

Shameless Theology

S2:02 - When Faith Becomes Control: Puerto Rico's Christian Colonial History with Yolanda Santiago-Correa, Part 1

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 00:08

Welcome to Shameless Theology, a space for honest, courageous conversations with queer, trans, and feminist people of faith and our allies. This podcast is brought to you by Soulforce, who is an international organization working to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTQIA plus people and all marginalized people by breaking open the ideologies of white Christian supremacy. I'm Reverend Alba Onofrio, also known as Reverend Sex. I'm the Executive Director at Soulforce, and I am honored and delighted to be your host as we dive into the thick of it.

This season is exciting because it goes deep on the ideas of our brand new book called Spiritual Violence, Religious Phenomena That Defile the Faith. Together we'll learn new concepts like spiritual trauma, religious abuse, spiritual terrorism, white Christian supremacy, and spiritual violence. Together we name the harm, not as abstract theories, but as lived realities. But we don't stop there because theory work is only as good as the path it leads to healing, and we'll be doing plenty of that too. These conversations are part idea session, part theological reflection, and part testimony.

You'll hear stories of resilience, liminality, code switching, theological imagination, and a kind of dogged persevering hope that refuses to let go of the sacred, even when our institutions fail us. Whether you're here because you have questions, or because you are healing, teaching, leading, or simply trying to make sense of your own experience, you are so very welcome here. You are not alone on this journey. Now let's get down to business, and pleasure, with Shameless Theology. Today we're talking about spiritual violence, not as an abstract idea, but as lived reality in bodies, churches, and nations.

Our guest, Yolanda Santiago Correa, grew up as a pastor's kid in Borinquen, who now does religious scholarship at the intersections of race, religion, and colonialism. In this conversation, she helps us name the embedded dependency between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, and how Christianity has been woven into that story in ways that shape Puerto Rican racial imagination and religious practice. One of my favorite things about Yolanda is that she always encourages us to keep asking questions, demanding that we move beyond reductive ways of thinking and into taking responsibility for ourselves, our communities, and our faith.

We're going to share this conversation in two parts. So today, we'll talk about spiritual violence as it relates to Puerto Rico's forced reliance on the United States, along with the historical entanglement of colonialism and Christianity. And then we'll dig into the messy politics of Latinidad. Yolanda helps us wrap our minds around rejecting binary thinking about purity and belonging, and ask what it might mean to queer the tools we've inherited for understanding race, identity, and faith. From reggaeton to racial gatekeeping, this conversation moves, and it refuses easy answers.

So buckle up, buttercup, because this is a juicy conversation. And without further ado, here is Yolanda Santiago-Correa. I just want to say hi, and thank you so much for being with us today. It's super, super cool to be here. And I am Alba Onofrio. I'm coming to y'all today from Durham, North

Carolina, and tell us where y'all are.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 03:51

Yeah, Yolanda Santiago-Correa, she/her pronouns. I'm coming from Spring Hope, North Carolina. So just about an hour away from where Alba is.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 04:01

Yeah, how about you, Nadia?

Nadia Arellano | 04:03

I am a little bit further away. My name is Nadia. I am in Mexico City. I am very excited for this conversation. I love hearing you talk about your faith and your *sinvergüenzura*. That first time we had a conversation, and I am super excited to delve deeper into spiritual violence and your perspective or your experiences. Because I know there's a lot of it. So, yeah, let's start.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 04:40

Yeah, let's go. OK, so I want to know, like, tell us a little bit about what you're thinking about for your writing for the spiritual violence book. And like, particularly, I thought you would be an amazing fit because you are you have this, like, long formation, both in Christianity and also, like, and it's like cultural resistance that comes out of the most creative, deep beings and also like African ancestry of Caribbean peoples. And so I'm like, you throw all this stuff together in a pot and make it look like this is what makes sense to me.

