, in front of that transgression.

So I have all these like wonderful associations of, of I think a complex term, at least in my Puerto Rican family. Yeah. Uh, and so when I think about it that way, I certainly do think myself as someone that strives to be, uh, sinvergüenza, I. I use the word strive. I don't wanna say yes or no because I'm also a person, like born in this world, raised in this world in a, you know, a, a person who identifies as a female, a person with all kinds of socially imposed and family imposed forms of shame around all kinds of things.

And so I think I am a person that's striving to, to live into that meaning that I, that I got from my family of being a person that [00:06:00] stands on the other side of shame, uh, that stands strong in the other side of shame.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): I love it. I love it. Now, the first time that we talked, I'm gonna go deep and then we may need to circle down.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Go for it.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah. Because the first time you and I spoke. I was like, got teary because we started talking about home and what it means to be in diaspora and you were telling me a lot about coming from island people and what that meant from you, like what that meant for you growing up, and also being a person who has moved around a lot in your adult life.

And so will you tell me a little bit about what home means and what that trajectory has meant for you of moving from place to place or, or what feels like home?

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I wanna start that by something, I didn't, we didn't talk about the the first time because since you and I talked, I finished reading a book called Olga Dies Dreaming. Which is a diasporic novel and I cannot think of the name of the [00:07:00] writer. Xóchitl.

I'll think of Xóchitl's last name, But, but in Olga Dies Dreaming. I told my cousin I was reading it, who lives in Puerto Rico, and my cousin said, I hated that book. Right. And I was like, oh, interesting. Yeah. And so as I, so I read it with that sense that my cousin who lives in Puerto Rico really didn't like this book.

Yeah. And I am like, but this book will won awards. Like, how do you not like this book? When I got to the end of this book, I, I wrote her and I said, I understand why you didn't like this book. I get it now because this is a book written in the diaspora for the diaspora. Because fundamentally that book is about finding home.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And it's about finding home in yourself. It's about finding home in your community. It's about finding home in your people. Yeah. And it's also about rediscovering a home that lived in your imagination, that in [00:08:00] this book, in Olga Dies Dreaming, the character is Puerto Rican from New York. And so her idea of what Puerto Rico home is

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And what Puerto Rico actually was were two very different things, right? Yes. And, and I think that when I, so I was talking to my cousin about this and my cousin was like, that's it. I am reading the book as someone that's never left home.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And you are reading a book as someone who was taken from home. Yes. Whose family made a decision to leave home and now are thinking about your place in the world in relationship to that geography that is home to you, but the further you are away from it, the, the more distanced it becomes. So it becomes a little romantic and illusory.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: As you move away. So I, I think that that's a little bit about how I think about home these days.

I, I have in fact moved a lot. And somewhere along the way I, I had to, I had to figure out that if I wasn't willing to make home where I went, where [00:09:00] I lived, I was never gonna stop missing home. And maybe it was, maybe for me, it was the realization that, I don't know, that maybe the, the longer I stayed outside of Puerto Rico, the further that home became to me.

Yeah. Right. That I couldn't, that I, I, I didn't feel like we just go back. That my mom and my dad were in the states, that my sister was in the states, that living

them behind didn't feel like a, a decision I wanted to make. And then I met my spouse and then like, now I had this other person that I wasn't gonna move to Puerto Rico and so home became a further and further thing in terms of like a place to call home.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And um, and I think that for me then it became about making home where I went and learning how to, how does one make home through story, through ritual, through people, through community. I think that the place that that clicked for me was really living in Indianapolis.

It was the furthest I've been from Puerto Rico. It's the furthest I've in from my family and my entire life. It's the [00:10:00] furthest I lived by myself, alone. Mm-hmm. In a place where I didn't really know anyone. And it was the furthest I've ever been from a Puerto Rican community. There were not really that many Puerto Ricans in Indianapolis when I was living there.

And I remember looking around. And seeing, okay, who are the other people? Like, okay, so I, I'm not gonna find Puerto Rican-ness here. So what is home? How do I connect to home? And it was like, oh, well, home is, home is rice, home is beans. Home is music. Yes, home is language. Home is, home is forms of corn.

Where am I? Let's go looking. Let's, who are the people who have the closest approximation to this?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And then, and then it was Guatemalans and Mexicans in Indianapolis. And then it was like, okay, Jessica, how are you connected to these people? What binds you to them? Where do you find your points of connection?

I think for me, that [00:11:00] required dismantling ideas. About myself as a person from the Caribbean, about them as persons from Central America and Latin America, broadly speaking. It meant cutting through some of the ways that the US pits us against each other. So home was also about discovering people.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That I have been separated from. Mm-hmm. Uh, discovering something about our, what bound us to each other, uh, beyond just food and language.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, and then, and then I think that then created for me this meaning of home that is grounded in community. Yes. That wherever, wherever the community I'm cultivating is that I am making home. So home is not a static place.

Home is this dynamic, constant making, world building project of saying, I am here. So who is my home here?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Like, and where are the, where are the degrees of home that I have? Like, so [00:12:00] how does home become the people I live with? In the most granular, like, yes, explicit place, my spouse, my pet, my dog. How is home my family?

How is home my cousins and my second cousins and my third cousins and my cousins via marriage? And how is home the people I've collected and that have gathered with me and that I have gathered with along the way? Home is like the people I've met in every city I've ever lived into where I found a way to make home. Like home is, home is the collection of all of those stories collapsed into each other. So that there comes a point in which I can feel at home wherever I go.

While also, also, I think, and maybe this is a function of getting older, I'm gonna be honest. Also consistently and at times really longing the home that I left [00:13:00] behind.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm-hmm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And that, and that both of those things are true at the same time, that I am at home in all of these ways among all of these people. Uh, people that aren't just Latinos. People who are Japanese, through my spouse, that are Jewish.

All of this ever-growing mass of humanity that make me home and that make my home, yes, my home. But also in the midst of all of that, also never really

quite reconciling that I'm far away from home. Yeah. And it's, it's, it's the tension between those two things that's also home, right? Like it is that in, in Spanish there's a word called, there's a word called añoranza.

And I, I remember writing a long time ago, like when I wrote up a sermon, I used to preach, uh, and I wrote a sermon in which I talked about, uh, the limitations of the English language. To describe, to describe what it [00:14:00] means to miss something.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And that, and that for me, the word añoranza is, it's not just that I miss something that. It it's to long for .

