



Abuelita *Faith*

What Women on the Margins
Teach Us about Wisdom,
Persistence, and Strength

Kat Armas

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Research Grief

I sat in bed staring at my laptop, the dozens of Google tabs detailing the journey I'd been on. Books were buried in my comforter, creating a type of literary war zone. My ojeras (the bags under my eyes) decorated my face the color of day-old bruises. I kept opening the folder on my phone titled "Do Not Open," robotically scrolling through each social media app to distract myself from the sharp, sucker-punch pain in my gut that had lingered for days. It wasn't the first time I had felt the pangs that come when the past reveals itself to you, when an unknown history digs itself up from the grave. Colonizer or colonized, oppressor or oppressed—there's a moment after the deep, dark, often lonely work of becoming our own archaeologists that the pangs hit. It's a surprising pain that often comes when we dig up the skeletons from the ground, when we realize the dirt we stand on is tainted and the reality we've been fed is curated.

While this wasn't the first time reality hit, it would be the first time it pulled a fast one on me while I was writing an academic paper—a process, I was told, that was supposed to be “objective,” a discipline solely of the mind. Up until this point, no one had warned me this would happen, that the work would feel this personal. The dominating culture taught me to separate myself from what I study, and consequently, to live with a fragmented identity. But when our musings about life and faith exist only in fragments, we live disembodied realities. God becomes disembodied too.

It's easier when we're fed what to think, what to believe about ourselves, our histories, and God. When our identities are programmed, we're not taught to really engage or to bring our whole selves to the table. We're taught our own thoughts and hearts cannot be trusted in any way, and thus we live in shame, a widened chasm. But something painful and terribly beautiful happens when that chasm begins to narrow. I think this narrowing, this shrinking space where theology, history, and our identities— hearts, minds, bodies, and souls—begin to blend together, is where the pangs are felt most sharply.

It may not feel like it in the moment, but this is also part of the journey toward liberation.

That day while in bed with my laptop and books open, that chasm narrowed again. Reality paid a painful visit. And it didn't come alone. It brought grief along with it—that deep, gut-wrenching sense of grief. It was a sorrow from a time deep in the past, before I even existed—a grief that my antepasados, my ancestors, knew, one that hovered above time, spanning history.

What do you do with generational grief?

I sat in it for a while. And then I got to work.

Initially I called the angst that I felt that day “research grief”; it's the grief that comes when getting deep into the thick of researching difficult topics. Surprisingly, this is a common thing in the academic world. I once heard of a woman who began losing sleep, her hair, and her sanity during her time as a doctoral

student writing her dissertation on the Holocaust. Even trying to make sense of other people's trauma can traumatize.

This notable pang of research grief surfaced early in my seminary career during a Women in Church History and Theology class. Though I was several courses into my master of divinity program, I was new to exploring the topics of women and people of color as they pertain to theology. The dominating culture had yet to invite me to see myself and my culture within God's story.

But I thank Creator for my stubbornness, for my combative spirit, which the dominating culture has deemed too much—*muy fresca*.

When I began this course, I was attending my second seminary. I had left the first one only months prior, after tussling with professors and pastors and experiencing firsthand the demons of sexism and racism. I admit, being raised in an immigrant Roman Catholic community and then transitioning to Protestantism as an adult left me unfamiliar with the ins and outs of evangelicalism. Not only was I blissfully ignorant of what I was stepping into spiritually, but as a Cuban American born and raised in a city predominantly made up of Cuban Americans, I had yet to wrestle with my cultural identity in a majority, non-Hispanic white context.



I was sitting in my hermeneutics class at the first seminary I attended when I realized I needed to leave—it was a difficult day. As the professor taught us how to engage interpretation week after week, it became clear that he wasn't speaking to me. The lens from which he taught and from which he encouraged us to engage was his own, of course. He was born and raised on a small farm in the rural South, so the context from which he understood the world was such, and the way he taught us to engage Scripture reflected this reality too. I remember constantly feeling like nothing he taught about the world, life, or the Bible

related to me. I grew up in a large Latine¹ city where I danced salsa on the weekends and greeted strangers with a kiss on the cheek. I was conceived and born out of wedlock, and I lived the first part of my life in a small apartment with my single mother in La Sagüesera, the southwest portion of Miami, where I owned my first fake ID at sixteen. These details made me feel tainted, like I didn't belong. Was I not domesticated or pure enough? Did the reality of my life, experiences, and worldview make me too much or position me too far from understanding and knowing God the way I was supposed to? Trying to learn how to do the work of interpretation within a rural Southern framework only made me feel further from God—and made me feel like my experiences, community, and culture were only getting in the way of my being able to understand the Bible. As a newer evangelical, I was told that shame was no longer mine to bear, but how could I not feel shame as a Latine woman trying to fit the mold of whiteness?

Activist Julia Serano once said, “A woman of color doesn't face racism and sexism separately; the sexism she faces is often racialized, and the racism she faces is often sexualized.”² This truth began to feel personal to me. One day this same professor went off on a tangent about how important it is for everyone to learn Greek and Hebrew, as it changes the way we read and teach Scripture. It seemed to me that he really was speaking only to the men in the class when he finished his speech with, “And ladies, your husbands will be really impressed if you can exegete Scripture alongside them.” My heart sank; I was stunned that he would imply I was going through the effort of learning the biblical languages simply to impress my spouse. I nearly fell off my chair when he ended by asking, “Right, Kat?” I was one of the outspoken students in class. The mujeres, the women, in my culture taught me to be that way—to be confident, to speak up, to work hard. I carried this with me in seminary. Not only did I debate theology, exegete Scripture, and have an educated opinion alongside my male peers, but I also spent just as much

of my personal time studying as they did—and according to my professor, it was not to eventually lead the church but to impress my spouse.

At this point I had already begun my in-depth study of women in Scripture. I had already learned about the household codes, women leaders in the Bible, the context from which Paul spoke, and a myriad of other details that convinced me that God had uniquely called me and empowered me to lead, to use my gifts and my talents, and to do so from the strength of my abuela (my grandmother), my mom, and the cloud of antepasadas before them.