And so for a lot of our folks, maybe they don't know how Puerto Rico has been colonized, particularly in connection with Christianity. And a lot of folks don't even they're like, oh, it's a territory. It's like that's a colony. That is a colony. And we understand this as we understand the US as a colonizing. Yeah. So I want to just check in, like, tell us where you are, what you're thinking at this moment, wherever you want to start.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 05:41

I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. And then after I finished college, I moved to North Carolina for divinity school with the intention to go back. And I didn't go back. It'll be 10 years this August since I left. And I didn't go back because the opportunity opened for doctoral work. And so I'm finishing now a Ph.D. in religion and culture. And I took the opportunity precisely because a lot of as I was doing my end to end of and this was between 2015 and 2018.

So you can kind of imagine politically what was going on in the United States. And I was in the US South. It was my first time living in the United States. I had never lived outside of Puerto Rico. And so, like, that's what I came into. And so it was a very intense experience. I was only 21 years old. And so I was also very young. And so coming into that, I feel like divinity school ended up creating a lot more questions for me than a Ph.D.

seemed like a good opportunity to explore and not only explore, but then also like answer. Not not because I had the answer, but because I realized that there is a very specific notion of what Puerto Rico is or what Puerto Ricans are in the United States that is very misinformed and that a lot of time it's standing on very specific stereotypes of what it means to be what it was, what it means to look

like about equal, like how we move in the world and the privileges that we have, which is very important to note that we are very privileged because we do have U.S.

citizenship by birth. But that is much more complicated than just saying that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens. There's a story of colonialism.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 07:29

Tell us about that.

Nadia Arellano | 07:30

Yeah.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 07:30

So Puerto Rico has never been free since the colonial times. And that's very important for me to always say, because I think that forms the imagination of Puerto Ricans in and outside the archipelago in a very particular way. So 1493, the Spanish came. They say it's Christopher Columbus. There is historical evidence that he actually never stepped on the island. But that's, you know, Spain was there. Yeah. We were colonized by Spain. And then in 1898, we were granted as a as a like war prize to the United States.

Obviously, there's more complicated, you know, points to that. But the gist is that. And since then, we've been a property of the United States. And so it's been more than 130 years at this point. And through all of that, we've gone through different periods, right, of recolonization, even though we've always been under that colonial power. And so citizenship was part of that. It was during the war. And so there's there's running theories that part of the the reasoning behind it was precisely so Puerto Ricans could go into the U.S.

military. And so you have scholars of Puerto Rican history that suggest that like that this was also part of the project is sending Puerto Ricans with this idea of like belonging to fight for the United States and die. People from the U.S. could come back as heroes and then the Puerto Rican would never come back. And so there's like the sacrificial lamb. Yeah, exactly. And people have contested this, but but I think it's it's important to know, right, that there's complications, that it's not that simple.

And that since the beginning, especially under the colonial rule of the United States, like Christianity and religion have been at the forefront of the U.S. project, colonial project, and that all of the decisions that are made over Puerto Rico have always had that undertone. So you can see, for example, during the text of the of 1898, the Spanish-American war, there were pastors in the United States preaching about what the United States taking over Puerto Rico and using the passages that refer to Joshua and taking over the land.

And like once God gives them this land, you know, it'll be ours. And the sort of like everything that you step on, that sort of rhetoric and saying like this is not only just politics, this is our divine right to a land that these people who are there, who are, you know, underdeveloped, dumb, lazy, all of these things don't have the like humanity, mental capacity to really take advantage of, appreciate whatever you want to say. And so it is the U.S.'s divine task to take over and wants to take it to never let it go.

And so you see that rhetoric repeated with like, you know, forced sterilization of women during a big time where women were being forced sterilized without their knowledge. And you see it in different iterations. And we're seeing it now with massive gentrification where people from the United States are coming and buying property. And and there has been explicit messaging from the Puerto Rican government saying, you know, we dream of a Puerto Rico when there is no Puerto Ricans. And so and that's been heavily backed up by Christian supremacist, you know, rhetoric.