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: It is to is to feel called to. It's to be, is to have a part of your being that is never quite fulfilled and never quite settled and never quite satisfied. That like gets activated with a song. Mm-hmm. Like gets activated with a smell. And so to me, home these days is both this expansive, beautiful, gathered through geography, through relationship, through time, community of relationships that are, are meaningful and important and where I find myself deeply grounded, and it is that place that can never quite be fulfilled. That place that is also pulling me and calling me and mm-hmm. [00:15:00] It's both Puerto Rico and it's also this reality that I live, that I have carved for myself.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): I wonder if that's something about being in diaspora or part of the experience of either being an immigrant or being in a family of immigrants or a community in diaspora that, that I feel like the narrative is once we are fully assimilated we will be fully American, quote unquote, and then the rest of it will kind of fall away.

And I think sometimes we don't teach our children our indigenous and native and Spanish, colonized though it may be, languages with this intention of trying to belong and fit in. Um, but I do think there's something that's no less.

American to use that phrase mm-hmm. By holding both of those. Ni de aquí ni de allá Yeah. Like I, I long for this place that I, for some [00:16:00] of us have never been mm-hmm. But know it in my bones and know it, my family know it in the longings of my family and the generations before me. And it's holding. It's that both, it's a very theological Right.

Both and kind of thinking Yeah. Of like, we actually can be fully here and never over it being displaced, both physically and spiritually from the billions of our ancestors. Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Oh no, I, I, yes. I think that the diasporic experience, the experience of being in diaspora is it, it is a liminal to use a, a big word.

Mm-hmm. Is a, is a liminal experience. It is, it is the experience of living in an in-between space. Uh, yeah. Because you. Like in my case, I'm a 1.5 generation like sociologically. People think of people like me as 1.5 generation. I lived to Puerto Rico till I was 15. I'm now 52. So I have lived right more than two thirds of my life here.

But what happens to a young person by the [00:17:00] age of 15 is so much of you are fully formed. Yes. And so when I think of my life, I think of it as so much of my life feels like it's lived in liminality, it's lived in this place that is neither here nor there. There are days that I'm only thinking English, never utter a single Spanish thought or word all day long.

And yet something happens, a smell, a call, and it just is it, it comes at you, it's activated. And if like you feel it in your body, you relax. Yes. Your ways of being are different. You use your hands differently, breathing, so there's a, you're breathing differently. There is something about the the diasporic experience.

That, that, that is generationally bound, that my diaspora experience as a 1.5 generation is different than my sibling and my niece's experience. Yeah. Of being diasporic people is different than my mom who was in her forties when she moved and, and that it is displaced where you are neither [00:18:00] here nor there, and that you make a commitment to place.

I think of my parents as people who built an island in a zip code. My parents have lived in the same zip code Okay. For the entire time that we've lived in the United States.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: They have moved four times. Okay. In a three mile radius. Right. They have made. Literally an island. Yes. In a zip code. And they have, they operate like island people.

They go to the same grocery store inside the bounds of their island. Their church is inside the bounds of their island. The gas station, the veterinary for the dogs, the place where they get their coffee, the place where they get the bread, the place where they put their gas. It's within the bounds of the island.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): The gas.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Yeah. There's, yeah. It's not like when I go home and I tell mom, well, I went shopping here, and she's like, where is that? And I'm like, it's just right over there. She's like, I've [00:19:00] never seen that. Well, because you never live. You never, you never get out of this place. They build an island in a zip code.

Yeah. And there's something really beautiful about that. Mm-hmm. Like, they know so many people there. They know all of their neighbors. They like can tell me tremendous intimate stories about these people. People show up in my parents' house and, and do things. There's like this, the guy that mows the lawn, he mows the lawn for groceries.

Like there's all these like island exchange and relational transactions that are happening, which are just incredibly rare in the United States or unless more like I, I think they are true in places like Appalachia. Mm-hmm. They're true in poor and rural communities. They can be true in certain urban cities, but by and large we are- that's not a reality in the United States. And I've watched my parents build themselves an island.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Because they're island people in their [00:20:00] liminal diasporic experience, yes. They recreated an island. Wow. And they, they have inhabited the space for almost 40 years. Wow. And so I, I think that your sense that part of the experience of being diasporic people where home is both a place that we make and we don't always make it 'cause we want to, sometimes we make it 'cause we don't have a choice.

Yep. Sometimes we make it 'cause we got pulled or pushed by colonialism and economics and war and persecution.

Yeah. Uh, or our parents needed to move and we got there dragged along, or someone sent us to protect us. We, one of the projects I think of being diasporic people, whether we know it or not, it's, it's building home while also continuously having this core, this pull, this thing that's just on the other side.

Like if the liminal of space is in between and that's where you inhabit, it's like it's just on the other side of that [00:21:00] space and you have a push and a pull. Mm-hmm. You are pulled into this world, what you described as assimilation. You're pulled into the, the economics of surviving, of getting a job, of getting an education, of getting ahead.

Right. That pulls you through the liminal place. But there's a pull that is always there. It's just never lets it go. It may be thin mm-hmm. Depending on your generation. But when you land. If you get to go back. When you see a person from your town. When, when someone tells you a story, like it just grabs you and it sends you back there.

Yes. To me, that's what it feels like to be in the active project of home building. Mm-hmm. Um, I don't think it's ever settled. It's it's world building.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes. Oh, I love that feeling of world building because I come from a generation of, I was born [00:22:00] here in the US and I was raised in Appalachia. So very much that network, like you were talking about. But not being in place and in community with other people from where I was from, the longing didn't go away.

Like, I think there could be this aspiration that eventually you just are where you are, who you are, now you're quote unquote American, and, and it feels right. But I think there's also generational hurt and longing and missing and identity that gets passed down in this way of like, I feel like I'm spending most of my adult life trying to bridge back to home, to ancestors, to that kind of place.

But I feel like, and you can tell me if you have a different experience, I feel like we don't talk about diaspora like as a concept as much as we should. Like we have, I hear [00:23:00] nostalgia where people talk about, you know, where they're from or their family traditions or things like that, or pride in being from the country that you're from.

