Symbolic Performativity and Contesting Whiteness: A Latinx Perspective on Popular Religiosity and Religious Education

Abstract
This paper seeks to contest white normativity by employing Latinx epistemological categories illustrated in Religiosidad Popular. The performance of whiteness, as often typified by ossification of canon, doctrine, and dogma, is subverted through the symbolic performativity of Latinx popular religious practices where community, relationality, and justice are the main objects of religious education.

Introduction
A theologian, a Catholic school teacher, and a Catholic seminarian walk into a bar. On any other day this opening statement would be the start of an innocuous joke. Yet, in this particular experience, this was a consciousness raising moment where white normativity in theological education manifested in myself and in others. I, the theologian, had been invited by a friend to have drinks at a German bar in Pittsburgh. Coming from New Mexico in pursuit of my PhD, I struggled to adjust to a new culture and new surroundings. I discussed my Abuela's spirituality and the way she did theology in la cortidiano (the everyday). Discussing how I missed the way of doing theology Latinamente, my companions looked sternly at me and said, “What your grandmother was doing is not theology.” I was taken aback. My abuela was an orphan from Juarez, Mexico and came to the U.S. undocumented. She had gone to Mass every Sunday and did a Posada every Christmas. She would put offerings on her ofrenda. She would help teach young men and women to dance traditional Mexican dances at her local Church. She hoped for a better life. Yet to these trained theologians, her theology was not considered valid. They suggested that the height of the normative function of theology is to be a science of definition and canon as promulgated by Leo XIII’s Aeterni Patris. In this document, Thomas Aquinas’ theology as science is set to be normative. I was appalled at their blatant disregard of Latinx theology done in the performative. Yet, upon further reflection I became aware of my own white normativity and how it functioned in my own theological education.

In my undergraduate biblical training I studied through the historical-critical lens made famous by German theologians. In my master’s degree I studied the Resourcement of Catholic thought in the early 20th century also founded by German and French theologians. In my entire undergraduate and master’s career I had only read two books authored by a person of color and no books written by women of color. I realized that my companions that night were only capitulating to the same educational white privileging I had received. Their white normativity,
and mine, had been traditioned and ossified. Such whiteness, as gender, is a performative construct and manifested in the field of religion and religious education, whiteness and Eurocentrism are often wedded to the type of education that is enamored with definition, doctrine, dogma, and canon as a science; leaving no room for my abuela’s theology. One does not have to look too far back in American Academia and Religious Education to see that what was considered normative was to “do theology” in the way of the White European. For example, in order to receive a doctorate in Theology one would have to learn French and German. To perpetuate such a Eurocentric norm in academia is to perform whiteness.

I seek to contest this performativity of whiteness through developing a way of teaching theology that is not based on doctrine, dogma, and canon, but derives from Latinx religious sensibilities, such as my abuela’s: based on symbol, performance, and ritual. Such a religious education does not result in canonical or doctrinal definitions but teaches relationalidad, comunidad, and justicia. I will posit three Latinx religious practices of la posada, ex-voto, and milagritos as examples of a way of doing and teaching theology that takes the student away from the Eurocentric constructions of definition and canon towards a phenomenological and experiential approach to religious education in order to create an alternative performativity in constructing a non-white epistemology through Latinx Religiosidad Popular.

**Constructing and Performing White Normativity**

I identify whiteness as a performance of taking the subjectivity of another person and objectifying them into static categories of identity. The performance of white privilege is rooted in the traditioning of static and totalizing conceptions onto people of color as a means of ossifying one’s own identity, stated in the negative.¹ The performance of negatively stating one’s identity through the objectification of the other’s identity in construction of whiteness is paralleled in religious studies. When one sees the construction of white normativity and white privilege as an attempt to solidify static categories of identity, teaching religion through the attempt of passing on immobile categories of dogma by normalizing Eurocentric theology and marginalizing decolonial performative epistemologies perpetuates the same constructions of white identity. Thus, teaching religion and constructing whiteness are both formed through performance and repetition of what are considered “pure” categories, over and against categories and bodies that are deemed impure. Identity for religious studies and for whiteness rests in the performance of negatively stating one’s identity against another.