And so it's really important that it became really important to me as I kept kind of having this conversation about Puerto Rico and understanding and seeing how people really did not know anything about about this tiny island and all of their point of reference to us was reggaeton or very specific like people in the public eye. Yeah. Then it became real important to me to also like do that work for myself and for my people, but also to say, like, no, we like if we're going to talk about Latinidad as a project, which is another thing, then we really need to talk very well about like what it means and not only for Puerto Rico, but for other places.

You know, it's not a monolith. We need to be specific and understand that each of us, like even within the same countries, like it can be really different if you come from the mountain than if you come from the city or if you come from the jungle or, you know. And so it was really important for me to do that work as I was being confronted by question. And so to sort of challenge the notion that the United States population, both within and outside of theological education, have about Puerto Rico, about Latinos, about the Caribbean and about the U.S.

and sort of like what the U.S. is doing for us, Puerto Ricans. Newsflash, they're not doing a lot. And I think we maybe the general population of the U.S. saw that much more after Hurricane Maria.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 12:40

But I wanted to say, like a lot of times Christianity gets used as an excuse to colonize places historically because of indigenous practices and religious spiritualities in that place. It's like, well, they need to be converted to Christianity. But in the case of Puerto Rico, it was already Christian. So it wasn't like it was like these are these like indigenous religions that we have to like squash out in the name of Jesus. It was like already Christian when the U.S. colonized Puerto Rico.

And I don't know if you can tell us more about this, but I feel like the most important moment of impact for me around white Christian supremacy and how it functioned on Puerto Rico in particular was this map that exists where it's like of the Protestant churches. Yeah. And it's like got all for people who haven't seen this, like it's got literally the map of Puerto Rico and like little boxes, like it's like a grid almost. And each box is assigned a different denomination and denominations that like are generally justice seeking or like denominations like Disciples of Christ and like the Quakers.

And like they are literally assigned a piece of Puerto Rico. And I remember visiting the Levitt's there and literally it's like a line of like this town, San Sebastian, has this is, you know, Presbyterian because the Presbyterians were assigned that chunk of land literally to colonize. And like that's still true a lot today in that. So do you do you know the map I'm talking about?

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 14:14

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I do. I do. I have the picture somewhere. I can share it if you ever want to keep it. Yeah. So it's really interesting. So I'm not a historian by trade, but but that's always been something that really interesting because another part of that, of this, of my story that sort of gets me into this is that I'm a pastor's kid. My mom is an ordained minister of the Methodist Church. My dad was an ordained elder as well until he passed.

And I'm an only child. I grew up sort of in that, you know, my mom became a pastor first. Her first appointment she got 25 years ago. So I was like five, six years old. Yeah. And then my dad became a pastor right after. But even before they became ordained ministers, they were active leaders in the church. And so ever since I was born, sort of that was my life. But because my life was within a pastoral family, I also got, I don't know if you want to call it privilege or not, you can sort of decide of seeing a lot of the backstage, like operational, very institutional ways that churches work.

And because of that, like I caught wind of things like this very early and was kind of in that conversation as well. And so, yeah. So this map, I don't know the specific year, but you can find online after, you know, the United States was taking over, which is another thing that's really interesting. So you mentioned, right, Puerto Rico was already Christian, but it was Catholic. And so it's really interesting that in Puerto Rico's case, you see that in other places of Latin America, Catholicism predominates very intensely in terms of the Christian faith.

And in Puerto Rico, although the Catholic church is very strong and Catholic practices had also bled into our cultural practices, which is another thing that we can talk at another time. Protestantism and especially Pentecostalism took hold very, very intensely. And part of it initially was that the heads of the Protestant churches met at that point. I don't know if there were bishops or anything, I don't, don't quote me on this, but it was just sort of the people who were assigned and it was not only connected to them, divided the island in terms of ministry, but it was also I learned about land ownership.

So it was also connected to the specific businesses that were in each area. So what were the specific like agricultural like things that were being grown? Was it sugar? Was it agriculture? Was it the cities, you know, and the education? What what was the thing? So it was more than just like proselytizing or evangelizing. It also had a business and sort of political and economic reasoning behind it, which is really interesting. And so they sat down around the table and they looked at a map and they split it in parts.