But the talking about the spiritual wound or the generational experience of being from a people who left. Or were forced or were trafficked. That work, I feel like we don't talk about enough in like communities that come from Latin America and the Caribbean. I'm, is that your experience also?

Jessica Vazquez Torres: We certainly, we don't use the word. I I think it's really interesting.

I, I, I, as I'm hearing you say that, I'm sitting here thinking about this one friend I have, whose name is Juan. And Juan and I have what, like, I, I think of them as diasporic summits. We, I just, I like, I'll just get a text mess- a text message that says it's time for a check-in. That's it, that's all the text message says.

And then we'll like, figure out how to get on the phone. And we both have like one hour. And so [00:24:00] it's like us checking in, like, are you seeing what I'm seeing? Like, are you noticing what I'm noticing? We start with like, what's happening in the US? Like, oh my God, what's going on? And then at some point we inevitably end up in Puerto Rico.

And then we start like having this conversation about the place that we both feel pulled toward. If that home is liminal, Puerto Rico is our, like our pullback. Our like, it's both our grounding and our longing and like the thing that feels beyond our grasp. And we're both looking at it, but we're looking at it with this clear sense that what we are seeing is a diasporic lens.

Mm. At some point in our conversation, we're like having a thousand opinions, right? We don't live there. Uh, but we have a thousand opinions about what's happening, what's going on, what is wrong with people, and then we have to say out loud. But that's the thing about being in the diaspora.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: You, you see something different, but you're also not [00:25:00] seeing clearly because you're not there either.

And I think that, that, I wish we talked about it more.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Me too.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Well, and lemme say I wish we talked about it more because I think I. I think that what made me navigate the diasporic experience as a teenager early on in my life, probably well into my twenties in so many ways, was like, was religious life.

Like in my case it was a Puerto Rican community at church. And so it like kept, it kept me sort of like, oh yeah, this is happening over here, but you, I have a place to touch.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yep.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And this place that I touch, it's like if I touch it, if I can put my finger in it, I am relocated. Mm-hmm. I now have a sense of my geography all over again.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I go away and now, and here's the problem, here's the beauty of that. Yeah. That there was a place I could touch.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Here's the challenge of that.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Is that because we never talked about, not only did we not talk [00:26:00] about diaspora. Yeah. We didn't also, in that conversation, talk about diaspora that is pushed on us by colonialism, by economic forces, by.

By the ways that, um, lack of sovereignty, demands, mobility, demands that you get out. Right by the push and pull of co-, of colonial capitalism. My touching here isn't making things clear either. Mm-hmm. So I'm touching, I'm relocated. I feel like I'm connected, but, but I am also not, I'm also getting a version of a kind of religiosity that isn't helping me resist some of the pulls towards abandoning of myself.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes, yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And that it would take a long time for me to figure out that I needed to still have a touch, but I needed to have a touch that was much more critical [00:27:00] than just being satisfied with giving me a sense of home. That I needed to challenge that also, it couldn't just be uncritical, touching regrounding and then.

Right. Something needed to give.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah, I, that makes me think about how many queer and trans people I know who have that same experience of church being this refuge, particularly in diaspora. That is the container of language. That is the container of culture, that is the container of after church food and meals and how we are connected to back home that feels so deeply like home.

And that theology that was nor- that was used to colonize our home places and brought back here with us to this country. How that then requires us to split ourselves so that we can hold onto that place of home, that touchpoint, as you were saying. [00:28:00] But only when we leave our queerness, our transness, our feminism, whatever that is, at the door and that kind of splitting feels like the colonizing project. And so I wonder, will you talk about, is that what you also see? Is that what you mean when you're talking about that work?

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Yeah, a hundred percent. A hundred percent. Yeah. Let me be clear. Yeah. I don't begrudge people the ways that they hold onto that. Yeah. Because life in the United States can be an absolute devastating thing.

Yes. For so many people. You know, I think about people that get pulled through the co the circumstances of, of the injustice of life and the world that humans create. Yes. Who never wanted to leave home, who didn't have a choice to live home. Who, who, i'm just living behind family and friends. They're living behind purpose. Career. Yes. Work that has meaning to do-

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Hope.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: To hope, a sense of possibility, a commitment to [00:29:00] a community, and then they land in a place where people don't see you, think you're disposable. So like I get, and do not begrudge that people need a place. Yes. That gives them language and ritual and narrative.

However uncritical it is. Yes. But that in the midst of that devastation. Yep. Yes. There is a place to go. There is a place.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): People ask us like, why don't you just leave if they treat you that bad or if they don't accept.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And it's, it's not that simple.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Right? It's not that simple. Yes, yes. Thousand percent. Yes. Not simple. I don't judge anybody who stays .

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I mean, I don't either. Right? Like, and I don't even begrudge the people that come up with these sophisticated, like, negotiations. I did it for a really long time.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Where i'd be like, okay, I'm just gonna do this thing over here. I'm gonna go sing my [00:30:00] songs. Yeah. And then I'm gonna go and I'm gonna go to the other church. Yeah. So I can detox a little bit from all the bad theology. Right. Like I would, I would do two services. Okay. Like the service with my people. Yeah. And then I would go to the white church. I would go to the white progressive church with all the, all the educated people that I, theologically aligned with. And I remember in Chicago because, like let me tell you the story, but I remember in Chicago we used to go to the Filipino community and we loved going there. Oh my God. It felt, I, I feel very much at home among Filipino people because of our shared colonial history.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): That's right. Island people, colonizer, island people.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Island people colonized by the same people, right? Like, you know, it's like we, like we and the Filipinos we're like this, right? We're like, we're like, we're like shared history. But the theology, Lord have mercy. I would go and I was like, but there's gonna be food afterwards. And these people are amazing and I love them.

And then the minute that the pastor would start speaking, I would lift up the [00:31:00] Bible and I would open the first chapter of Mark. And while he was like saying whatever, I'm, I'm just gonna read the gospel of Mark. It's my favorite gospel.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mine too!

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I'm just gonna read the gospel, Mark. I'm gonna, I'm gonna counter this noise by reading this.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: As a way of remaining, as a way of holding onto this little piece of a thing that so matters. Yes. So anyways I don't begrudge it. I have been there. I do it. Yep.

