

# Using Latinx Theology's *Lo Cotidiano* to Decolonialize Oller's *El Velorio*

## Abstract

This article explores the theological valences of Francisco Oller y Cestero's *El Velorio* (c. 1893), his interpretation of the child's funerary wake called *bakiné* in Puerto Rico, using the Latinx theological concept of *lo cotidiano* and its decolonializing force. In contrast to Oller's elitist and colonized view of *bakiné* as "brutish" and "superstition", a decolonial *cotidiano* approach valorizes its nuanced expression of Puerto Rican popular religion, identity, and culture among everyday belief and practice. This approach construes *bakiné* as a celebration of life, orthodox in light of Catholic doctrine, and representative of the reality of many Puerto Ricans to this day, a life in which redemption triumphs over sin and creativity over chaos even when rife with suffering and oppression. Indeed, *El Velorio* evinces a popular hermeneutic, a quotidian relationality, and a creative faith that has larger theological implications about the complexities of being human, being religious-in-community, and being created, and about the relationship between theology, art, and human.

## Keywords

Oller, *El Velorio*, Puerto Rico, Latinx, Theology, Art, Decolonial, *Lo cotidiano*

## Biography

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## Introduction

One of the most famous examples of Puerto Rican visual art, *El Velorio* ("The Wake", fig. 1) has been widely studied for its value in regional and global art history, in Latin American studies, and in Caribbean history and tradi-



Fig. 1: Francisco Oller y Cestero, *El Velorio*, oil on canvas, 244 x 396 cm, c. 1893, Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

tions.<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, its value for Christian theology, however, remains unexplored. This essay aims to address this oversight using the Latinx theological concept of *lo cotidiano* (loosely translated, “the everyday”), especially helpful in this case for its decolonial force.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that a *lo cotidiano* reading of *El Velorio* can increase its importance for decolonizing Puerto Rican culture specifically and global religious art history and religious studies in general. To do that, after a brief analysis of the painting from the perspective of material culture, including painter Francisco Oller y Cestero and his context, I will use *lo cotidiano* constructively to subvert Oller’s own understanding of *El Velorio*, which earlier scholarship on the painting has presupposed to be normative.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 See for example Benítez 1983; Taylor 1983; Schechter 1994; Delgado 1998; Alegría 2001; Martorell/Hurley 2010; Salazar 2010; Cortés 2012; Pons Irizarry 2012; Álvarez 2017.
- 2 The use of “x” in “Latinx” is an incomplete yet essential attempt to unite binary and non-binary folk under one ethnicity. I will also use it with other concepts as applicable.
- 3 My understanding of “material” comes from material religion and material culture studies, especially through the work of Miller 2005 and Morgan 2004. Briefly, the “material” is that which is expressed through/revealed by sensory interaction and with implications for “real life”. I use “constructively” as in “constructive” theology, meaning open-ended and forward-looking, and as in the “constructivist” sense of material religion scholarship,

But first, why approach a painting theologically? The articulation of Western Christian theology and art together has had a tortuous history. From Tertullian through medieval, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation thinkers to Paul Tillich, through centuries of doctrinal nuances and outright schisms, theologians have debated the proper place and usage of pictorial works of art in Christian belief and practice. Yet the Roman Catholic Church, in the Council of Trent (1545–1563) for example, has construed art as an orthodox vehicle for God’s agency and salutary for Christian life in general.<sup>4</sup> As “God-talk”, theology is also a medium for divine meaningful action. Thus, discourse is of the essence in both theology and art, and both “speak” about being human in ways not easily explained but no less essential to faith and full life. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner says it well:

Everything which comes to expression in art is a particular actualization of that human transcendence through which a person, as a spiritual and free being, is oriented to the fullness of all reality. Only because the human person is a being who by his very nature pushes beyond every given boundary, a being for whom every end is a new beginning, a being who encounters the unfathomable mystery of things, only because and insofar as the human person is a transcendent being can there be both art and theology in their real senses. Both art and theology are rooted in man’s transcendent nature.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will use Latinx theology as the general framework of my analysis. Among its analytical categories, I will concentrate on *lo cotidiano* and its decolonializing force upon *El Velorio* *qua* a meaningful vehicle for the divine. *Lo cotidiano* refers to “the day-to-day reality in which [Latinxs] lived-experience is enmeshed”.<sup>6</sup> This lived-experience, a key element of the

meaning that understanding is formed through experience. I also embrace material religion’s historical (i. e., diachronic, contextual) and emic (i. e., insider) perspective. I mean “normative” in the sense of “mainstream” but also as opposed to “positive”. As will be seen, Oller makes a normative statement about this *lo cotidiano* funerary ritual through *El Velorio*, yet presumes much (and mostly mistakenly) about its content and intent due to his rationalizing colonializing mindset.

4 E. g., Catholic Church 1545/1848.

5 Rahner 1982, 29. I do not presuppose maleness, masculinity, or heteronormativity of humanity or of God. Indeed, I consider such presupposition offensive. However, all quotes are kept as originally published.

6 Isasi-Díaz 2002, 6. “Latinx” mostly refers to people of Mexican, Central and South American, and Hispanic Caribbean ancestry living in the United States and its territories. The

Latinx hermeneutical lens, is particularly relevant to Latinx identity and history. On the one hand, Latinxs everywhere are subjugated by systemic racism and all its consequences to varying degrees, experiencing, for example, less access to education and health care, lack of equal economic opportunity and legal rights, and sustained violence due to their dark-skinned bodies and/or accented speech. To the quotidian question “how are you?”, most Puerto Rican Latinxs (although U.S. citizens by birth) would respond “*en la lucha*”, “in the struggle”.<sup>7</sup> For those Latinxs thrown onto U.S. soil as non-citizens by the insidious push-and-pull forces of neoliberalism, this *lucha* is compounded exponentially – it becomes *guerra*. On the other hand, and ironically, lived-experience is also rife with hopes and dreams. In the United States, many Latinxs are able to carve a life in the intersection of oppression and celebration (e. g., of family separation and *quinceañeras*, the celebration of a girl’s 15th birthday) together with strong devotion to family and popular religion.<sup>8</sup> This reality of *lo cotidiano* has become a *locus theologicus* for Latinx theologians: theological source, content, and context.<sup>9</sup> In other words, *lo cotidiano* as theological category grounds, signifies, and generates God-talk that enables and justifies Latinxs’ God-given right to be fully human.

By “decolonial” I mean the power of *lo cotidiano* to shift the epistemic frame of Latinxs. The term derives from the work of Aníbal Quijano, who invites us to think of coloniality as the epistemology inherited through settler colonialism and modernity in Latin America.<sup>10</sup> Coloniality is invisible and pervasive, present even when the colonial situation has ended politically. For Quijano, coloniality sustains Latin American oppression by continuing to impose the epistemic framework of its oppressors. For instance, in Western Christian ec-

term is helpful but not meant to reduce so many countries and cultures to a single ethnicity; indeed, many Latinxs do not agree with the term (mostly because of its gender neutrality) and use hyphenated demonyms. Earlier scholarship used “hispanic” and “*latina/o*” for the same group. In Spanish, many scholars have started to use *latine* as a gender-neutral term. “Latinx” is not meant to include Latin Americans who do not live in the United States, yet it is sometimes used interchangeably.

7 For a masterful elaboration of this theme, see Isasi-Díaz 2004, 52–61. Puerto Ricans are a good example of the precarious complexity of Latinx as a term. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, a right no other Latinx group has outside the United States. This fact makes them only tangentially Latinx for many, yet Puerto Rican culture is overwhelmingly Latinx.

8 To borrow Alexander Hamilton’s axiomatic statement in Lin Manuel Miranda’s eponymous musical: immigrants get the job done.