And it's like all the Methodists are going to go here and all the disciples of Christ are going to go here and the Baptists are going to go here. And so the interesting thing is that when Pentecostalism came, it took Puerto Rico by storm, but it did not really like alter sort of the holds that these denominations have over specific areas. And so even though the influence of Pentecostalism is wide and it has like not only strengthened Pentecostal churches and movements, but also influence, you know, these mainline denominations to the point where as a Methodist myself, when I moved to the United States and interacted with Methodism here, I was just like, yeah, this is weird.

I don't like this. They were like, oh, Methodists don't do that. And I was like, well, maybe not in the U.S., but I know a lot of Methodists that do this. So, yeah. But beyond that, like it's state. And so you can still sort of see the remnants of that. So, for example, La Iglesia Metodista Methodist Church

was the north. And so in Arecibo, in one of the towns, there's 14 Methodist churches in a single town. And so you can kind of still see the echoes of this decision that was made and that even though things have shifted over time and everything, like it's sort of the colonial and history, like the echoes of it are still there and you kind of can still see the skeletons of of churches deciding to to do that and it being motivated by more than just, you know, their perceived divine, you know, task of evangelizing people out of Catholicism because of whatever perspectives or perceptions they had about the Catholic Church.

It was also economic and it was also in the interest of connecting back to the establishment of institutions and all of that, and feeding back into U.S. politics and white nationalism and supremacy and all of that.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 19:18

Right, because, like, I've spent a little bit of time on the island, but my biggest experience, as they said on the island, which I found to be exactly true, just hanging out with people on farms and stuff is like you can they said you can stick your thumb in the ground and plant a seed and literally anything will grow because the soil is such a fertile land. And yet what the people imports, like, I don't know, 85, 90 percent of its food.

And it's like that is that like economic dependency model that makes it so it seems like the U.S. is offering like we're taking care of Puerto Rico who can't take care of themselves. But it's this embedded dependency model that makes that's like built into a Christian like motif of charity and care.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 20:08

And yeah, and it's like that across everything, you know, because it's it's the it's the you can tell, you know, with agriculture, it's the case. And yeah, I think if I'm not mistaken, I might be wrong, but I think in total, if there was ever a crisis and we couldn't import food, I think there's enough food in Puerto Rico for like two weeks for everybody to eat and then it would be done. There will be no more food because in case you don't know, there's some there's laws that impede Puerto Rico from receiving anything from anything anywhere that is not any ships that is not the U.S.

And so, for example, if a product that we are getting is from Colombia and Puerto Rico, it did not come directly to us from Colombia. It goes from Colombia to the U.S. to get a change to a U.S. boat and then come back to Puerto Rico. So we paid double the taxes.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 21:01

Yeah, and that's what happened with even relief for things like hurricane.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 21:05

Yeah, yeah. And so it was only lifted for 14 days. So La Ley Foraker, the Jones Act, all of these, you can kind of do your research. It was lifted for 14 days under the previous Trump administration and then it was closed down again. And so there was a lot of aid that didn't excuse me, didn't get to make it to the island that a lot of countries were wanting to send stuff but were unable to. And then on top of that, a lot of it got went to waste.

And so you can there's still pictures, aerial pictures of like water and food and all sorts of like medical resources that would send that weren't distributed for whatever reason. And they went to waste. And so 4,000, almost 5,000 people died during Hurricane Maria or because of the direct effects of the hurricane. And a lot of them could have been avoided if infrastructurally we were better. But but as I'm saying, like it's everywhere, you know, it's the same situation that we're having with the privatization of electrical energy in Luma, where there is projects that have been done to research that says that Puerto Rico could potentially run fully on renewable energy.