I'm also clear that there is something really deeply problematic, it's sad, it's destructive. That Christian theology, that Christian faith, given its incredible colonial history in Latin America and the Caribbean, isn't for so many of us, isn't a place that gives us a pathway to a sense of freedom and wholeness and to the possibility of home building and world building.

That instead what it does is that it has us [00:32:00] attached to forms of morality and control. And, and I get it. If you're feeling out of control, having a, a faith that is all about control. Where, where yes. You know, where the deity is has an answer for everything, may feel like a place of power. Yeah. And I think it makes us vulnerable.

I think it makes us, yeah. I think it hurts us. I think that it doesn't provide us with a way to critically fight for our own liberation. It. And, and that is, that is just, it's such a place of struggle for me because I, yes. These people, these communities of faith also, you know, they hold the wounded, they provide care for the sick.

They feed people, they show up with people, they are there for them in community and do it in a way that is also creating like poison pills. For people like me, for people who are queer, people who are trans, for people who are young, who just don't [00:33:00] see the, the exchange of that. Yeah. Isn't always liberatory and I, it's a, it's a deep place of struggle because I, yeah. So it creates a home that's built in a form of control and conformity.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That is not healthy. It's a, it's a bit of a toxic home.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah. Well, it's, it's the antithesis of life abundant for so many of us in, in any form, anybody who doesn't conform. Part of the work that we do at Soulforce, and I know that you do in your work, and I'd love to hear more about it, is trying to do this disentanglement from the colonizing project and like what we believe. Because we were given this theology usually at the tip of a sword or a tip of a gun, and like how we exist apart from that, beyond that, how we develop spirituality.

And one of the things that I think is really important to talk about when we're having a [00:34:00] conversation about Puerto Rico in particular is its place as a US colony, because oftentimes we're talking to folks in Latin America, are from places in Latin America, that have a whole variety of relationships with the United States, but there's a very particular history, particularly with the Christian Church, with like lots of Protestant denominations. I feel like one of the most remarkable aha moments for me that I just didn't know I was just ignorant about for so long, was that map of Puerto Rico where they di- like, literally the church, Protestant church leaders, like divided the map and it's like, here is the Presbyterians. Yeah. And even people like the Quakers and the Disciples, like

almost all of the Protestant denominations were like there and they have their little section of the map. And my experience is like even now.

Like even now, 2025, if you go to those places on the map, the majority of churches and the majority of people will still [00:35:00] belong to that specific Protestant denomination that were assigned to. Like, to, like, they didn't say colonize, they said like, um, civilize. Right? Yeah. So will you tell us a little bit about that for folks who are new to the conversation?

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Oh, please. Lemme tell you, lemme tell you about it. Yes. Um, so I, I wanna start by saying that one of my, one of my favorite books, I wanna go back to this map, but one of the books that I read called How to Hide an Empire. And so, so in How To Hide of Empire. Immerwahr, who Is an historian, he studied US history.

He opens the book by saying he's in the Philippines. He is going up an escalator in the airport, in the Philippines looking around going like, there's an awful lot of words here in English. What is this about? And so he's like, there for a symposium or something on American history, like brand new minted American historian PhD. [00:36:00] Quickly realizing Uhhuh that somehow in his entire trajectory, yes, somehow he missed this entire little business of the Philippines being a possession of the United States.

As he begins to interrogate sort of his own shaping, he's like, how? How can I be a historian of the United States of any repute if I don't know that this was a territory of the US? Then what else I don't know? And so he begins to try and piece together, what else don't I know? And suddenly where he lands is this beginning to sort of discover the way that the United States so effectively-

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: So effectively hid its empire while preaching to the world and engaging in military [00:37:00] conflicts designed to end empires. Yes. And this is the irony of Puerto Rico, right? Yes. That Puerto Rico was a part of an empire. Yes. The Spanish Empire, right? Yes. We were a colony of Spain from 1493 until 1898, just like the Philippines, FYI. And Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and the part of Dominican Republic that is not Haiti, the, historically known as Hispaniola. Mm-hmm. And, and all other kinds of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. And the United States decides that it's going to declare its sphere of influence over the entire Western hemisphere. And so it's gonna go to work and it's gonna engage military conflict

designed to essentially remove all European empires from its sphere of influence, right?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: In order to liberate and to democratize them. [00:38:00] By creating a European empire, a so-called Pax Americana, that it will impose upon the world. Yes. And so we Puerto Rico are fighting for our own independence from Spain and comes to the United States. Oh, Spanish American War. Oh, we're gonna kick Spain out of this part of the world.

And when people in all kinds of places in Cuba and the Dominican Republic in all kinds of Latin American nations are thinking the Spanish are gone, we get to be self determinant people. The United States said, oh, not so fast. Not so fast my friends, because we actually believe that you have, uh, import. You are an important part of our new world influence. And so we are gonna liberate you by imposing upon you, um, a kind of democratizing project. [00:39:00] Uh, a civilizing and democratizing project. And in order to help with that, we are gonna impose not religion because Puerto Rico had been a colony of a Catholic Christian nation for, at that point, four hundred years.

We are gonna impose Protestant American Christianity upon you and just map that you referred to. That there would be a gathering of all of the missionary agencies of all of the, what we call today, the historical white churches of the United States. And they would literally put up a map and create territories and assign each of those lands.

So I was Disciples of Christ, that's the territory I lived in. Mm-hmm. Um, and they would go at that, like with zealousness, we're gonna go recruit people, we're gonna go start churches, we're gonna go undermine Catholicism. And we're gonna do it not by selling them Christianity, [00:40:00] because we were already Christian.

We are gonna do it by selling them middle classness. We're gonna do it by, by integrating ideas of the American middle class: upward mobility, education. a kind of separation of politics from religion. Uh, forms of sobriety, forms of like public morality. Yes. We're gonna, we're gonna invest in hospitals.

We're gonna invest in like housing projects and building that are going to co-mingle. Christianity with a kind of American building project.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And there is something about that, that will have a real impact. I mean, the, the status of life in Puerto Rico would significantly increase. Like my family, my grandparents had sixth grade and I think it was sixth grade and fourth grade educations, all of their children were graduated from college.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Uh, their eight children, all of my cousins, by and large, went to college. Most of us have master's degrees. Many of [00:41:00] us have second master's or graduate degrees, postgraduate degrees. You literally can see in one family the impact of this alignment. Right. And, and you can also see, in one family, and in many families the impact of the training for the Colonial project.