The performance of Whiteness as negatively stating one’s identity in opposition to a totalized conception of the other has a long and troubled history in enlightenment thought. As M. Shawn Copeland states, “Indeed, from the eighteenth century until well into the twentieth, their [enlightenment philosophers] ideas about race served to reinforce proslavery attitudes, to sustain

¹ Here I use the same category of Totalization as Emmanuel Levinas in his work *Totality and Infinity*, yet I also argue that Levinas himself totalizes people of color by advocating for an encounter of the face without characteristics thus perpetuating a Eurocentric colorblindness to the marginalization of people of color.
racial segregation and discrimination, and to exert subtle, perhaps devastating influence on metaphysics and ethics. From Kant stating “Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of Talent. The Negroes are lower and the lowest are a part of the American peoples” to Hegel suggesting that Africans are without history and barbarous, enlightenment philosophers have posited their own identity in contradistinction to the superimposed categories they placed on non-Europeans. Not only did these enlightenment philosophers stereotype non-European’s to reinforce their own white supremacy, but they equated such white supremacy with reason itself. Thus, to contest these normative claims of supremacy is to contest reason itself. To contest negative racial representations is to contest the enlightenment’s universal reason as static categories itself.

White supremacy, now internalized as reason, gave rise to new and more subtle institutions to preserve “whiteness”. Halley, Eschleman, and Vijaya discuss that once slavery was dissolved, the South became more obsessed with racial purity as a static category. Going so far as instituted the “one drop of blood rule.” Where once someone knew they were white because they were not a slave, the abolishment of slavery threatened that negative structure of identity. Racial purity laws, therefore, went so far as to suggest that if a person had 1/35th amount of non-white blood in their veins, they were not considered white. According to Halley, Eschleman, and Vijaya “In other words, U.S. courts defined ‘white’ through a process of . . . systematically identifying who was non-White.” Now that overt racism is no longer socially acceptable, new forms of what have been called colorblind racism has taken their place in which Whites, subtly blamed marginalized communities and individuals for what are perceived to be social failures. This structural racism suggests that it is the marginalized communities own fault for not working hard enough to overcome disadvantages. Today’s racism is preconditioned by the ideas civil rights legislation has ended racism, policies that are created to “level” the playing field are no longer needed, and that a lack of success is a result of a failure of, “racial groups to

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take advantage of the opportunities that exist.”

Ideas of white identity as being pure are subtly connected to privilege and deservedness. One essentially knows one is white because their rewards are based on hard work without recognizing the privilege afforded to them by the systematic advantages afforded to them by white supremacy. The outright bifurcation of who is in and who is out is supplanted with subtle and subconscious biases that re-substantiate systems of oppression. The performance of whiteness as tradition is thus internalized into a cultural construct meant to advantage one group, however “innocently” over another.

If one were to take the methodology of traditioning totalizing principles on the basis of a negative affirmation of identity, (e.g., one is White through arguing that one is not Black or Latinx), then such a method of negative identification and ossification itself becomes a performance of white normativity. The process in which one attempts to pass down ossified categories of identity are in fact a performance of normalization of whiteness. Moving such a performance of white normativity and imagined constructions of race into the realm of religious education thus means that the parallel method of defining doctrine, clarifying canon, and ossifying dogma as science is itself a method of white normativity. If as Mikulich suggests that, the persistent legacy of racism and White privilege shapes the way Americans conceive and perceive race, as well as the way they use social, political, and economic power to delimit “who is who, who belongs and who does not, who deserves what, and who is capable of what”

then the way of passing on religious doctrine as delimiting “who is who, who belongs and who does not, who deserves what, and who is capable of what”, through doctrinal and canonical categories, shares in that same legacy. If religious studies, and particularly Catholic and Christian religious studies comes down to identifying oneself in the negative, as it has often done in the past, then its methodology is the same as white normativity. If one knows they are Catholic because they are not Protestant, Arian, Monophysite, Jansenist, then one recapitulates the same epistemological move as constructions of whiteness where one knows they are white because they are not Black, Hispanic, or Amerindian. Fernando Segovia states, Modern Christian theology has been, by and large, a theology of colonization and its discourse a colonial discours: a theology of ‘we’/center, grounded in western civilization; a theology of enlightenment and privilege, looked upon as far superior to anything that ‘they’/margins could ever produce or aspire to

