Alejandro García-Rivera: A Legacy in Theological Aesthetics

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In this article I will consider the contributions of the aesthetics of Alejandro García-Rivera in the field of Systematic Theology. It is difficult, if not impossible, as García-Rivera’s former student, to disassociate the personal from the academic. But personal testimony is also a form of speaking the truth. García-Rivera’s theological aesthetics had a profound influence on my intellectual development. If it were not for him, I never would have read Hans Urs von Balthasar, and it was from a seemingly casual suggestion by him that I discovered, and fell in love with, the writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Along with Nancy Pineda-Madrid, we worked closely with him as he was writing *The Community of the Beautiful* (1999), and I can honestly say the many hours we spent with him discussing this text are one of my fondest memories as a student and academic. My essay focuses primarily on García-Rivera’s first two books, *St. Martin de Porres and the Semiotics of Culture* (1995) and *The Community of the Beautiful*.1

In defining theological aesthetics, García-Rivera states, early in *The Community of the Beautiful*, that a foundational question for this field is, “What moves the human heart?”2 This simple question that is so profound, transforms the manner in which we approach theology. Prior to its publication, academic theology, and in particular theology in the Americas that engages racial/ethnic minority communities, had distanced itself from the affective, instead reducing theology to either discourse as a socio-scientific rational model that has little to do with the human experience of, and response to the sacred, or to ethical actions. Theological aesthetics reminds us that this attention to Beauty is the most authentic manner in which to speak of the Mystery of the Sacred in regards to human encounter. In evoking Beauty, García-Rivera introduces the categories of love, awe, and desire into our theological language. Beauty is inherently attractive, meaning that it draws contemplators out of themselves and into a direct encounter with the phenomenon manifesting itself, and this Beauty, the contemplator knows, testifies to itself in a way that the other transcendentals of the True and the Good cannot. Latino theologian Roberto S. Goizueta sees this role of aesthetics as integral and organic to Latina/o theology: “If Tridentine Western theology stressed the fact that God is known in the form of the True (Doctrine), and liberation theology [the fact] that God is known in the form of the Good (Justice), U.S. Hispanic theology stresses the fact that God is known in the form of the Beautiful.”3 For too long revelation has been understood as truth (to be known) or good (to be chosen).

As defined by García-Rivera, “Theological aesthetics recognizes in the experience of the truly beautiful a religious dimension.”4 In other words, theological aesthetics contends that Beauty is a result of divine initiative: Beauty not only exists, the human receives it. “Theological aesthetics attempts to make clear once again the connection between Beauty and the beautiful, between Beauty’s divine origins and its appropriation by the human heart.”5 Drawing from the work of von Balthasar, García-Rivera notes that in addressing both the objective and subjective dimensions of Beauty and its reception, theological aesthetics attempts to address modern suspicions surrounding the experience of Beauty.6 Situated as the first part of von Balthasar’s enormous trilogy, his aesthetics seeks to recover the aesthetic form of theology. The trilogy itself is based on the three transcendentals of being: the Beautiful (*Herrlichkeit*), the Good (*Theodramatik*), and the True (*Theologik*). The order of the trilogy is not arbitrary. The manifestation, or theophany, of the aesthetics leads to the encounter of the dramatics. As von Balthasar writes, “God does not want to be just ‘contemplated’ and ‘perceived’ by us, like a solitary actor by his public; no, from the beginning he has provided for a play in which we all must share.”7 The theo-drama, in turn, is followed by the theo-logic, which treats the human articulation of the dramatic event. In the *Theologik*, von Balthasar struggles to maintain the seemingly contradictory assertions of the dramatic nature of inner-Trinitarian life and an understanding of God as unchangeable. Building on the unity of the transcendentals as found in von Balthasar’s theology, García-Rivera understands the True, the Good, and the Beautiful in terms of communities. This construction allows for a relational understanding of the transcendentals that addresses the
realism of difference. The aesthetic principle that emerges from this is the lifting of the lowly, a subversive aesthetic norm with ethical implications.

García-Rivera’s theological aesthetics also has concrete implications for the sources and methodology of systematic theology. Art, literature, and poetry suddenly become not just viable, but central sources for theology. However, theological aesthetics argues that these are not just sources to be mined for potential theological data; they are in fact theological expressions. This expands the methodology of systematic theology, which is at times too intimately wedded to philosophy, failing to critically engage other fields of study as viable conversation partners. This is also significant for Latina/o scholars who have been historically excluded from the canons of philosophy and theology. Luis N. Rivera-Pagán highlighted the significance of literature as an avenue for tapping into Latin American consciousness and imagination. “The Latin American existential drama, in all its manifold complexities, has expressed itself fundamentally, and in a magnificent way, in our literature, especially our novels, not in philosophical treatises.” Rivera-Pagán argues for the use of literature as a vehicle for unearthing the intellectual heritage of Latin American peoples. This resonates with the contributions of theological aesthetics.