Through my study of Scripture, I had learned that God didn't make a mistake in creating me a woman, and God surely didn't make a mistake in creating me a Cuban woman. The shame that I felt for not fitting the mold of whiteness and patriarchy soon began to lift, and I was able to see the ways that the divine met me in the midst of my complex, multilayered identity, background, and experiences. I admit, this is an ongoing journey.

After class that day, I arrived at home still in a state of disbelief and pain, feeling as if my hard work, my calling, my dignity had been ripped from me. I walked through the door, looked at my brand-new spouse only weeks after our wedding, and muttered, "I think we need to get out of here."

"OK," he said. "Where should we go?"

A week later, while I was still at that same seminary, another professor taught about how different Bible translations altered the paragraph formations in Ephesians 5, which affects how we read it and thus how we translate it. In some translations, a new paragraph begins with verse 22 (and oftentimes with its own heading), signaling that submission belongs primarily to wives. But the original Greek doesn't have headings or verse numbers. So this command, my professor taught us, is supposed to flow from the verse before it, which teaches about mutual submission. Realizing what he may have been trying to imply, I nearly jumped out of my seat.

After class, I confessed to the professor that I was thinking of transferring to a different seminary. He encouraged me to go, reminding me of the potential I had and the little opportunity there was for me to grow in a context that doesn't affirm women in all aspects of ministry.

A few weeks later my spouse and I had our entire lives packed inside my Kia. But at that moment, I didn't know where we'd end up, just like I didn't know where the decolonizing journey would take me: to a new state, a new city, and a new seminary, where I would study the history of my isla, my island, and how it intersects with my faith. I also didn't know how much more I would learn, what I would reject or embrace. It was a scary and uncertain space, but a sacred one nonetheless. I realize now how dangerous it is to think we've arrived at enlightenment, at certainty, about ourselves, about God. I'm still figuring it all out day by day. Some days I'm confident and hopeful. And others? Well, other days I just get by.

There was one thing I did know for certain that day I learned about Ephesians 5. I learned that God really does work in mysterious ways and places—and through unexpected people. This detail alone makes the journey exhilarating.



It wasn't until I made that first painful exodus that I felt the freedom to begin inviting every aspect of who I am into my study and work as a theologian. It was in the second seminary, in that Women in Church History and Theology class, I was encouraged to explore how my past has shaped my present, and it proved to be another turning point in my life and ministry.

After ten weeks of diving deep into the lives of overlooked women in Christianity's past—women like Perpetua, Felicitas, Julian of Norwich, and Katharina Schütz Zell—I began to see how their work, though often unrecognized, changed history. I know we wouldn't be where we are today if it wasn't for the

sacrifice of these women who dreamed about God and wrote about God and were often silenced, labeled heretics, or worse, simply ignored because they did so. However, this discovery left me hungry to learn more. What about las mujeres, the women whose lives directly influenced mine? The border crossers, those who inhabited multiple in-between worlds?

As a daughter of immigrants who was raised in a city of immigrants, I always had a deep connection to mi isla, my island, Cuba. However, before this time, my antepasadas—the women whose shoulders I now stand on, whose experiences live inside my body, and whose sacrifices paved the way for my present reality—had never been a part of the theological narrative in any “formal” sense.

When beginning my research, I didn’t know how far the rabbit trail of digging into the history of mi gente, my people, would take me. While I knew our past was painful, I was naive and eager to take on the task of learning more about it. Back at home, we didn’t talk too much about our history. Sure, we were—are—proud and unapologetically Cuban, but because the details of my family’s past are tender and complicated, they are oftentimes uncomfortable to talk about. There was so much I wanted to learn, however, so I looked forward to understanding the way Christianity intersects with the country that birthed my abuelita³ and my mother—the two strong and courageous women who raised me.

The first book I picked up was Miguel De La Torre’s *The Quest for the Cuban Christ*. I left the library that day looking forward to reading about Jesus and my foremothers and forefathers. But needless to say, my excitement quickly dissipated when I read the first page: “Women were raped. Children were disemboweled. Men fell prey to the invaders’ swords.”⁴

I immediately knew this journey would be dark, heavy, and difficult. And the worst part? This was only the beginning of the written history of my people. This information would redirect

the course of my ministry and how I understood theology, who I am, and the ways the two intersect.

The story of *mi gente* involves the story of the native Cubans—the Taínos—being invaded and tortured by Spain. Worse, it tells how Spain would use their imported “Christ” to justify the greed for gold and glory.⁵ Spain would exploit and oppress the so-called heathens they encountered in the name of this imported “Christ,” who would support the ethnocide and genocide of the Taínos as well as the forced transportation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved African people to the island.⁶ And as we know, ethnocide, genocide, slavery, and forced relocation aren’t isolated to Cuban history but describe the history of Native people across the globe.

Many people generally know that the Jesus they’ve been singing about and singing to—and the beloved symbol of his cross—has historically been used as a weapon of hate, pain, and oppression, but something changes when a person first realizes how deep the colonial wounds truly run. This shift is colossal. Disorienting. What do you do with this information? Many throw in the towel and abandon the whole thing—understandably. The feelings of betrayal can be overwhelming. Others go through seasons of lament, grief, anger. This process has often been called “deconstruction” or a “decolonizing” of the faith—the unlinking of ourselves from a god we thought we knew, from a colonial Christianity, from an imported and imperial Christ. While uncomfortable, the journey from one place of knowledge, one way of being and knowing, to another way of understanding and seeing the world is crucial and even sacred.

Gloria Anzaldúa calls this space “nepantla.” Nepantla is the Náhuatl (an Indigenous group of people from Mexico and Central America) word for an in-between state, un espacio entre medio. The nepantla is the uncertain terrain that we cross when changing from one place to another. It is a space of constant tension where transformation and healing may be possible.⁷ Our journeys

of decolonizing and indigenizing, of deconstruction and reconstruction are that of nepantla. They are sacred spaces of learning, growing, shifting, becoming.