And that's because of the sun, right, the amount of sun that we get during the year because we're an island, there's no winter or not in the same way that everyone else. But also because archipelago surrounded by water. So you have hydroelectric systems that could potentially like run a full island on a renewable electrical grid. But obviously that doesn't benefit U.S. interests. It doesn't benefit like political interest in Puerto Rico because that's the other thing that goes into all of this is that the colonial mentality is so strong and influences so much that you can not only blame people from the United States or governments from the United States.

You also have to look at how Puerto Ricans themselves, especially Puerto Ricans in power, have adopted this mentality and have fed into this colonial matrix of power and see themselves as active members of this sort of utopic Puerto Rico with no Puerto Ricans. And so, like, if you ever caught wind of what was happening in 2019 in Puerto Rico with Governor Ricky Rosselló at that point and how he was taken down from the office by the people, by the people. Yeah.

Part of what motivated or a big like what motivated that was the public, the sharing of a chat, a private chat where they were, you know, admitted to all sorts of things. And among all of those like crimes and messages and all sorts of things that they were saying, you know, derogatory things, sexist things, homophobic things, racist things, all of that. There was a message that I believe it was Edwin Miranda who said, like, you know, I saw the future and it was beautiful.

There was a Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans and this is a Puerto Rican man. But he like is feeding into that into that mentality of like it's detaching from Puerto Rico as an identity and seeing themselves as like outside of that or or wanting to redeem that in a way that like extracts from it, you know, any sort of trace of anything other that is not whiteness and sort of the United States and all of this. And so to me, it's mind boggling because then you have all of these messages that clearly tells you that the U.S.

does not care about Puerto Rico, like most of its inhabitants, especially its government, don't care. Like you have, you know, examples of this comedian a couple of months ago that said that Puerto Rican was a floating island of garbage and all of these things that clearly message that this dream that they've been sold is literally just like a dream meant to co-opt the mentality of the people. And yet they're still like, no, we're going to get there. You know, we're going to it's going to be better, you know, and they're going to help us and they're going to save us.

And a lot of that rhetoric comes from Christianity, unfortunately.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 25:24

Yeah. And that seems like it's connected to what I hear a lot of times with Latinos, Latinas and Latinas who come to the U.S. of like in the countries that we come from, we are not Latino, Latina, Latina, like that doesn't exist. We are Puerto Rican. We are Colombian. We are Mexican, whatever. And then we come here and there's something that I feel really passionately about is this absorption of that thing that or like you get labeled this thing that's cultural.

But if you like fit on this end of the spectrum, then you assimilate to whiteness with this promise of the American dream that is very connected with like prosperity, gospel, like God blessing us as good people. And if you don't fit into that, you get put in this category of black or some other form of non whiteness. And that's really shocking for a lot of folks who are like, I mean, in many years of being in community, it's just like I was never any of this over there and now I am.

And there's this project to like literally put this cultural label of like Hispanic or whatever. But really, it's this like now we're racialized into these categories that don't make any damn sense. And it allows for whiteness to swallow up huge pieces of us that then makes so many of us vote against our own best interests and against our community's best interests because we're doing this assimilation model. And I remember like. Having another conversation with Guyla from the Afro-Latina Theology Project, where she was like there was this moment where I realized like.

Oh, God can love me as a black woman, like as a Latina and a black woman, and this like imposed idea that God was white forever, like forever without us even knowing. And that kind of weird like doesn't fit racial stuff, but that like has so many of our people colluding with white supremacy. And it sounds like exactly what you were saying about this elected official being like Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans, even though that person is Puerto Rican.

Nadia Arellano | 27:37

Yeah.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 27:37

And very weird thing. Right.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 27:40

Yeah. I feel like the sort of identity politics of Latinidad itself are just like such an interesting thing, because even when you're saying like and, you know, and I think about my experience in Puerto Rico, it's not even about like, oh, I was there, I was Puerto Rican. Not even like it's just about what town are you from? Like you talk to people and it's like, oh, de donde tu eres? De Bayamon, de Ponce, you know, and it's the same for other people.