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8 Robinson, 228.
9 Notice that both Enlightenment constructions of race and Eurocentric theology makes an appeal to science to substantiate their superiority over marginalized communities.
produce; and a theology of hegemony and mission, whereby the
margins could be brought under effective control and raised to the
civilized standards of the west by way of either its North American
or Western European variants.11

When Eurocentric theologies deny the validity of other contexts and posit the universality of European/Euroamerican contexts, then one performs white normativity because the hegemonic need to control identity is identical in universalizing theology and universalizing white experience as normative.

The symptoms of performing whiteness in religious education is that whiteness is universalized and nonwhite communities are contextualized. That is, no matter what seminary, religious studies department, or parochial school, the authors that are considered to have a universal normative claim on theology are white European authors. Authors of color, and much less women of color, are often relegated to the field of contextual theology without the acknowledgement that European and Euro-American Theology is itself contextual. Angelina E. Castagno’s article on “Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness” suggests that teachers often enact colorblind difference and powerblind sameness through performing assumptions of universality over particularity. Performing whiteness in education manifests itself when, “Whiteness pushes us to acknowledge difference in certain small ways (i.e., colorblind difference), but overall it encourages sameness (i.e., powerblind sameness).”12 This is paralleled by paternalistically acknowledging difference in the field of religious studies by offering courses in contextual theology as electives but not letting particular contexts have any normative claims on Eurocentric theologies. When one acknowledges differences but still maintains the same power structures and citational privilege of what authors have normative claim over theology the conversation moves from difference to sameness. Thus, “Multicultural education is intended to highlight, and thus reduce, inequities, but the sameness discourse instead serves to hide such inequities.”13 By suggesting that a certain way doing theology is universally beneficial through the traditioning of doctrines, it necessarily excludes those who are rooted in a culture who exist outside of doctrinal understanding of theological reasoning. Thus, an appeal to colorblind difference by allowing contextual theologies to be taught so long as it does not infringe on the practices of theology proper (meaning Eurocentric theology) only temporarily assuages the problem because it fails to acknowledge its own powerblindness in making universally normative claims of itself. This is not to suggest that universally normative claims themselves should be done away with, but one should acknowledge that by not allowing marginalized communities to make normative claims (especially if one holds to the preferential option of the poor), one increases their marginalization and increases their liminality.

11 Fernando Segovia “In the World but Not of It: Exile as Locus for a Theology of Diaspora” in Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise, eds. Ada Maria Asasi-Diaz and Fernando Segovia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 201.


13 Castagno 113.
Whiteness is the performance of an ideal through systematically defining and categorizing the “nonideal.” Religious studies, whose method is often the same by defining orthodox and heterodox, performs the same whiteness in its institutions and in its method of education. What is needed is an alternative performance of difference and community that attempts to celebrate difference through performing things that seek to not categorize but embrace difference. I suggest that Latinx performative rituals as a means of religious education provides such an alternative performance and epistemology.

**Latinx Alternative Epistemology**

Latinx theologies have long contested the static categories employed by enlightenment empiricism as well as it’s corollary of modern and post-modern thought. Rather than being a theology that embraces individual categories of identity eager to separate what is pure against what is impure and what is ideal from the less ideal, Latinx theologies employ the categories of *Mestizaje, Mulatez*, and *Nepantla*. Virgilio Elizondo posited *Mestizaje* as an epistemological starting point in Latinx theology. 14 *Mestizaje* is, “employed not only as a paradigm of racial diversity, but of all other diversity found in Latino/a communities.”15 When it comes to ethnic identity in the United States, especially for Mexican Americans in the Southwest, one is not Mexican nor are they American, they are in between. Being *Mestizo/a* is to be rejected by one’s country of origin and one’s country of birth. To be *Mestizaje* exists in between. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz further delineates the complexity of in-betweenness by adding the category of *Mulatez* to Latinx theology. 16 Rather than only seeing a push and pull between being Hispanic and being Euroamerican, *Latinidad* is further complicated by the role of slavery in Latinx identity. No longer is there an in-betweenness between Hispanics and Euroamericans, but Latinx community must figure into their identity the fact that much of their culture, identity, and being is interconnected with African identity brought to the Americas via the slave trade. With the mixture of identities at the heart of Hispanic experience, one must add a third category of mixture to understand the pluriform Latinx experience. *Nepantla* as a word, “originates among the indigenous peoples who have contributed to the overall Latinx identity. This Aztec word connotes being in the middle, “that situation,” as anthropologist Jorge Klor de Alva reminds us, “in which a person remains suspended in the middle between a lost or disfigured past and a present that has not been assimilated or understood.”17 *Nepantla* not only includes *Mestizaje*