My nepantla journey didn't begin that day sitting on my bed with my tabs open and my ojeras bright purple. But that day was when I became aware that I was on it. In fact, thinking back, that day stands out as another turning point on this journey. I'm reminded of Rachel's husband, Jacob, who built a sacred stone pillar in Luz, "to the God who answered me when I was in trouble and who has been with me wherever I've gone" (Gen. 35:3).

That day and the day in my hermeneutics class serve as stones of remembrance on my life's altar—reminders that the divine has been with me wherever I've gone.



On that day, while reading De La Torre, I became curious to know more about the Christian European invaders—the representatives of Christ, who claimed allegiance to the "true" God of the Bible while ignoring the Bible's basic call for justice.⁸ I became curious about the Christ they claimed too. I wondered, Can this Christ—the one who has infiltrated much of our theology and mission efforts—the Christ who is white, elite, and of European descent, be redeemed? Is this the Jesus who "saved" me?

Or could there be another Christ? The one whom many of us have been in search of, the one of los humildes, the humble, as De La Torre calls them? My journey began to be shaped by the desire to learn about Jesus from the perspective of los humildes—the colonized, the marginalized, those who didn't get to write the history and theology books. In many ways, they are the ones intimately acquainted with the Jesus of the Gospels—the bicultural, border-crossing, Brown Jesus, the one born in a stable, rejected in his hometown, tortured, broken, and battered. I knew that in order to understand this Jesus better, I would have to prioritize listening to and centering the voices of los humildes.

I kept reading. “Upon the female body are found the scars of colonialism and domination.” Throughout history, Black, Indigenous, and other women of color have borne the brunt of colonization through slavery, subjugation, and sexual exploitation. These colonial and patriarchal wounds still linger today. As a result, poor and marginalized women are among the most underrepresented in our society, their voices often ignored. As I reflected on this, I realized that the more time I spend around women the world overlooks, women who bear the scars of colonization, the more I recognize that they understand something the rest of us don’t. Their remarkably intimate relationship with the Brown Jesus of los humildes is the kind of connection many of us with differing levels of privilege long for. I didn’t have to search too far to find these women; I was raised, shaped, and formed by them.

But why are their theological insights overlooked, and why are they never invited to share their wisdom? In my experience, our spiritual ancestors, our madres (mothers) of the faith, were always the objects of narratives, the ones talked about but never talking themselves. The more I wrestled with this, the more I wondered, *In our fight for liberation, are we seeking to ensure that overlooked and unrecognized peoples act as protagonists of their own stories?* Too often, women—particularly marginalized women—are the heroines of someone else’s story, or worse yet, someone else (usually a man) is the hero of theirs. This wrestling is where I received the inspiration for this book as well as a podcast. My quest to find protagonistas (protagonists) initially led me to buy a microphone, download editing software, and begin sending emails to Black, Indigenous, and other women of color in my networks. A few months later my podcast, *The Protagonistas*, was birthed into the world.

What made this process so meaningful was not just that I got to speak and learn from protagonistas in my networks but that with each conversation, I reflected on the most personal

and significant protagonista in my own life. You see, even after several years of formal seminary education, I can honestly say that the most impactful, albeit unrecognized, theologian in my life is a woman of valor who modeled wisdom, strength, survival, persistence, and resistance—a woman just like the one praised in Proverbs 31:

A woman whose value exceeds pearls,
whose husband[s] entrusted their heart[s] to her,
who ran businesses,
provided food for all in the familia,
planted fruit from her gardens,
who gave to the needy,
who [literally] made her own garments and sold them,
who wore strength and honor as her clothing,
who was confident about the future,
whose mouth was full of wisdom,
whose children bless her
whose husband[s] praised her.

—the *eshet chayil* of Proverbs 31
(vv. 10–31, my translation)

My abuelita.

The beautiful thing is that my abuelita is one of the millions of abuelitas—as well as tías (aunts) and madres—who have formed us and our beliefs. Many of us have or know a strong, devoted, unrecognized theologian who has served as a madre of our faith, a beacon of light on our spiritual journey, whether she is biologically related or not. This book is an invitation not only to celebrate these women but to consider them genuine sources of theology.

Throughout these pages, you will be met with stories of la lucha, the struggle, for liberation. Black, Indigenous, and other women of color are deeply acquainted with the depths of this struggle.

This book explores an abuelita faith through the lenses of my abuela and other unnamed and overlooked *madrinas* (godmothers) of the faith in Scripture and beyond. It is an attempt to tell a familiar story of displacement and belonging. Within these pages are stories of raw, grassroots faith and its close friend, survival. While these stories are unique, they aren't unusual. Many are remarkably familiar among many marginalized women—from before the time of Jesus through our current day. Part of what makes their stories so familiar is that, historically, they've remained untold. But I often wonder, What if by silencing these women, we've missed something profound? *What if the world's greatest theologians are those whom the world wouldn't consider theologians at all?*



I love the Bible—I find its stories fascinating. I love to study it and talk about it for many reasons, but one of the main reasons is that, frankly, it's not going anywhere. As some have pointed out, the Bible doesn't just reflect history; it makes it.¹⁰ The Bible isn't just a book about the past; it affects the way present-day decisions are made. For centuries Scripture has been used and misused to justify atrocities across the globe, and as a Western, biblically educated Christian, my conviction is to offer tools so that others can read and reread it through life-giving lenses, as I believe liberation is central to God's story.

Although the Bible has been used as a weapon of destruction in many ways, it's also important to acknowledge that throughout the centuries, marginalized people have found themselves within the narrative too—often claiming the Bible's "reality" as their own and thus exceeding the bounds of imperial exegesis.¹¹

For example, Rigoberta Menchú is a Quiché Mayan organizer and activist who led her community in standing against the Guatemalan government, which was seeking to exterminate her people. From reading the Bible, Menchú learned that it is her

people’s—and other oppressed people’s—right to defend themselves against oppressive and colonialist powers. “For us the Bible is our main weapon. It has shown us the way,” she says.