This is a particularly significant contribution for Latina/o theology, which claims to emerge from the lived religious experiences of Latina/o communities. Yet while this is often a central theme in the writings of Latina/o theologians, our work does not always reflect a sustained relationship with concrete faith communities that have been critically studied by us. The methodology of theological aesthetics broadens how we define and what can be our sources for these faith experiences. Contrary to growing trends in the academy, we do not all have to become ethnographers to connect to lived religious practices. However, Latina/o theologians do need to reflect a sustained engagement of Latina/o religious worldviews. The methodology of theological aesthetics broadens what we can consider viable and significant sources for tapping into the Latina/o religious imagination.

The influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar on García-Rivera’s theological aesthetics, and consequently mine, has often been a point of puzzlement for scholars. I am often asked, “Why Balthasar?” It is a question I myself asked of García-Rivera during the first few years I knew him. It was not until I sat down to read hundreds of pages of von Balthasar’s corpus in light of trends in contemporary systematic theology that I began to understand the unique contribution von Balthasar offers us today. In von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, we find a heavy emphasis on the dissimilarity between creator and creature. This is a radically different theological starting point than say the Rahnerian anthropology that dominates so many progressive Catholic voices. For Karl Rahner, the starting point of theology is anthropology. The abyss that separates us and our Creator can be crossed, and it is God’s glory that crosses it. The human is by nature open to receive revelation: We are recipients of God’s gracious self-communication. In other words, we are created to be saved. Rahner argues that we are oriented toward the horizon that we know as God, and that the ground for the reception of grace is in the structure of the human. Within us is the experience of grace, and only in grounding our self-reflection of that experience of transcendence will we truly understand ourselves. Von Balthasar shapes his anthropology around the theological category of gender. In addition to revealing something about human nature, as Lucy Gardner and David Moss highlight, “There is another critical role in which sexual difference is asked to perform in Balthasar’s theology. It is also presented as analogical to the difference between the world and God—a difference we shall name [the] theological difference.” The distance between creator and creature, García-Rivera highlights, always outweighs the similarity.

I also suspect that what has been described as von Balthasar’s kneeling theology held great appeal for García-Rivera. As von Balthasar poetically writes, “From the very outset, one approaches the word of God, the scripture, on one’s knees, prostrate, in the conviction that the written word has within it the spirit and power to bring about, in faith, contact with the infinity of the Word.” The term kneeling theology is a veiled critique of the exclusively academic approach to theology done sitting at a desk. For von Balthasar, as for García-Rivera, good theology is contemplation brought to conceptualization.

In the sources that inform his aesthetics, García-Rivera challenges how we define Latina/o theology. He unapologetically used non-Latina/o and non-Latin American sources within his theology in order to offer insights into the Latina/o religious experience. I remember at the time of The Community of the Beautiful’s publication, grumblings about what Charles Saunders Pierce, Hans
Urš von Baltsasar, and Josiah Royce would say about Latina/os were whispered among our peers. At a time when Latina/o theologians were finally making some inroads into the dominant North American theological academy, a book published by a Latina/o that did not have Hispanic or Latina/o in the title seemed quite shocking. I welcomed it. García-Rivera’s decision to write fundamental theology that is informed by, but not limited to the Latina/o faith experience is a welcome contribution to our work. What struck me most about this is that when I asked him about it, he seemed surprised. Clearly, he was aware of, but not defined by the politics of identity that haunts Latina/o theology.

In his use of North American pragmatism, García-Rivera had a clear vision of what a theology of the Americas could look like. His hemispheric approach to the task of theology is an often-overlooked dimension of his aesthetics. García-Rivera wanted to speak of the Church in an American way, in an inclusive way that went well beyond the geographic and consequently intellectual borders we often create. Coupled with this is his use of von Balthasar’s theology, which situated Latina/o theology within broader conversations among Roman Catholic systematic theologians. I see a similar trend in his first book on San Martín de Porres. Here García-Rivera went to Latin American historical Catholicism as a resource for his theology, a bold move given Latina/o theology’s continuous efforts to distinguish itself from Latin American theology. Similarly, his work on semiotics in this volume introduced this field into Latina/o theology.