And how do we in 2025 as that colonial project has traveled. Through movement, through mobility, through displacement, through push and pull economics. Through, the impact of disaster after disaster, after disaster, ecological and structural disaster upon the island of Puerto Rico. Maria, Irma. That constant battle with a board of, uh, overseers that won't let the people have self-determination. As people have moved, these ideas, these religious ideas have moved with them.

Mm-hmm. And so now we find ourselves right in [00:42:00] the diasporic Puerto Rican communities encountering multiple generations of diasporas.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Right. 'cause then each of these communities, there's a diaspora meeting them. And the people hear a different experience of the colonial story. The newly arrived a narrative of the colonial story.

I think that there is, if there is a project of decolonization that is desperately needed among many of us, I will just speak for Puerto Ricans for a second, my view of the Puerto Rican community, is there is a, there is this work that we're gonna have to do that is about dismantling and reimagining together that, you know, what does it mean?

Uh, I, I wanna use Bad Bunny for one, for one example for a minute.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Please do.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, we got, there's always room for a Bad Bunny reference, right?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Absolutely.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: We have a family chat in my family, and that family chat has Puerto Rican people, from the Puerto Rico, and has people from the States

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): uhhuh.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And, um, [00:43:00] and we have had the most fascinating Bad Bunny arguments in that chat.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Oh my gosh, yes. Tell us, tell us.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And and, and let me be clear, prior to the last, last album, I'm not a Bad Bunny fan. Um, I am A too old. Um, and I don't get 90% of the references. It's not right. I moved to, I listen to country music. I like, I'm I right? Like, I'm like, I know much more about what's happening in Nashville country music than I know about what's happening with Puerto Rico music.

I'm like, I'm like stalking my parents music. I listen to like eighties and like eighties and below Latino music and then like country music forward in Americana. Right. It's like a very weird, I don't, and, and so Bad Bunny not in my catalog of music. But when the project came out, when status project came out, you know, you gotta pay attention to that.

Something's happening here. This is not just music. It's a political project [00:44:00] here that one needs to pay attention to. Yeah. And so it's been so interesting to watch my family

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: The chat has three generations.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Really try to negotiate its way into this conversation. Right. With like the older people saying: trash, not a representative of who we are. Yeah. Brings shame into our country and they, some of the younger

generation saying: ah, I don't know. I think the music's pretty good. Like, you know, why are you so concerned about profanity? Why is that the thing you're hung up on? By the way, the reason why we're hung up on the profanity Protestant American Christianity.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That's why we're hung up on the profanity. Yes. Oh, all the sexuality stuff. Why are we hung up on the sexuality stuff? American, Protestant Christianity. So you can see all of that colonial narrative, all of those colonial values playing themselves in this chat conversation.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And the the peak of the conversation

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.[00:45:00]

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Comes when my mom says that is not a Puerto Rican, I would not call that a patriot, she says. And I-

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Interesting

Jessica Vazquez Torres: said. I said I, I'm not sure that that's a fair statement. Like, who are we to be the ar- of the arbiters of patriotism? Some people wouldn't call us patriots. Right. Because we left.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Because you left. Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I, and I, I, I, because whenever I pick on my mom, I do follow up with a phone call, right. So I, I had a long conversation with her afterwards. You know, and she finally said to me, we can't agree to disagree. And I said, I, I'm not saying that, I'm not trying to convince you of anything. Yeah. But what I am saying is that we have to be careful.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: When we use the word patriotic that, that we can't be the arbiters of someone's love for their country. Mm. Like it is obvious that Bad Bunny loves Puerto Rico.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: It's obvious in the choices that he makes. Yes. It's obvious in the, in the decisions that he's [00:46:00] made around this. It's obvious in the ways that he is trying to make sense of what's happening in the place that he keeps going back to

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That I've never gone back to, to live.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes. Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And. There is something to be said for creating room. Mm-hmm. For what happens when the diaspora and the ways of the diaspora go back to the island. Right. So this is how I think about the Bad Bunny experience.

That Bad Bunny looks at what's happening with hip hop in the United States, just looking at what's happening with, with all of this music that's pushing against something that's building for identity.

And he's also looking at what's happening in Latin America and the Caribbean. What's happening with the bands of the eighties and the nineties. What's happening with the Calle Treces as they are beginning to talk about a kind of political narrative. Mm-hmm.

And in the way that music is derivative, Bad Bunny emerges and begins to create a new sound. A new [00:47:00] way that is both diasporic and 100% a part of this island and this people

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): mm-hmm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I don't have to like it

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: To understand that there is a decolonial project built into this. Even while I can be critical of the ways that colonialism is still running through that.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Totally.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And that both, two things can be true at once. And so like I, when I think about the work we do in my work at Crossroads, it's the work of helping people make sense of that.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That if, if in any given moment a people of La- a group of Latinos, it's in a conversation, it is not a single conversation. It's always gonna be a multi-level conversation. That there's gonna be a conversation about, which generation of migration am I speaking from? How tied is my identity to the place I came from, or not?

Yes. How am I relating into the linguistic cultural dynamics and how are they [00:48:00] shaping even how I'm showing up in this conversation? Am I clear of my cultural, religious, political shaping?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Am I aware of the narratives that my parents gave me so I could survive?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That made me buy line, hook and sinker, some ideas about American mobility that were always a lie and will always be a lie.

The job that I do is to try and give us a lens.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm-hmm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: To look at all of that.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: All at once. Uh, so, so maybe to come closer. Or maybe we can find a place of home with each other. Maybe so we can resist.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Right. At a minimum so we can resist.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah. And it's so much part of white Christian supremacy and the Protestant colonizing project there can only be one way. And there can only be one approach. And there can only be, like everything is black and white, which parallels with good and [00:49:00] bad. And so even just the work of like, kind of, pulling the threads of the cloth apart and seeing that there are many lines running through it and holding all of that together, is I think the work of decolonizing everything.