Perhaps those who call themselves Christians, but who are really only Christians in theory, won’t understand why we give the Bible the meaning we do. But that’s because they haven’t lived as we have. And also perhaps because they can’t analyze it. I can assure that any one of my community, even though he’s illiterate and has to have it read to him and translated into his language, can learn many lessons from it, because he has no difficulty understanding what reality is and what the difference is between the paradise above, in Heaven, and the reality of our people here on Earth.¹²

Menchú’s activism—her fight for her Indigenous community against colonial exploitation (for which she was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize)—was born from her personal study of Scripture. While the Bible has been weaponized by oppressors, it has also served as a beacon of hope and strength by the oppressed. My hope is to highlight the latter within these pages.

As you read, you may notice that I ask more questions than give answers when it comes to Scripture. For me, questions are an invitation to stay curious and to keep listening. Oftentimes, when we feel like we have the answers, we stop paying attention—and I never want to stop listening or paying attention to the divine voice within the pages of the Bible. I also hope that, with my questions, I can give our theological imaginations an opportunity to soar, to see the text with new eyes, and to find fresh insights. To this end, my exegesis is not exhaustive. Instead, I offer alternative readings that are in no way objective or universal.



Throughout these pages I also highlight the ways that my abuelita’s faith has affected my own. It follows how I came to learn,

unlearn, and relearn much of how I read the Bible and understand God.

Before I get into this, however, it's important to state my social location and position. My intention is to be inclusive, but I don't speak for all Latine people or women. Despite the dominating culture's attempt to stick us into one category—"Hispanic" or even "Latino/a"—our cultures and experiences are layered, diverse, and unique. I am a second-generation Cuban American born and raised in the Cuban community of Miami, Florida—these are important details that shape me and speak into the context of this book. Being a second-generation Latina means that my perspectives are different than first- or even third-generation peoples. Additionally, the fact that I'm a US-based Latina means that my experiences and understandings of the world are different than Latine peoples who live in Latin America.

Being raised in a city where my culture is the dominant culture also influences my reality. I don't know if you've ever been to Miami—strolled down Calle Ocho (Eighth Street) to watch all the old Cuban men play dominoes and smoke Cuban cigars—but it's a remarkable place, unlike any other. Many have referred to it as the capital of Latin America in the US, where strangers go in for a kiss on the cheek, Spanglish—a mixture between English and Spanish—is the primary language spoken, and Cuban restaurants populate every street corner.

Miami's Cuban population made national headlines in the 2020 presidential election for its pro-Trump affinities, making it an interesting case study for what it means to be Latine and how we, as a people, are to wrestle with our collective—and individual—identity. While many non-Hispanic white, (mostly) liberal commentators were perplexed by how many people in our community voted, many Latines I know were not surprised.

Similarly, I saw news headline after news headline referencing "the Latino vote," as if our community weren't marked by a myriad of countries with their own histories, backgrounds, and cultural

customs that influence each of us uniquely. The political opinions and overall experiences of the Latine community are diverse. If the dominating culture has learned anything about us, I hope it's that we are not a monolith. Like many other Latine peoples, my city and mi gente in particular hold a multilayered identity born out of a complicated history that bear the scars of colonial wounds.



While most Cuban American history focuses on post-Castro immigration, it's important to note that many Cubans arrived in the US as early as the nineteenth century. This early group was composed primarily of Afro-Cubans who established themselves in different parts of Florida, including Tampa and Key West.¹³ Nearly a century later, just after the 1959 revolution, another large wave of Cubans arrived in the US. During this time over 150,000 refugees landed in Miami, most of them white, elite, professional, and educated. Although they still faced ethnic discrimination in housing and employment (it was common to find signs in Miami that read “No Cubans, no pets, no children” and “Dade County is not Cuba, speak English!”), they were able to use their connections, wealth, and time to build roots and reestablish themselves in ways similar to their past.¹⁴ Another wave happened shortly after and lasted through the early 1970s, bringing nearly three hundred thousand refugees, most of whom were semiskilled working-class people, and many of whom designated themselves as “other race” or mixed.¹⁵ A majority of this group was also women, children, and seniors.

My abuelo, grandfather, came to this country during the second wave of immigrants. What I think makes his story so unique is that he was among the *balseros* (boat people)—a less honorable term for those who arrived in the US not by plane but on a raft. I've always found it interesting that to many within the dominant culture, those who leave their country for a chance at a better life are often frowned on, thought of as less than, without honor.

It's curious because I cannot think of anything more honorable than doing whatever you can or have to do in order to provide a better life for your family.

Yet another wave of Cuban immigrants arrived in Miami in the 1980s after thousands of Cubans on the island were able to storm through the gates of the Peruvian embassy, seeking asylum primarily from the poor economic situation on the island. After Castro opened the port of Mariel, over 125,000 refugees crossed the Florida Straits; a majority of these were young Afro-Cubans.

With time, Miami became a haven, a place where Cubans were able re-create their past and grasp firmly to the memory of their isla.

De La Torre uses the term *Ajiaco*—a Cuban stew consisting of different meats, indigenous roots, and tropical vegetables—to describe who Cubans are and the formation of their diverse ethnic backgrounds. From the Amerindians we have maíz (corn), papa (potato), malanga (taro), boniato (sweet potato), and others. The Spaniards included calabaza (pumpkin) and nabo (turnip). Chinese peoples added a myriad of spices, and Africans contributed ñame (yams) and more. This mestizaje (mixture) of flavors, races, and cultures offers a stew of identities that come together on the stove of the Caribbean.¹⁶

In the same way, Miami became what it is not only because of the mass exodus of Cubans who fled their island after Fidel Castro took power but because of the mix of Nicaraguan, Haitian, Honduran, Dominican, Colombian, Jamaican, and other cultures that contribute to its collective “Ajiaco stew.”