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and Mulatez identities, but also adds indigeneity in the multilayered identities of Latinx communities. Nepantla requires seeing past binaries and simultaneously having double vision that subverts the static categories of white normativity. As Gloria Anzaldúa stated, "Living between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent."18 Because Mestizaje, Mulatez, and Nepantla deal with the intersections and overlapping of a multiplicity of identities, static categories and ossification of identity stated in the negative is not possible because Mestizaje, Mulatez, and Nepantla exist to subvert identifications based on purity. Because of the interconnected matrices of identity, these Latinx categories become epistemological preconditions for understanding Latinx popular religiosity that blurs the everyday from the divine and that resists the very notions of doctrinification and categorization.

The way the epistemological categories of Mestizaje, Mulatez, and Nepantla are played out in religious practice is through Latinx Religiosidad Popular. Latinx Popular Religiosity, as an alternative epistemology, is rooted in the performative and symbolic and is the praxiological key to subverting identities constructed in the negative. Latinx practices have a distinct history from the history of Catholics coming into the United States from Northern Europe. While Catholics from Northern Europe had been entrenched in doctrinal definitions of Trent as a counter distinctive identity from Protestants, Latinx Catholicism in South America arrived prior to the reformation and retained much of its medieval Iberian character of symbol and rite.19 Rather than a static ossification of categories superimposed onto others, Latinx epistemology is active and open. Through the performance of Latinx Popular Religion, what is taught to the uncatechized are not formulations of in-groups and outgroups. Rather, Latinx Popular Religiosity teaches relationalidad, comunidad, and justicia through the very acts they symbolize. Three examples of Popular religiosity, Las Posadas, Ex-Votos, and Milagritos, illustrate the performative nature and the teaching of relationalidad, comunidad, y justicia of Latinx Catholicism and Latinx religious education.

**Las Posadas**

Las Posadas is a performative Novena of prayers re-enacting the parts of the nativity story of Jesus. More specifically, Las Posadas is the reenactment of pregnant Mary and Joseph looking for a room at the inn (Posada). Usually, both Mary and Joseph are performed by a young person in the community. Mary and Joseph lead a procession from house to house and reenact the rejection from not having a vacancy in the inn. While processing from house to house a song is

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sung from the perspectives of Mary, Joseph, and the Judeans who reject them. The goal of the Posada is to educate the participants in both the Nativity story and more importantly in identifying with Mary and Joseph as pilgrims in search for a place to stay. In performing the ritual act of the Posada, the participants of the procession walk the footsteps of Mary and Joseph with them. The ritual song says to Mary, “We are walking, following the footprints, all who are asking, who is that star?...What a happy road is seen in this land; all of us kneeling are with her.”

20 The performance, especially for the Latinx community is not just a game, or a play, but rather a prayer where one experiences the rejection of Mary and Joseph. One does not just learn the story of Mary and Joseph and their rejection from the Judeans, one lives the story and experiences the rejection themselves. When Mary and Joseph finally find a place to stay in a lowly manger, one lives the moment of joy and rest alongside Mary and Joseph. According to Miguel de La Torre, “for many walking in solidarity with the Holy Family, they are doing more than simply reenacting the familiar biblical story. As increased homelessness and immigration restrictions disproportionately impact our barrios, the story reenactment reminds participants of the challenge of providing a home for all.”