Because we have always been multifaceted, multi-layered people. Communities with different kinds of history. So, I'm curious if you would talk for a second about what you are thinking in this moment around the, the construction and deconstruction of Latinidad as as a project, because there's so much up in the air atmosphere around

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Oh yeah.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Latinidad or not Latinidad. For me, as somebody who was born in diaspora, it's really important as a i-, as a political organizing identity. Because I feel like as somebody who didn't grow up around [00:50:00] Colombians all the time, I was, you know, off in a Appalachian community that was white. And, and there's an identity piece or a formation that I missed because I wasn't surrounded by people who constantly reinforced, this is our food, this is our language, this is our, so there's a longing for something I didn't know.

And I see, as I see more and more what looks like white supremacy trying to swallow more of our people as a profound act of anti-Blackness, of like literally, if you are not Black, then we can, we can like breed you into white enough. That kind of aspiration that people, that we are like buying, as a people, that I feel really invested in.

And I can hold the other reality that a lot of people feel totally erased by this pan-, you know, continental identity of Latina, Latine, Latinx, whatever that is. And I think it's a really [00:51:00] juicy conversation, and I, and I'm interested in us as a people talking about it and talking about how, what you're saying around generations, I think also makes a huge difference in how we approach that conversation or where we find belonging or similarity.

But mm-hmm. I talk more about that kind of, that kind of identity and multiculturalness multiracial ness.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Yeah. Yeah. So I, this is one that I can tell you I am a hundred percent pro Latino. I, I, oh, and I, like you, I'm a hundred percent pro Latino because I think it's about a politic. It's not about. It's about a construction of something made up in the context of diaspora.

That Latino is a, is a political, and by here, I mean, is a community that is making an agreement with itself on how it will be a community together to operate and advocate for itself, but to [00:52:00] join in solidarity with others. And so it is about the politic of being a people and, and I think of Latino as being dynamic. Yeah. I think of Latino as being diasporic and in the context of the US, um, to be domestic.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Meaning that, it is the Latino community is a diasporic, domestic, multi-generational, multilingual, multiracial project.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: To make a people. Um, as a way of combating the divide and conquer, of creating a place of home, of providing a place of solidarity, of providing a place to struggle from, and to creating that touch place that I can ground myself when nothing else grounds me.

These people ground me. And, and there is, there is great complexity [00:53:00] because colonialism is real.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Colonialism is present, colonialism is past and is current.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And so the project to decolonize, the project to unearth and surface the lost story, the lost thread to indigenouness, to, to Blackness, to diasporic Blackness, really.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm-hmm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, it's necessary and it is important. And all of us, particularly those of us who are more recent migrants, and then the people who migrated before who were born out of migrants, also come from national narratives that themselves are projects. Puerto Ricans are a project. We are literally a political project.

We were an island full of indigenous people that gets invaded by a colonizer who then introduces enslaved people who through [00:54:00] time, people from other nations, including Asians, have come to, to also call home. And that all of those people together over time have built something called Puerto Rico. Yes. And who call themselves Puerto Ricans in the world.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I don't know that I can ever go back and be indigenous. Because my people who were indigenous, they were killed. Like I, I, I can go back and acknowledge it. I can go back, but I can't go back and recreate it. Like, it's not a thing that I can, you can't just restore the past, not time machine. And I can't go back and, and go, you know, I'm, I'm not from Africa.

Like, it's like, I love this poem from Aurora Levins Morales, uh, Child of the Americas. I am not from Africa but Africa is in me. Hmm. I am not from Latin America, but Latin America is in me. I am not from Europe, but Europe is in me.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: So I, we are all, we are a political project made of [00:55:00] political projects who find themselves living in a political project.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And so to me, Latino, Latin, Latinidad, this construction, in spite of its profoundly racist history.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yep.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Like all awful things. Like being Queer. Uh, it's a, it's a project of what people taking an imposed identity, reshaping, claiming it for itself, and then building a political home from where to strive for one's dignity and self-determination.

And so I, I always struggle with the move to say, well, we gotta stop using the term Latino. Some people are Latino. They were born Latino. They were born in like a place of parents who met there from another place.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Who, whose grandparents met somewhere else from another place and then traveled to that place where they met and then they had [00:56:00] this kid that, that kid's not gonna go all the way back to four places of origin.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: To call home. That person, that kid is a Latino. A product of the forces that brought all those people to this place. Yeah. And so I, I often say that I'm a Latino of Puerto Rican descent. Uh, with Midwest and Southern sensitivities. I have spent more time living in the South and living in the Midwest than I ever spent living in Puerto Rico.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I am as deep, I am as comfortable eating like parsnips and rutabagas. And like, and eating biscuits and gravy with sausage. As I am eating mofongo, I am as comfortable having sweet tea, um, and like poundcake.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, as I am eating sauerkraut and eating beer brats. That is what makes me Latina. Is that I am [00:57:00] all of those things.

It's what it, it's what made me not just Puerto Rican. It's what makes me a Latina of Puerto Rican descent living in the United States. I, I feel like we, I think we need to create room in our decolonial project to understand that some things are born out of terrible ideas that turn, can be turned into and used for liberatory outcomes and um, that's how I think about the faith I practice. Born out of terrible ideas that can be used for liberatory outcomes.

I think the Latinos are like that. I think the construction is an imposition, but I think the project has liberatory outcomes if we allow it to.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow. That gives me so much hope. And, um, just reassurance, I think. Because if I were to say I'm Colombian, even though I was born in the US, raised deep in Appalachia and spends [00:58:00] most of my time, I currently live in Mexico City.

I spend my time throughout Latin America. It doesn't feel authentic. Because immediately folks will be like, oh, what about this food? What about this word? What about this place? And those places, none of those places feel like home. Because it was, it's Puerto Rico that I've spent the most time. It's Mexicans that taught me how to cook and how to use chile and how to eat tortillas.

And it's, you know, folks in diaspora who were constantly in fear of police and ICE and la migra that re, that my nervous system responds to, even though I was born in the US. Like the, that is all part of that experience, and I think it's very chocante, like a very harsh reality for people who immigrate to the US to all of a sudden be Brown, whatever the hell that means.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Mm-hmm.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Because it goes from a, a national or a like community [00:59:00] identity, to a different place in which now you are given a new name.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Mm-hmm.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Right, and at least in the south where I come from, everybody's Mexican. So like, are you Mexican? It doesn't matter if you're from Puerto, Puerto Rico,

Jessica Vazquez Torres: It doesn't matter. Yeah, no. Like, like no, I mean, I, it's really funny. I, yes. Uh, here's what's interesting though.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Okay.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: So like, you know, tacos al pastor. What Mexico is known for, Mexico City. It's known for tacos al pastor like,

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Delicious.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Where did tacos al pastor come from? The Middle East. Right? Right. It was Middle Eastern immigrants who moved to Mexico,

who are walking around trying to make home, trying to find connection, who are like, well, there's tacos, there's grilled meat.