The notion of a multiflavored stew with a variety of ingredients simmering together can also symbolize what it means to be a Latine person. While this mixture of cultures and races contributes to our rich diversity, it also adds complexity to how this diversity is lived out. Historically, it has resulted in the silencing of the Black and Indigenous cultures and voices that make up the Cuban and broader Latine community. The hope, the goal,

is that each flavor plays a unique role in the creation of the final masterpiece—not that one flavor be elevated at the expense of another.



As I mentioned, my lens is that of a second-generation Cuban American who has swum Westernized waters her entire life. What's unique about the second-generation experience is the complexity to being Westernized and US American while simultaneously having nondominant ways of communicating and understanding the world. Leaving Miami made me realize how different my childhood was compared to that of many of my non-Hispanic white friends. Being from a city made up of immigrants who have been displaced from their country offers its own particular lens. I've swum in waters that are traumatized, are shaped by exile and displacement, and in many ways, look to the empire, to the United States, as a sort of salvation. But that's what empire does, doesn't it? It puts people in vulnerable positions and then convinces them that only the empire can save them from their vulnerability.

My decolonizing efforts seek to name that complexity.

Because of Cubans' prevailing presence and success in Miami, I've also swum in waters that carry varying levels of privilege. I took one of my final seminary courses with the Hispanic Summer Program, an ecumenical enrichment program for Latine students. During one of our first sessions, our professor asked us to share experiences we had with our ethnicity growing up. One by one, each classmate—most of whom had arrived in the States to study as international students from Latin America—began to share that the notion of being a minority person was new to them. They hadn't thought about it prior to moving and were surprised when they suddenly became "people of color" overnight. Although I had been born in the US, I felt a sense of solidarity with my classmates, as my experience of leaving Miami

felt similar. De La Torre also grew up in Miami and moved to the South as an adult. He articulates my experience exactly: he states that he went to bed one night as a white person in Miami and woke up the next morning as a Brown person in the South.¹⁷

These realities—the disadvantages I experience from being part of a “minority group” in the dominant culture’s eyes as well as the advantages I experience because of my skin color, documentation status, and level of education—all add to the complexities of who I am: the multiple identities that I hold and from which I understand and navigate the world.

In Miami, the longing for Cuba has become “the unifying substance of the Exilic Cuban’s existential being,” representing a common past, symbolically linking us to the land we left behind.¹⁸ *Mi gente* are a people perpetually in exile, and like the Israelites did, Cubans dream of the promised land. But their promised land lives only in their memories. Much of this longing from my familia and the community around me has been passed down from generation to generation.

It’s an odd thing to feel nostalgia for a land you’ve never lived on, but if we’ve learned anything from our ancestors in Scripture and beyond: the land lives within us. My soul remembers the familiar rhythms of my island, and I can feel the congas and my heart beating as one.

2

Abuelita Theology

When I've talked about abuelita theology in the past, many have asked, quite simply, What is it? A fair question, but one that is difficult to answer because abuelita theology is deeply personal. For me, it is created in real time as I decolonize: decenter and recenter, deconstruct and reconstruct.

It is the practice of uncovering and naming our abuelas who have inspired, taught, and guided us in our process of becoming and belonging. In this sense, I like to think of not *one* abuelita theology but *multiple* abuelita theologies born from the diversity that makes up the lived experiences of marginalized women across religious expressions, races, ethnicities, cultures, classes, and places. Developing or articulating this theology won't have a linear, Western, or modern definition. Instead, we must not only stop to listen but pause to reflect: Where, when, and how have we been ministered to or mothered by abuelitas—those in the present and those who came before us?

While this chapter might feel a little academic, this isn't an academic book. An academic book may come, but introducing an abuelita theology first through personal and biblical narrative told through the everyday lives of women, is important for me because that's the essence of abuelita theology. It's a theology birthed through *lo cotidiano*, the everyday. It is not lofty but informal. Some call abuelita theology "kitchen theology" because it is formed in the kitchen—while the *frijoles negros* (black beans) are simmering on the stove, the floor is being mopped, and the *cafecito* (coffee) is brewing. Abuelita theology takes form while family members are sitting around *la mesa* (the table) discussing *la lucha*, the struggle of everyday life. Thus, this book is an invitation into *la sala* (the living room) of my experiences and my perspectives from growing up as a daughter of Cuban immigrants.

Now, I wish to be honest when talking about abuelita theology. While I seek to honor and elevate the voices of our grandmothers and "abuelita theologians" through Scripture, I also want to be careful to not romanticize or essentialize their lives or experiences. Their stories and reflections hold both beauty and pain. Many people I know still carry wounds from ideologies perpetuated by their abuelitas, whether they be from gender or patriarchal stereotypes, body shaming, anti-Blackness, or strict cultural norms—our abuelitas inhabit a complex reality. In the same way, abuelita theology as a kitchen theology reflects the beautifully communal and natural formation of faith in *la cocina*, the kitchen. However, this reality is true primarily because our abuelitas are often relegated to *la cocina* due to the existence of *machismo*. Thus, abuelita theology inhabits a complicated, interstitial¹ space, as we will see.



Your journey and mine are shaped by a collective cultural memory. Theologian Jeanette Rodriguez explains that culture has been the means of human survival. Human cultures have

survived many threats by interpreting, adapting, and resisting dominant cultures that are more “powerful.” This is done primarily through our capacity to remember, create, and re-create our past. *Cultural memory*, then, refers to a collective knowledge from one generation to the next that gives many of us a chance to reconstruct our cultural identity. It is characterized by the survival of a historically, politically, and socially marginalized people and by the role of spirituality as a form of resistance. For Rodriguez, “cultural memory is about making meaningful statements about the past in a given cultural context of the present conditions.”²

This, too, is the essence of abuelita faith: it requires that I dive into the treasure chest of the collective, cultural memory of those who came before me. As you read the chapters of this book and reflect on my story alongside the stories of women in the Bible, I encourage you also to dive in. We are shaped by the memory of our antepasados, our ancestors, the cloud of witnesses who went before us.