I came to study with García-Rivera at the Graduate Theological Union based on reading his book on San Martín. His insight into the significance of the “little stories” is one that continues to have profound influence on us even today. These little stories are in contrast to the “Big Story,” the universal account of human reality. The little stories are told by academics and everyday people and reveal the context and symbols from which they emerge. Discussing the significance of the little story of popular religion for Latina/o theology, he notes that, “Popular religion is a crucible in which the faith of the Church becomes incarnated. It is a place where the ‘Big Story’ carried by official tradition is made possible through the ‘little stories’ of the popular.” García-Rivera found a way to frame contextual theology so that all theology is rightfully categorized as contextual. He refused to allow his work to fall into the pitfalls of being reduced to advocacy theology for Latina/os. Instead, the little stories reveal to us that all stories are little stories, and that context and culture shape all theological writings. I realize that this is not a radical statement today, but over fifteen years ago when this book was published, it professed this insight long before other scholars were taking contextual theologies seriously.

In many ways, the little stories set up the theological aesthetics. For García-Rivera, “encounter” is such a fundamental dimension of his theological aesthetics. Similarly, his scholarship is deeply influenced by the concrete pastoral life that he faithfully and consistently engaged in ecclesial settings. The subject matter of the book, St. Martin of Porres, emerges from the devotions of those faith communities in which he participated. This book also represents the first monograph in Latina/o theology that directly addresses Afro-Latin American religious history. His emphasis on the blackness subject is a precursor to the turn to Black studies within Latin American and Latina/o theologies that would begin years later.

Through his work on aesthetics, García-Rivera pushed the boundaries of Latina/o theology and systematic theology as a whole. Scholars like Roberto S. Goizueta and Peter Casarella join him in this growing emphasis on theological aesthetics within Latina/o theology. Often, a hasty interpretation of aesthetics leads to an understanding of its focus as downplaying or obscuring the significance of ethics and social justice. However, an emphasis on Beauty does not have to be at the expense of the Good, and can in fact inform one’s commitment to social justice.

This is far from the truth. In García-Rivera’s case, whether it is highlighting the little story of San Martín or incorporating the lifting of the lowly as a fundamental dimension of his aesthetics, an attention to justice has never been far from his work. García-Rivera shows us that we cannot have true justice unless we have the aesthetic encounter. This insight, like so many others, builds on the previous work of Latina/o theologians. If there is one way I would describe García-Rivera’s contribution, it is that it moves us forward. He pushes the conversation into a new arena, forcing us to rethink our approaches and recognize those moments when our parochial vision limits our growth as scholars.

While not the exact focus of my article, I must conclude with a word about García-Rivera, the professor and mentor. And here I must call him Alex. Often when
people ask me about Alex’s impact on me, they think my answer will be purely intellectual. But it is so much more than that. Alex was a wonderful mentor and role model to me. The hours he spent discussing my dissertation with me, over cups of Cuban coffee in his living room, are a gift I cherish even today. His love for his students and his passion for theology were contagious. He never made us feel that we were bothering him or taking him away from something, though I suspect at times we were. He opened opportunities for us and encouraged us to take chances with our research. There are so many things about Alex as a teacher and mentor that I try to embody in my own relationships with students. When I think about Alex, I think about his brilliance and his humility.

I can honestly state that Alejandro García-Rivera is the most original and creative thinker I have ever met. I remember so clearly having conversations with him and knowing that the insights were words I would not hear anywhere else. His aesthetics is a fundamental dimension of this contribution. It comes from not only his own intellectual curiosity, but also his concrete engagement with the two communities at San Martín of Porres Lutheran Church and St. Leander Roman Catholic Church. I began my remarks by quoting Alex’s fundamental question for aesthetics, “What moves the human heart?” I can honestly say, and I know I am not alone in this claim, that Alex moved my heart, through his generous spirit, his brilliance, and his passion. Thank you, Alex.

ENDNOTES
9 In his discussion of Rahner’s transcendental anthropology, García-Rivera highlights, “As such, human and divine realities meet in the subjective reality of the individual spirit. In other words, God becomes present to human experience as the transcendental horizon which makes possible all human knowing,” García-Rivera, The Community of the Beautiful, 78.
12 This is clearly seen, for example, in chapter 7 of The Community of the Beautiful, where Our Lady of Guadalupe as patroness of the Americas is evoked centrally in his analysis.
13 Alejandro García-Rivera, St. Martín de Porres, 21.