If we take our making, if we take the gyro narrative of making Latin America, like making Lebanese food and Middle Eastern food in spikes that are vertical, [01:00:00] what if we just make this meat in this way using these things. And well, we got labneh, they got tortillas. It's a flat thing that you wrap around things. But like, but like it's, it's when I go to Puerto Rico and I eat Chinese food, yes, but like they're the best Puerto Rico.

The best Chinese food I've ever had in my life is in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico. Why? Why? Because the Chinese people, the Puerto Rican Chinese people make Chinese food the ways that Puerto Rican cook. So it's like, it's like the most pork filled, sorry. If you don't eat pork, it's the most pork filled. Like it is.

Like how much pork did you put in this fried rice? Right? Like it's like you're gonna have the best tostones you are ever gonna eat, are gonna be on a little Chinese restaurant. That's when you're gonna get the best [01:01:00] tostones. It's not gonna be on a Puerto Rican restaurant, it's gonna be on a Chinese restaurant. I think we have to be weary of any narrative that invites us to flatten both our national reality and our diasporic reality.

I always struggle with the ways that my dad, when he was alive, would talk about like Dominicans from Puerto Rico and, and Chinese people from Puerto Rico, as if they were not Puerto Rican. And I'll be like, I'm sorry, dad. If someone is on their third generation in the island, I think we can stop calling them Chinese.

They may be Puerto Ricans who come from Chinese people, but at this point, I think we could say they're Puerto Rican. I mean, like, we're, we're three generations in. I mean, like how many generations do you have to be, right, before we claim you? And I think, to me, that's the thing. We, we started talking about home.

Yes. And I, I think that for [01:02:00] me, the only way to redeem the construction of race and the construction of imposed racial categorization

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Is to is to redeem it by creating home for people. By, by using it, not as a place to, to be diminished. Uh, or to distance ourselves

from, but to see it as the place where I meet the other people who are home to me.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Right like, and that, and that the unique role of being a migrant, an immigrant, a displaced person, a refugee in a place like the United States.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Is that, is that those are the people that will help you like survive catastrophe. Yes. Those are the people that will show up for you when the migra comes.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): That's right.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Those are the people that are gonna go and walk with you to the court if you have to go to a hearing. Those like, that [01:03:00] is, it's, that is the one thing that, in order to decolonize it, it's how do we decolonize it by building home within it.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I, yeah, there, there is something really powerful for me. That's why I'm a great believer in it. Um, maybe my experience is that it's those Latinos who were home to me.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes, yes. And the Latinos who were home to me were newly arrived immigrants from places that they were economically displaced from. Mm-hmm. Looking for a place to connect across, you know, language, culture, time, family.

And it's really a sacred thing to spend time with others and be able to have access to their children, to have access to their dinner tables, to have access to their mm-hmm rituals and ceremonies. And I think that is, so, for me, for my experience, is so multicultural. Even within Latin America, but it's so [01:04:00] multicultural and regionally specific and all of that mashed together.

And I think it is, I have so much gratitude for that openness that I feel in so many of our communities. And I'm hopeful that we find places to be that. Outside of the very limited boxed in tiny people that we are allowed to be

within conservative church spaces, because I think religion is that intersecting point for a lot of us, and yet it requires us to give up so much of ourselves.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Yeah, maybe, maybe the thing I would, I would add to that business of home and the context of religion. I, you know. Mm-hmm. I am, I believe the reason you said that Mark is your favorite gospel and Mark is my favorite gospel and I like, I like Mark as a gospel because it's the first. So it's the, the shortest. It's the least complicated. Right, it has no childhood [01:05:00] story. It has no resurrection in it. It starts abruptly and it ends abruptly.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): And it's messy.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, and it's so messy and there's so much cluelessness. And you, and you, you know, that it's a story, right? That when the gospel of Mark gets written, it is written to be performed.

So that it is meant to be a story that engages people. So it's like it has a lot of action, like suddenly, quickly, like there's all these likes, changes of scenery that are happening. But one of the things that, one, the reason why I love that gospel is that there is in it a kind of everydayness, um, of Jesus's life, right?

That there's a lot of eating, there's a lot of sitting in the desert, there's a lot of like, being hungry. There's a lot of like, how, how are we supposed to figure this out? Like, what's going on? And there's a lot of like folks [01:06:00] that are encountered that provide pathways, that make ways, that, that create, um, in the everydayness create sacredness.

That in the everydayness, there is that inbreaking that's happening. Right. You know, as the, you know, as the listener that what's happening here, if, if you, if this is your theological system, in your, in your theological condition, you know, as the listener that what's happening here is that this force of the universe we call God is walking among us, is incarnate.

And so that you are literally being given. A roadmap for what incarnation is supposed to be. It's sitting with people. It's, it's being in the middle of the desert. It's being afraid. It's being with your friends in a boat. It's like, it's like picking up and following a sense of purpose and call. And it's also living in ambiguity.

It's having zero answers and, and being [01:07:00] given a community with whom to have zero answers. Right. Like with whom to be perplexed together.

Right? Like it's, it's being given that over and over again. I think that if, if anything, what you just described, the people that, that you met, that held you, that made you home, that opened doors to people.

I think that's what it means to say that God is incarnate. Mm. That what, what we encounter in those moments is something deeply holy. Mm. And I think sometimes in the Americanized version of church that is about control.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Church that is about morality, church that is about prescribed set of beliefs, of belonging to a club, or people who are gonna be saved, or whatever that means. What gets lost is that, at least the Jesus I follow, the one I have conviction in, what invited us most, most simply, invited us to just [01:08:00] be the presence of God to other people.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That's it. At a table in the street, at a courtroom, that's all that we were asked to do. And I think that what colonialism wants to do,

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): mm-hmm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Is to tell us that that's actually not what God calls us to. Right. What colonialism tries to do is to tell us that Christianity is about, um, creating clubs of people who are superior to other people. Mm-hmm. Who are detached from the needs of other people, who are concerned exclusively with that kind of personal piety and personal salvation that disconnects you from community.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I think that's antithetical

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Absolutely. Absolutely.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: To what the gospel is and what Christianity is.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): And, and just blasphemy, if we could.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: It is.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: It makes an idol.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Ooh, wow. What an incredible [01:09:00] conversation. I wanna end us with the question of who is your cloud? Mm-hmm. Who, who is part of your cloud of witnesses?