I also seek to articulate an abuelita faith through decolonized and postcolonial lenses. The term *postcolonial* was created to give voice to the most vulnerable and poorest members of the global community. Postcolonialism deals with colonization or colonized peoples, focusing on the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experiences and realities of colonized peoples as well as assumes their inferiority. It seeks to reclaim the identity of colonized people who were shaped by the idea of *otherness*.³

The idea of the other, which was perpetuated by European colonizers, has been used as a way for those in power to maintain authority over those they are colonizing. An imperialist sees the other as different from the self in order to commodify control over the other’s identity. The self and the other are the colonizer and the colonized, respectively, or the familiar and the foreign—the one who does not belong to the group, who doesn’t speak a given language, or who doesn’t have the same customs.⁴

Dominating culture has othered many of our abuelitas because of the language or dialect they speak, their accent, the pigmentation of their skin, their cultural customs, their lack of Western education, their socioeconomic status, and/or their gender. The concept of otherness sees the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites. While the self (the colonizer) is ordered, rational, masculine, and good, the other (the colonized) is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil. The current dominating culture may not say this with its words, but what is presented as “normal” or “common” perpetuates this myth.

Throughout history the colonizer has been the one to “know” and “theorize,” while the colonized can only be known or theorized about. Therefore, postcolonialism advocates thinking *with* the marginalized rather than thinking *about* them. My hope is that when we engage with colonized, grassroots, or overlooked persons, whether in society or in Scripture, we listen not to consume, to take, or to appropriate but to hold sacred space, to learn, and to make room for the holy, where God is often at work in lo cotidiano, the informal space where life and faith happen, where a myriad of decisions are made—decisions that many of us with varying levels of privilege never even have to consider.

As I’ve read the narratives of many marginalized women in Scripture, I’ve sought to notice not only the countless decisions they make for their familias but what these decisions communicate. What is in the details? What is left unsaid? What can we draw from the voice of the other in Scripture, the one whom God so deeply cares about and seeks to protect and honor? My hope is that the stories of these overlooked and unnamed women will give us a chance to listen to “them” talking to “us”—instead of “us” talking about or to “them.”⁵ I also hope that when we uncover and listen to their often silenced voices, we will tune our ears to those same voices in our midst. As we imagine these narratives in Scripture, may we reread these texts with eyes to see the abuelas who have grandmothered and mothered us, not

just our own biological abuelas but our madrinas and co-madres both in the present and in the past. My hope is that we recognize how much more we have to learn—not from books but from lived experiences—and that these experiences may help us change the way we see the world and those who have something valuable to offer us.

For me, abuelita theology is about looking into the real, raw outworking of faith.



Before we can hear and recognize these voices in Scripture, however, we must first understand that the lens through which many have read and been trained to understand the Bible has predominantly been a Western, male, European lens. These voices have dominated our pulpits and our commentaries, the places from which many of us have been educated, trained, or spiritually formed. This has left the insight, interpretations, and perspectives of Black, Latine, Asian, and Indigenous writers as secondary.

In 2019, John MacArthur, a prominent evangelical pastor, appeared in a widely shared video not only telling Bible study teacher Beth Moore to “go home” but also criticizing Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) leaders for their suggestion that there should never be another Bible translation committee without a Latine, Black, or woman scholar on it. MacArthur scoffed at the suggestion and responded by questioning, “Translation of the Bible? How about someone who knows Greek and Hebrew?”⁶ The SBC has a clear history of racism, but surely they weren’t implying that knowledge of the biblical languages is unnecessary for translation committees. And surely MacArthur knows this (or perhaps he doesn’t?). His apparent disregard for the lived experiences and cultural insights of those who are unlike him perpetuates ideology that excludes the majority of the world from the theological table.

Because of this, I like to think that this work, my work, as a Latina theologian, writer, and emerging biblical scholar is an act of dissent. As others have said before, *my existence is resistance*.



First, any attempt I make to present a theology that is decentered from the dominant narrative and recentered to focus on or highlight the perspectives of marginalized women will inevitably be filtered through a Western lens, because I am a Western individual. I am on the same journey of decolonization as you might be.

Second, as Latino scholar Oscar García-Johnson illuminated for me, any attempt to incorporate decolonized thinking, particularly in the context of US American culture, will necessarily feed into a colonial narrative. The crux of colonial thinking is embedded in perceived binary dichotomies—and no matter how hard I try to come away from these colonial binaries, my work will be put in some sort of category: liberal or conservative, left or right. This is true especially as someone from the Cuban American community. Many Cubans in the US who were affected by the revolution hold strict political stances—understandably. On the one hand, if I—or anyone else in my community—is critical of any of the positions they might hold, we might quickly be labeled a “socialist” in a derogatory way. On the other hand, being sympathetic to the trauma of exile and displacement might cause many progressives to question if I am no longer on their side.

The human experience—our stories as well as those of our abuelitas—are often more nuanced and complicated than the boxes set before us, the ones we’ve been forced to fit into. Although I do so imperfectly, I try to hold these complexities with care.

I often wonder if the strict colonial binaries set before us are what have hurt so many people within the church. For so long church leaders have told us that we are loved no matter what,

while simultaneously telling us that if we don't hold to a specific way of understanding God, a certain category of belief, we are at risk of damnation. The first time I was called a heretic was for believing that women could preach, a belief based on my in-depth study of the biblical text. I wasn't called a heretic because I denied the Trinity, the resurrection, or any of the core tenets of Christianity.

Perhaps so many young Christians are fleeing from the church because of these dichotomous, "all or nothing" views of faith that disregard life's complexities—the views of faith that gloss over the messiness of life mirrored by the biblical characters and stories that we hold so dear. As the rest of this book will show, Scripture is a beautiful and nuanced account of the chaos of life and faith.

