

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS ON STORIED LANDS – INVITED SESSION

Topic: A Dialogue on Portland with LaCugna Award Winners
 Convenor: Reid B. Locklin, University of Toronto
 Moderator: Megan Hopkins, Boston College
 Panelists: Craig Ford, Candler School of Theology
 Cristina Lledo Gomez, BBI—The Australian Institute of Theological Education
 David Turnbloom, University of Portland

In this invited panel, three recent winners of the Catherine Mowry LaCugna Award for New Scholars discussed Indigenous histories of the Portland area and considered the significance of this storied land for the CTSA as a site of theological reflection.

In his paper, “Rethinking Church and Solidarity in a Queer, Indigenous Key,” Craig Ford explored the underexamined role heteronormativity has played in the struggles of Native populations in the contemporary United States. Foundational to such a consideration is understanding heteronormativity as a “social formation in which coupling, procreation, and homemaking take on a particular shape exemplified by the nuclear family.” Ford argued, following Mark Rifkin, that heteronormativity supplied an important rationale undergirding not only the forced displacement of Native communities but also the forced integration these same communities under laws like the 1817 Civilization Fund Act. Though the devastating effects of settler-colonialist tactics disenfranchising Native communities are well known, paying attention to the operation of heteronormativity can help one understand the extent to which the forced reconfiguration of Native intimacies in the direction of bourgeois homemaking concomitantly disabled the *political* organization of Native communities. In view of this, Ford challenged the church to examine the ways in which its operative theologies continue to legitimate the exploitation of Native communities (but not only Native communities) by regarding the nuclear family as an icon of socio-cultural legitimacy and normalcy.

Cristina Lledo Gomez’s paper was entitled, “Doing Theology on the Stolen Native Lands of Oregon,” and it focused on the specific histories of Indigenous dispossession in the Portland area. Lledo Gomez started with an historical narrative, drawing on the work of Oregon State University historian and citizen of the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde, David Lewis. In 1853, Indigenous nations of Western Oregon held 14 million acres of land. Beginning in 1856, these lands were significantly reduced and the peoples subjected to assimilation pressures, until most of the treaties were unilaterally dissolved in 1954-1956. Though some lands and rights were restored in the 1970s, Indigenous peoples of the land are still rendered invisible. In the paper’s second half, Lledo Gomez noted the importance and difficulty of learning these histories and facing our settler identities, as well as ways that the corporate setting of CTSA meetings promotes unhealthy competition and discourages connection to the land. She concluded by reflecting on one of the most expensive toilets in the world, built for tourists on the Gorge River—Cowlett sacred land—as symbol of the desacralization of Indigenous peoples themselves. This echoes the irony of doing theology for the poor and being oblivious to the actual poor and marginalized.

Finally, David Turnbloom narrowed the focus still further in his paper, “Reflecting on Baptismal Theology in Light of the Forest Grove Indian Training School.” This presentation examined Catholic baptismal theology through the lens of the Forest Grove Indian Training School (1880-1885) in Oregon. The Forest Grove school, modeled after the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, forcibly assimilated 384 Indigenous children from over forty tribes using the philosophy, “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” The founder Richard Henry Pratt explicitly compared this process to baptismal immersion, saying he believed in “immersing the Indians in our civilization.” Turnbloom argued that baptismal theology’s emphasis on “killing the sinner” and dying to one’s old life was thus weaponized for cultural erasure and violence. When Indigenous or immigrant people undergo baptism today, these traumatic histories cannot be ignored—symbols carry the weight of their oppressive past uses. Drawing on James Cone’s connection between the cross and lynching tree, the essay calls for liturgical practices that honestly confront their complicity in cultural genocide while remaining open to transformation. The dangerous memories of oppression should create “liturgical anxiety” that questions whom the church seeks to save—and whom it seeks to kill.

Subsequent discussion touched on practical strategies for changing the relationships of the theological academy to Indigenous peoples and the land, at the CTSA, at other Catholic societies and at our home institutions. The importance of focusing on local connections was noted, as well as risks of voyeurism and unhealthy romanticism of Indigenous peoples on the part of settler scholars. Indigenous, Hispanic, Black and other racialized communities all have to respond somehow to whiteness; the challenge is doing so in collaboration and solidarity.

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