21 Such performativity of the nativity story plays three roles in religious education. It first teaches the nativity story to the younger community. As an activity of community formation, the parish community caminan con Jesús, María, y José to form a universal community of journeying pilgrims. Walking the streets alongside Mary and Joseph, and if one is particularly fortunate, a live donkey, allows for students to commit the Posada into long-term memory and make them part of the story. Second, the Posada allows one to experience the emotions felt through the rejection of Mary and Joseph because one explicitly identifies them in their rejection. A relationship is formed between Mary, Joseph, and Jesus with the congregation that surpasses metaphor but constitutes a real relationship with the divine. Third, and most importantly, the Posadas function as moral formation to show hospitality to the stranger. According to Ana Maria Pineda, to participate in a Posada is to, “ritually participate in being rejected and being welcomed, in slamming the door on the needy and opening it wide. They are in this way renewed in the Christian practice of hospitality, the practice of providing a space where the stranger is taken in and known as one who bears gifts.”

22 For the Pilgrims, “Reenacting Las Posadas signifies the risk-taking and life-seeking migrations Latinx families are often called to undertake due to the consequences of colonialism. Participating in Las Posadas reveals the most basic understanding of who God is and what political acts we are called to enact.”

Through enacting the Posada, it becomes difficult to reject the migrant who knocks on the door of the United States. If Mary and Joseph are forced to move because of unjust economic structures in the

20 Elizondo, 35.
21 De La Torre, “A Colonized Christmas Story”, 413.
23 De La Torre, 414.
nativity story, one can more easily empathize the Jose and Maria who knock on door of the U.S. border because of unjust global economic structures.

In contesting white normativity, *Las Posadas* illustrates that performing the migrancy of Mary and Joseph requires a preference of openness and fluidity over doctrine and dogma. To be a pilgrim is not to be defined by a static identity but to always be on the move, dodging attempts to totalize identity by being rejected and outcast. Through the constant movement of the pilgrim, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the community, openness to the other becomes embedded in the community’s narrative. As a matter of justice for migrants, one cannot simply argue to welcome the stranger based on natural law, but through the performance of Mary and Joseph’s movement from Nazareth to Bethlehem, one ingrains the virtues of hospitality and justice. In fact, it is probably the staticization and ossification of dogma, doctrine, and canon, that allows for a staticization on border mobility and the construction of whiteness through the categorization of migrants. Through the Posada, one moves from the static category of us vs. them and performs and identities with people on the move. Through the performing of La Posada, the static category of whiteness is undermined, and those who participate and perform the novena, experience and identify with the non-static category of migrancy.

*Ex-Voto*

An *ex-voto* is a votive offering usually commissioned to give thanks to God in completion of a vow or a promise. More often than not, *ex-votos* take the form of a commissioned painting telling the story of the miracle, promise, or achievement. In the southwest, numerous restaurants, public businesses, and private homes have murals or paintings depicting a particular moment where the family who owns the business or home had a promise or miracle fulfilled by God.

The most famous *ex-voto* painting would be the one commissioned by Guillermo and Matilda Kahlo commissioned on behalf of their daughter, Frida, on the occasion of escaping death in a Trolley car accident. The painting depicts the accident with Frida’s leg being crushed by a Trolley car. *La Virgin de Dolores* is painted in the corner looking over and after Frida. The inscription below the ex-voto does not describe the incident; it simply states who is thanked and for what. The description of the event is the painting itself. The painting or the offering does not explain in static categories how the miracle happened, the nature of the miracle, or the nature of the divine person or santo. There is little to be said about doctrine or canon in an *ex-voto*. *Ex-votos* are commissioned for many reasons. A victory in battle, the overcoming of an ailment, the success of a student. Sometimes, ex-votos are commissioned for having a boyfriend successfully sneak into a bedroom, almost get caught by parents, and narrowly escaping. The commissioning of the *ex-voto* illustrate the internalization of faith in the everyday.

The act of painting or commissioning an *ex-voto* functions in religious education to illustrate the character of the divine rather than description of the divine through static categories. One reads an *ex-voto*, much like an icon. Yet, rather than reading an icon through the depiction of a saint, the picture teaches the faithfulness of God, the santo, or the divine. The commissioning of the *ex-voto* itself functions as a performance and thanksgiving from the living experience of faith. As such, the commissioning of the painting is not patronage of the arts, but
the internalization of faith in the family and the community. Ex-votos pass on faith stories from generation to generation with little dogma or doctrine, yet they explain and personalize the faithfulness of God.