To construct decolonized thinking, we must set aside dichotomies that stereotype and force people into boxes—in order to recover the voices of the underrepresented, the marginalized voices that get lost in the middle.

Now I want to be clear: I'm not saying that there isn't right or wrong. Injustice, dehumanization, and oppression of people are always wrong. When the image of God is violated, destroyed, dishonored, or unprotected, that is wrong, "an act of violence," as Black author Osheta Moore points out.⁷ Instead, nonbinary language resists the notion of reducing people—particularly marginalized people—to objects that can be easily categorized and understood.



Before describing the details of abuelita faith (as I understand it) already articulated by a few scholars, including Virgilio Elizondo, Loida Martell-Otero, Miguel De La Torre, and Robert Chao Romero, I want to introduce other theological frameworks that have marked this journey. Besides the studies of decolonization and postcolonialism, these include (but are not limited to) womanist biblical hermeneutics, *mujerista* theology, feminist

intercultural theology, and Latina evangélica thought. Each of these have helped shape my understanding of theology from the perspective of los humildes.

Womanist biblical hermeneutics. Womanist scholar Mitzi Smith notes that womanist biblical hermeneutics prioritize the communal and particular lived experiences and histories of Black women and other women of color as not only a central point but a starting point, as well as a general interpretative lens for critical analysis of the Bible, contexts, cultures, readers, and readings. “Womanists sing, write, and speak from the margins for the margins—the doubly marginalized, the black woman called to preach in the black church, the single black mother, the motherless black child, the pregnant unwed mother striving to find a home in the black church. We testify that the God in us is great, compassionate, courageous, audacious, loving, nonjudgmental, and empowering.”⁸ Womanist biblical hermeneutics has helped me to engage with this God in Scripture, in myself, and in the world.

Mujerista theology and feminist intercultural theology. Fellow Cuban Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz coined the term *mujerista theology*, which is liberation theology from a Latina perspective. Liberation theology originated as a prophetic movement responding to human suffering—more specifically, poverty and injustice in the popular sectors of Latin America. It highlights the social concerns of poor and oppressed people, as Jesus emphasized in much of his ministry. Liberation theology has taught me that theology cannot be divorced from personal story. Story is what connects theory with reality, what gives life to our religious understandings.

In this vein, *mujerista theology* takes the narratives and lived experiences of women seriously, emphasizing the unique struggle of Latinas at the intersection of ethnicity, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Isasi-Díaz began developing this theology after her time serving as a missionary to Peru. There, she realized not

only that liberation is necessary for justice and peace but that one cannot be liberated at the expense of another or isolated from others.⁹ Thus, *mujerista* theology is a process of empowerment for marginalized women that begins with the development of a strong sense of moral agency. It works on clarifying the importance and value of who these women are, what they think, and what they do.¹⁰

Mujerista theology seeks to provide a platform for Latina grassroots women, taking seriously their religious understandings and practices as a source for theology and challenging theological understandings or church teachings that oppress Latina women.¹¹ It insists not that liberation is something one person can give another but instead that it is a process by which the oppressed become protagonists of their own stories, participants in creating a reality different from the oppressive one they are in. Most important, *mujerista* theology is not a theology exclusively *for* Latinas but a theology *from* Latinas, enabling Latinas to understand the ways they have internalized their own oppression. Practically, *mujerista* theology is a theology of resistance that aims to help Latinas discover and affirm the presence of God in their communities, as well as the revelation of God in their daily lives.¹²

Although I've resonated with and built many of my ideas from *mujerista* theology due to its Roman Catholic and Cuban connections, I also understand and want to engage the critiques it has received for the ways it risks a kind of exclusivity or homogeneity that universalizes the Latina/Hispanic experience, often to the advantage of white Latinas. Because of this, I seek to also engage with *feminist intercultural theology* brought forth by María Pilar Aquino, Daisy Machado, Maria José Rosado-Nuñez, and others. For Aquino, *feminist intercultural theology* adds more nuance to the table. It best names what she calls *convivencia* (living together) across Latina identities—Catholic, Protestant, Amerindian, African, Latin American, US Latina—as equals in wisdom.¹³

Latina evangélica thought. This framework has helped me see how theology as a whole, including the doctrine of the Trinity and Scripture, intersect with my position as a Latine woman. Latina evangélica thought emphasizes the feminine “Wild Child” of the Trinity, la Espíritu Santa¹⁴ (the Holy Spirit), and the inspiring and inspired word of God in the Bible.¹⁵ The work of Latina evangélicas has reminded me that theology is a communal and collaborative task. Women, particularly women of color, learn from one another’s experiences and seek that all, together, are liberated to better serve one another and their neighbors and to live into the freedom promised in la Espíritu Santa.

As I present an abuelita faith (one among many), I am doing so from the shoulders of womanists, mujeristas, intercultural feminists, Latina evangélicas, postcolonial scholars, decolonizing thinkers, and others, continuously gaining insight from their perspectives and theological understandings about God and the world. The work of theology is a work of the people, something we do en conjunto, together. In this way, the image of God is not just individual but collective. We need one another because no one person or one group of people can fully bear all that is God’s image. Instead, each culture, people, or group offers a glimpse of a different aspect of the full image of God.



I “formally” learned about abuelita theology while doing research on César Chávez, the preeminent leader, voice, and public face of the Mexican American civil rights movement of the 1960s.¹⁶ Asian-Latino theologian Robert Chao Romero notes that Chávez’s enormous impact on the Mexican community was ultimately started by his grandmother, Mama Tella. In the same way, the role of abuelitas in the lives of many US-based Latines cannot be overstated. Our abuelas are our connection to our culture, our language, and the country that birthed us. They are our wells of wisdom and memories—both traumatic ones and

those necessary for survival. For we who are Latines in the US, our abuelitas hold much of our identities, beliefs, traditions, and theologies.