You know, I've interacted with people from Mexico and it's like, oh, yo soy de Mexico, but they would be like, yo soy Oaxaqueño, yo soy Sonorense, like it's very important to claim that specific thing, because, again, not a monolith. And then you get here and Latino becomes this thing. Right. And I say Latino specifically with an O, with a purpose. And it becomes like Latino. And this is sort of the thing, you know, mi gente Latino sort of mentality. And it's just totally homogenous.

Yeah. And so now you have to feed into here and you have to sort of accustom to this existence. And depending on where you are in the United States, that might mean that you are not even

represented by that sort of Latino brought in mentality, because like, for example, I live in North Carolina now and lived before, but I lived in Texas for five years. And in Texas, the predominantly Latinx culture in Texas is Mexican. Amazing does not represent anything that I am.

And so every time people would be like, oh, we're celebrating Latinos. And then I walk into a room and it's mariachi and papel picado and tamales and pique. I'm like, I love this business, not celebrating me at all. I do not relate to this. I did not learn any of this until I came to the United States. So my point of reference in interaction with this culture is the same as you, as any other person who is non-Mexican. And so the same, you know, it can be said true for people who go to the North.

And it's like it's full of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. And so, for example, somebody from Paraguay maybe goes there and they're like, this is not like I don't eat mofongo, I don't eat mangú, I don't like.

Nadia Arellano | 29:47

There's no other words.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 29:49

Exactly. And the expectation is like there's this umbrella that came because of the census. Right. So we got Latino because the census needed. To put all of these people under who because again of the colonial history of Latin America, we're not identifying themselves as black and or definitely not as black or we're identifying themselves as white and the white people are like, wait, but they're not. They're not white and so they need another category. So Latinidad is a colonial project. I'm sorry if that makes you upset.

Just FYI, it is. And it's a homogenizing project, right? Because it's a project that is erasing all of these differences, even within countries themselves, cultures within countries themselves, and then saying we all fit into this model. And because we're all seeking the American dream, what is hidden under that is projects of blanqueamiento, right? And you see that in history where it's like each of our generations is lighter than the previous and more disconnected than the previous until that is gone.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 30:54

And that's a good thing.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 30:56

Yes, and that is a great thing, right? It's the thing that we aspire to because that means progress. It means access. It means more money. It means jobs. And so, and the problem is that, again, it becomes really complicated because we can't necessarily police. For example, I interact with students who are like, ah, my parents no me enseñaron español, right? I don't speak Spanish. I only speak English, blah, blah, blah. And it's like, yeah. And also we can't necessarily police their decision because they're living into a reality where they know that you are persecuted for speaking Spanish.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 31:28

That's still a thing-speaking English without an accent.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 31:28

Exactly. And so it's how that becomes necessary and how we don't clock that as we are trying to survive, we're also feeding into that project. As we're trying to kind of get further, like do stuff for our people, we also end up like working in favor of all of these things like, you know, with *Latinidad*, with *mestizaje*, you know, with the use of the word brown. And it's like, oh, we're all brown. It's like, no, we're not all brown. You know, what are you saying when you say that?

Like, we're not all mixed people. And like, what is behind us failing to claim black when we are black? So saying, no, no, no, yo soy brown. It's like, okay, so anti-blackness first. And then second of all, where are we failing also in terms of like exploring what is happening when Latinos who are light skinned or are white are like, no, I'm brown. And it's like, no, it doesn't make you any less Latino, but you do benefit from being a white person and moving in the world in that way.

But we were like, we're not comfortable with that conversation again, because we have been fed this rhetoric of like, you might not be white, but at least you're not black like the black persons. So we're a minoritized community, African Americans or Africans themselves. And then we're like, and because you're not here, you get to keep aspiring because at some point, you know, seven generations into the future, 10, it'll get to a point where your kids will be white. And you'll get to thank God because you did that.