While patronizing the arts in Northern Europe was an exercise of power, privilege and status, the commissioning of ex-votos among the poor in the southwest attest to the preferential option of the poor and their faith. God, Jesus, Mary and the Saints, are illustrated to be deeply involved in the lives of the everyday community. The community commissions these paintings as a sign of relationship with the divine. Justice is illustrated in the everyday through the public proclamation that God cares about the poor and those struggling to get by. Ex-votos show God and the saints care in the everyday. In the passing on of religious traditions under the normative white construction involves a passing down of doctrine and dogma, the performance of ex-votos pass down faith stories of the kind of God who exists in relationship with the Latinx community.

Milagritos
Milagritos, or Milagros (the *ito* functions as a diminutive to denote smallness), function as performance of theurgy, a quid-pro-quo in a sense. Usually, in the form of a tiny token, figurine, or small metal figure of a body part, a milagrito is taken to a shrine and offered up to God, Mary, or a *santo*, in exchange for healing or a miracle. Sometimes a milagrito is offered as a thanksgiving for a miracle where they are, “Placed at a shrine that is considered to have miraculous power, they are attached to the clothing of the saint’s statue responsible for the miracle.”

One can see milagritos as tiny images of body parts nailed to the bell at San Miguel’s chapel in Sante Fe in exchange for healing. My mother and I nailed tiny metal figures of a pancreas for healing for diabetes at this site. Or, one can see tiny figurines and rosaries at different shrines out in the desert on the way to cross the border in exchange for safety and health. While many theologians are weary of the offering of goods in hopeful exchange of miracles often calling such gifts superstitious, if one takes the preferential option of the poor seriously then these gifts and sacrifices illustrate the hope that the poor have in God. As an act of thanksgiving one can see that those who have come to the United States, in the modern practice of *milagritos*, come back to difficult places of their journey and offer citizenship papers, marriage licenses, or parts of a driver's license to give thanks to God or the saint for having blessed them in their new life in U.S.

Through the ritual performance of offering an *milagro* at a shrine, one is taught that God is a God who is manifested in the everyday, who hears the cries of his/her people. Rather than being taught that God is the ground of being, or, “that which nothing greater can be thought,” God is taught to be the one who suffers with and for us. When a milagrito is attached to a crucifix, which it often is, or flowers are offered to *La Virgin de Dolorosa*, one does not encounter abstract characters but rather the flesh and blood of human beings who lived and died in solidarity with our pain. In the same way *Ex-Votos* illustrate community, relationality, and

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A Final Suggestion

If performing whiteness in religious education is defined as the passing along static categories of identity formed by determining what is not white and religious education typically functions in the same way, then the Latinx praxis-oriented education subverts these static categories. By employing the epistemological preconditions of Mestizaje, Mulatez, and Nepantla, Latinx Popular religiosity teaches relationality, community and justice. By looking at three examples of Latinx Popular religiosity, one can see that the static categories which delineate in-groups and out-groups are not the primary concern as it is with the methodology of white performativity.

What can white allies do to participate in dismantling white normativity in religious education? Here I offer three suggestions. First, although it would seem obvious, one should lift up voices of the marginalized and avoid citational privilege in the choice of textbooks for classes. Second, while it is important to move away from a doctrinal and canonical formulation of religious education, white allies should be careful not to appropriate the experiences of the marginalized. If one is to employ Latinx Popular Religiosity, it is important not to pretend to be a neutral observer of these Latinx rituals. One must acknowledge one’s privilege to be an observer.
Solidarity means participation in the plight of the marginalized. Thus, it is necessary that if one is to put on a posada, participate in ex-votos, or hang milagritos that the lessons of relationality and community are employed by conversing and participating alongside the communities of faith that practice these devotions. The final suggestion is to listen to the ways of knowing that exist outside the normalized constructions of theology. In patiently listening to the popular religiosity of marginalized communities, one can see that such a popular religiosity reveals the injustices of mainstream theology. In listening to the prayers of the marginalized, Whiteness’ oppressive character can be revealed and dismantled.
Bibliography