Where is that fount of restoration? When you need reminders of who you are, where you come from, what you believe, who are those ancestors? Be they blood, family, cultural references, theologians, who makes that up for you?

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I was, found myself this week really drawn to Fania All Stars. Like, um, for those of you who may not be familiar or maybe too young, for the Fania All Stars, uh, or do not understand that Fania All Stars was a recording studio from New York that made salsa music, made New York based salsa music

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Okay.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Uh, from like the seventies, eighties, into the mid nineties, and it had an orchestra called the Fania All Stars. And it [01:10:00] basically was an orchestra that profiled every single recording artist.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That the Fania recording company had, and they toured together. People like Ruben Blades, people like Willie Willie Colon.

Right? Like people like Hector Lavoe were all part of Fania All Stars.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Willie Colon and Ruben Blades have an album called Siembra.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, which is beautiful. The beautiful album. Um, and there's a song, this, this, the title song of that album called Siembra is, it's all

about the, the beginning is like siembra, if you wanna have, if you want a community, you gotta, you gotta sow love you gotta sow compassion.

You gotta sow empathy that if you don't sow these things then you cannot have, you're not gonna reap the things you want. Like you sow the things that you wanna see in the world. That's why you have to sow the love of nation.

[01:11:00] You have to sow the love of people. This amazing, amazing song. Wow. And so when I think about my, my ancestors, I think about that song often as sort of the soundtrack that accompanies it.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I think about people like my, my great-granddad who for better or worse, like, he was like a, a assistant to the, to the colonizers. He was like the evangelist, the first that became a Protestant. And yet, every person that I've ever met who, who knew my great-granddad loved him because of his profound compassion.

And I think about my grandparents, um, as people who were incredibly flawed humans.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Who lived lives of profound moral righteousness.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And were broken in so many ways by, by colonial occupations, by war, by poverty. And yet [01:12:00] we're just incredible people.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: That's gonna make me feel super emotional now.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes. That's really important for us to hold together. And I think we discard sometimes our people when we shouldn't.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Oh no. A hundred percent. Yeah. And I, you know, I, um,

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Take your time.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I, I think about right, like, um, I think about like my, my uncles who have passed. Uh, I think about, um. My, uh, this woman that I, that I, when I was growing up, took care of us to help my grandmother who worked as a seamstress. So she worked 12, 14 hours a day. So that there was this woman in the neighborhood, who was a [01:13:00] spiritualist.

We, we helped her clean her saints. Right. Like her barias, so people would pay her

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: For her to do, um, to do, uh, to, to put in through petitions, uh, under their name. And she's a part of my crowd of witnesses, right? Yes. That, that belief in the, in the, the spirit of ancestors and in the spiritual realm.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Uh, I think of people like my dad, um, yes. Who, who has passed on and, and, um, his commitment to seeing people.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Um, yeah. To me they are, um, uh. Maybe the way to say this is that when I think of my spiritual ancestors, I think of they deposited seeds. Mm. They are the people who gave me a garden. Yes. And [01:14:00] I am the person who gets to be stewarding all that has been deposited. For, in good ways and not so good ways.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes. Weeding as well as

Jessica Vazquez Torres: I'm I and i'm Exactly. And there are some things that gotta be ripped out of there because they're not useful.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And there are new things that I'm trying to put in there

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: For the ancestor that I will become to others.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Mm.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Uh and so yeah. My, my spiritual ancestors are, are, are the Fannie All Stars are all of this great cloud of witnesses of my family that have moved on.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yeah.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I also think that there are spiritual ancestors that are living. Uh, as sisters that are, are in the making, right? Like they're, they are, uh, folks like my former colleague Ann Stewart, who's spirituals grounded so much of my twenties and thirties as we collaborated, as she as [01:15:00] an elder now, and, and, you know, continues to, in a more limited way, do amazing work upholding community and, and, um, and I think of folks that whose, whose ancestry to mine is teaching me actively how to be an ancestor to others.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Yes.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I, I'm grateful for that. I, you know, what it means to be a 1.5 generation is to be a bridge. And when I think about who the spiritual cloud I'm connected to and who the spiritual cloud that is coming, and how will will I be a pathway in between these places?

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: And I don't come from a tradition that does ancestor recognition.

Right. We are not an ancestor people necessarily in our, in our spirituality. The colonizer took that away. Yeah. Um, but I believe that, I believe that the world, that the veil between this world and the other is thinner than we give a credit for. Yes. And so [01:16:00] the ancestor that for me, the cloud of witnesses, that image of ala witnesses is this very thin, constantly intermingling thin space. Where ancestors, through us, connect to this world and the ancestors that are becoming through us connect to that world. Wow. And that we are the embodiment of the gift of both of those things.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Wow. Yes. Thank you for sharing that, and thank you for sharing your heart. I feel like one of my driving passions in trying to discern what is my path and what is right is that deep desire and hope that I

be a worthy ancestor. Mm-hmm. That someone else will talk about in the way that you talk about yours, like not perfection, you know, deeply flawed as a being in this body, trying to make my way, but that the things that I plant will [01:17:00] make the earth better. And I mean that in terms of like the literal earth and in terms of, yeah, literally our spiritual homes and our lineages, and it matters.

And so I'm just grateful for your tenderness and openness around that because it connects us, again, circling back to the idea of home and mm-hmm. This space just in this hour together has felt like home. And I'm just really grateful for your presence and your time. Thank you. And sharing your brilliance.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for being here.

Jessica Vazquez Torres: Thank you. Thank you so much. Really appreciate you all.

Reverend Sex (Rev. Alba Onofrio): Thank you for joining us today for Teología Sin Vergüenza. I'm Reverend Alba Onofrio, but you can call me Reverend Sex. Let us know what resonated for you from today's conversation, and make sure to like, subscribe and share this episode with someone in your life who might need it.

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