Mama Tella's Catholic faith formed Chávez in the early years of his life.¹⁷ One example was when he received his first Communion. Because the Chávez family lived far outside the city, César was not able to attend regular catechism. Nevertheless, his family took a trip to the city one day to request it from the Anglo priest, who refused, reminding them that they could not take Communion without first receiving "formal" religious training. Chávez's mother, Juana, told the priest to ask César and his sister, Rita, any question from the Catholic catechism to prove they were ready. To the priest's surprise, they answered every question he asked, so he had no choice but to allow them to receive Communion the following day.¹⁸ Chávez, who has been called the Martin Luther King Jr. of the Mexican American community,¹⁹ wouldn't have been who he was without the abuelita theology training he received from Mama Tella.

The story of Mama Tella speaks to the fact that white, Western thought has long monopolized ways of knowing and being, assuming that originating, Indigenous, or immigrant cultures lack aesthetic capacities, intellectual traditions, and/or critical thinking. Dominant culture has historically discredited our communities, labeling them uneducated or, because of other factors like socioeconomic status, assuming they are unable to develop knowledge or articulate their thoughts, particularly in regard to theology.

In his book *After Whiteness*, Black scholar Willie Jennings explains that the image of the educated person in Western culture is that of a white self-sufficient man. His self-sufficiency, Jennings argues, is defined by possession, control, and mastery.²⁰ Western culture has long made the rules about what is "knowledge" and what is not, positioning themselves as controllers, possessors, masters, and thus as teachers of knowledge. This

has resulted not only in homogeneity—“a control that aims for sameness and a sameness that imagines control”²¹—but in the marginalizing or silencing of anyone from outside the white elite academy.

To this end, postcolonial thinker Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that social justice is not possible without *cognitive justice*. For Santos, cognitive injustice is the failure to recognize the different ways of knowing by which people across the globe live and make meaning of their existence.²² I echo Santos in urging that we must recover the diversity of ways of being and knowing in the world. While dominant culture says we have nothing to learn from poor or uneducated people, abuelita theology says we have the most to learn from them—from marginalized women like Mama Tella or my own Abuela Evelia.

Not only have the Mama Tellas of the world served as the backbones of our faith, carrying the weight of the César Chávezes of the world, but in doing so, our abuelas have resisted and even shamed the dominant Western notion of “knowledge” that isolates and further marginalizes.

In an interview with Krista Tippett, Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, explains that in Indigenous ways of knowing, to know a thing doesn’t mean to know something just intellectually, but to know it intuitively. To really know something, you must know it emotionally and spiritually.²³

“What does it mean to be an educated person?” Kimmerer asks. “It means that you know what your gift is and how to give it on behalf of the land and of the people, just like every single species has its own gift.”²⁴ By this standard, our abuelas are educated beyond measure, offering their gifts to us in ways the academy cannot. The rest of this book will detail some of those ways: how the abuelitas in our midst and in Scripture share their wisdom with us through their hands, their bodies, and their alternative ways of being and knowing.



Abuelita theology is a reality for more than just the Latine community; it has also been expressed by some in the African American community. Hak Joon Lee recounts in *We Will Get to the Promised Land* Martin Luther King Jr.'s intimate relationship with his grandmother, Jennie C. Parks Williams. Lee calls it “the African family characteristic of the abiding presence of maternal bonding.”²⁵ Grandma Jennie played a key role in King’s emotional and spiritual formation, instilling in him a strong identity, self-esteem, and mission. King’s grandmother “was a strong spiritual force, a bearer of culture, and a pillar of strength in the family.”²⁶ King’s bond with his grandmother was so strong that on the two occasions when he thought she had died, he tried to commit suicide. Imagine where our society would be without Grandma Jennie’s influence on her grandson’s life.

Abuelita theology recognizes and celebrates her life alongside his.

Theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman was raised by his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose. He recalls the ways his grandmother served as a rock for their entire community, taking it upon herself to be the one to empower her family—to remind them that despite their circumstances they were God’s children. Thurman writes that his grandmother’s passion and energy established the ground of personal dignity “so that a profound sense of personal worth could absorb the fear reaction that came with being slaves.”²⁷ His grandmother believed that the Christianity of Jesus appeared as a technique of survival for the oppressed. Through the years, however, it became a religion of the powerful and the dominant, often used as an instrument of oppression. Through his grandmother’s influence, Thurman also challenged the notion that oppression was in the mind and life of Jesus.

This, I believe, is what abuelitas possess: a connection to Jesus that empowers, despite the ways dominant culture has attempted

to strip them of their dignity, even and especially in the name of Jesus. Thurman's grandmother's teachings about Jesus were instrumental to his ministry and fundamentally shaped his religious sentiments, which eventually birthed *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman's most famous book. It is rumored that King carried a copy of this book in his pocket alongside his Bible.

Many within Native American communities are also intimately acquainted with these experiences—namely, the ways Christianity has been used as an instrument of oppression. Historically, Native peoples have been driven out of their lands, forced to “convert” and be baptized, enslaved, murdered—often in the name of Jesus. Throughout the years of generational trauma and unresolved historical grief, many Native American grandmothers have offered strength to their communities, carrying on cultural knowledge, spiritual awareness, and kinship ties, as community elders and grandparents are often responsible for raising and educating children.²⁸ Tribal grandmothers often rear grandchildren, and through their age and role as caregivers, older women hold a special status in the community, acting as cultural conservators, exposing their grandchildren to Native American ways of life through ceremonial and informal activities.²⁹ George Tinker, a theologian and citizen of the Wazhazhe (Osage) Nation, explains that many in his community understand creation as “Grandmother of the Earth”: creation is sacred, the earth is a source of life, and creatures are relatives to whom we owe respect and reciprocity.³⁰ It is this honor that abuelitas are given.

Similarly, Japanese sociologist Yoshinoro Kamo explains that many countries in East Asia, including China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and others, have adopted Confucian ethics, which stresses age hierarchy.³¹ While most Western nations value individualism and self-reliance, which oftentimes results in ageism, the opposite is true for many Eastern cultures. Not only is a communal mentality upheld, but grandparents, including abuelitas, are among those to be most honored and respected.