And so we have representations, for example, like there's this painting in Brazil. I'm trying to remember the name. If it comes to me, I'll say it. But it's this grandmother, black, visibly black woman. And then her daughter is mixed and marries a white man and her grandchild is white. And so it's a picture of all of them. And she's sort of like lifting her hands in praise, because we like in three generations, they erased the blackness. So you have a very visibly black mother, a mixed daughter, and then a white grandchild.

So it's like three generations, we achieved it, we did it. And so it's like, that's what's behind it, right? It's wanting to do that. And how all of these other things like patriarchy, anti-blackness, anti-indigeneity, you know, racism, ableism, all of these things fit into that same project. And we continue to play into it. And Christianity is a big tool of that, unfortunately.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 34:15

Yeah, and it's complicated. So complicated. Because for me, for example, as half Colombian, half Appalachian, white, Southern Mountain, whatever, it's like, for those of us not raised in community or not, who don't speak Spanish or who don't know the food or who aren't in any kind of hub of community, *Latinidad* for me was the way that I understood what was happening to me. In a Scotch-Irish context, where I was always the dark one. And that is a very different thing than in Miami, where I'm like, way on the light side, could be white, whatever.

And so that's really complicated. And also the *Latinidad* of like, I'm trying to figure out, and this is a little bit adjacent, but I think it has to do with this Latin American and US as its diaspora of Latin America conversation. Or when we talk about white Christian supremacy and spiritual violence, it's like, they're all these folks that I talk to who because they don't speak Spanish, or because they don't know the food, or because they aren't connected with their home country, or with their *madre tierra*, through family lines, are like, I guess I'm just white, so I'm just going to be white.

And it's like, your ancestors are not happy about this. I am very committed that your ancestors want to be claimed also. But doing that, where our only option in this frame is Latinidad, which was literally constructed for this assimilationist project, that's where that stuff gets really complicated. So I'm always trying to think about like, how do we capture more of our white Latinos back? It's okay that you don't speak Spanish. It's okay that you've never been home. It's okay. Those things don't make the blood that runs through your veins any less connected to where you come from.

It just means we have work to do. And especially when I'm going to deal with the thought into a narrative of improving anything about our race, our culture, our family, our people, whatever. And it's like, so it's a super complicated conversation because we use the tools we have. But also, we got to clear the tools because that was exactly what you say of like, so many folks that I have in community, like newly arrived immigrants who come from the Caribbean, particularly Dominican Republic, and they're like, what do you mean African American?

Right? Because in the US South, there is no context for Latinos apart from Mexican in general. And so it's like, you don't fit the only category of white, Black, Mexican is Black. And then we have all these conversations, right? And so it's like, that imperialist project clearly does not fit at all. But then Christianity kind of comes and is like, we're all one in Christ.

Yolanda Santiago-Correa | 37:08

Yeah, and it's complicated, because then you have also conversations about ways in which there's also the gatekeeping of Blackness in the United States. And saying like, oh, you know, Black people from the United States, African Americans, don't want Latinos to claim Black. And it's like, yes. And also, there's a history of anti-Blackness within the Latinx community. So there's also a distrust that is totally fair. Because it's like, why are you wanting to utilize this? Do you understand the history of what it means to be Black in the United States?

Because if you do get racialized that way, the people who are racist don't really care what language you speak. And that's not their point of reference, right? They don't care. They don't. So it's also like our responsibility as well to understand that when we're coming into the United States. And at the same time, to fight against that. Because I think what this goes back to, which also connects to Christianity, is the concept of purity, right? And it's like, there's pure categories that we must fit into, right?

And that has to do with gender, has to do with race, it has to do with everything. And so it's like, there is this box, and you must fit in there, because we need, and it's also an impulse, a human impulse that our brains have, this is my psychology major coming through, we like to see patterns, right? We recognize patterns, our brains are wired to recognize patterns. And so because of that, that has fed into our social operations. And so socially, we're like, we need the pattern, right?

I need a category, I need a word, I need the thing. And so the concept of purity comes into that. And so then it's like, it's a colonial project, but we don't have anything for children who are mixed and don't get to like purely say, I was born in this country, or I speak this language, or I belong to this indigenous place. It's like, no. So then how do we expand our conversation to see how we are being gatekeepers, how we are essentializing certain things, and at the same time, place emphasis on how important it is to, if you don't have those things, make the effort to try to return to them, not because they will make you more Latino or less or whatever, but because this is part of preservation

against the colonial project that's seeking to erase it.

How do we reframe that and also fight against this notion of purity that is misinterpreted, right, from the concept of Christianity, that is also influencing you because you're being shown a Christ who was white. And so I always think about children, right? And I was, again, I'm very privileged because as two parents that are ministers, I get to have a lot of these conversations with a lot of nuance early. And so I feel like some of these things didn't affect me in the same way.

And so I need to recognize that publicly, because that was a privilege, right? There were certain protections that I had from spiritual violence and religious trauma and all of that because of, like, my parents' own commitments in their role. But, you know, think of the mind of children. Children are very literal. And so if you are being like, *este Jesu*, right, and you're showing them a Jesus that is white, and then you're like, you know, we are all created in the image of Christ, because this Christ is holy.

And then you look at a picture of this Christ, and this Christ looks nothing like you. Cognitively, that has an effect, because it's like, the divine doesn't look like me, the divine looks like this person. And so that means that if I don't have it, I need to make sure that my future generations have it, and that they can be closer to the divine. And so you have whole books from, especially the African American community in the United States, that are talking about, like, what does it mean when we racialize Christ a certain way?

And with our stained glass windows, and the pictures that your grandma has in the house, and the coloring books, and the Bibles that are graphically illustrated, that you are shown this Christ is white, with straight hair, you know, and it looks nothing like you. Like, that has an impact, cognitively. And so if you're a child, especially growing up in this tradition, you're like, I'm not created in the image of Christ, it's not for me, because I don't look like them. And then you get fed all of this socially as well, that it's like, oh, and then I'm also like, not fitting into this category purely, because I'm either like, too white, or not white enough, or too black, or like, speak this way, or like, we're centralizing Spanish.

And then you have people who don't even speak Spanish, because they speak like, Quechua, or Nahua, or other languages, or, you know, you have people in Brazil who speak Portuguese, and then it's just like, how does the Latino project also is anti-black in like, a centralizing Hispanic ancestry, and like, *Haiti no importa*, and *Suriname no importa*, and *Brazil no importa*, and *Guyana no importa*, and it's like they're there. If we're talking about Latino, in terms of how they define it as a category, it's about geographical location.

So like, yeah, how do we how do we do that? But again, we're queering it. We need the purity and also the colonial matrix of power needs the purity, because that's what helps with categorizing, that's what helps with, you know, all of the rhetoric that we're seeing politically right now, especially in the context of the United States, and sometimes even in Latin America itself, where it's just like, this is the dream. And you need to do everything religiously, socially, economically, until you can you can get to that point.

Rev. Alba Onofrio | 43:45

Thank you for spending time with us today on this episode of Shameless Theology. I hope you found it both provocative and helpful on your own journey toward healing. These conversations are part of Soulforce's ongoing effort to name harm, honor our lived experiences, and imagine faith beyond violence. If you want to go deeper, you can find a link to our new book called *Spiritual Violence Religious Phenomena that Defile the Faith* here in the show notes. You can also find more information on our website at soulforce.org, where you can download free theological resources designed to support individuals, faith leaders and communities who are navigating religious harm and spiritual reconstruction.

If something in today's dialogue resonated with you, maybe it stirred something and settled something or helped you find language for your own story, then you have found yourself in the right place. Consider sharing this episode with someone who might need it and follow along for future conversations and supplemental content. Whoever you are, and wherever you find yourself in this time-questioning, grieving, rebuilding, or reclaiming-I am so grateful that you are here. May your theological imagination remain ever alive, and may you find spaces that honor your full, blessed humanity.

With hearts ablaze and spirits unyielding, until next time, I'm Rev. Sex, and this is Shameless Theology.