9 Nanko-Fernández 2015, 16.

10 Quijano/Ennis 2000.

clesial spheres, religious practices of “everyday” believers (such as Holy Week pageants or home altars) are deemed “popular” and thus inferior, while those performed by the institutional church are “official”. But behind this distinction are power asymmetries that range from the doctrinal (e. g., orthodox and heterodox) to the hierarchical (e. g., ordained and lay). Simply stated, that very distinction between popular and official is colonializing – all practices are “done by people” – and the difference between them is power.<sup>11</sup> From the standpoint of *lo cotidiano*, such dichotomies break down. Popular religion *is* religion. The theology of everyday Latinx folk *is* theology, not Latinx theology. For instance, a *lo cotidiano* concept of *imago dei* takes into consideration not only U.S./European theological anthropologies but also the “dirt under [Latinx] fingernails”, that is, that being human includes being “for others”.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Latinx-*lo cotidiano* being human concentrates on community not the individual. *Lo cotidiano*, in sum, serves to decenter colonialized meaning within theology.

The decolonial thrust of *lo cotidiano* becomes evident as a mechanism to subvert meanings, and since *El Velorio*’s subject matter is unavoidably *lo cotidiano*, what better framework to decolonialize it? As will be seen, Oller intended *El Velorio* to communicate a specific message, yet in any painting the message depends as much on the painter’s production as it does on the beholder’s reception, and a decolonialized mindset certainly subverts the latter. Stuart Hall’s distinction and relationship between “encoding” and “decoding” can be helpful to parse out this mechanism. According to Hall, the producer “encodes” meaning via discursive signs (such as words and images) with the goal that the receiver “decode” according to the producer’s intention. Since the whole process is influenced by conditions internal and external to both producer and receiver and by the communicative mechanisms themselves (such as technological, semiotic, and social aspects), the message may fall some-

11 For an excellent recent resource on decolonializing Christianity and theology, see Barreto/Sirvent 2019, esp. 1–21. They note: “The decolonial turn therefore examines how those in the ‘underside of modernity’ create spaces that serve as sites for producing theory, knowledge, philosophy, and we add, theology” (6).

12 González 1990, 129, 132. *Imago Dei* refers to Genesis 1:26–27, where we are told that God created humans “in God’s own image”. It is a central concept in theological anthropology, the area of theology that asks what being human is and means. For instance, what are the implications of being “like” God? In which ways, if any, are humans divine? What makes human beings human, especially among other humans? What does it mean that humans were created, and what does the God-given human mission of lordship over the rest of creation imply? What does the racial, sexual, and other diversity among humans say about being human and, by extension, God?

where between (conscious or unconscious) understanding and misunderstanding depending on the “positions” of both producer and receiver. Indeed, Hall hypothesizes that message and its meaning can be constructed from one of three positions: the “dominant-hegemonic”, which I would here call the colonial; the “negotiated”, which I would call colonialized; and the “oppositional”, which I would call decolonial, which according to Hall “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference”.<sup>13</sup> This “alternative framework” is *lo cotidiano*, which “retotalizes” *El Velorio*’s normative meaning through its decolonial, that is, “oppositional” force. Moreover, *El Velorio* was painted by a Puerto Rican, its subject matter is a Latinx funerary ritual, and in this article its receiver/decoder is Puerto Rican – the painting is thus thrice colonialized.<sup>14</sup> Because of this dense coloniality, *El Velorio* necessitates strong “opposition”, one that questions Oller’s position and nuances his intended message by applying a *lo cotidiano* focus. To do that, I will analyze *El Velorio* in three interrelated steps: description, Oller’s interpretation and my critical (re-)interpretation of the *bakiné*, and my own signification of the painting, concluding with the theological constructive insights that emerge from this process.<sup>15</sup>

## The Painter and the Painting: Description

Oller was born in Puerto Rico in the first half of the 19th century. Puerto Rico, located in the Caribbean Sea, was then a colony of Spain and has been a territory of the United States since 1898. Oller started training as a painter on the island at a young age but later refined his studies in Paris. Arriving

- 13 Hall 1993, 101–103. In my view, previous scholarship on *El Velorio* vacillates between the “dominant-hegemonic” (e.g., Benítez 1983; Delgado 1998) and the “negotiated” (e.g., Martorell/Hurley 2010) because their “decoding” is too closely aligned with Oller’s “encoding”.
- 14 The methodological implications of being both colonialized beholder and decolonializing agent were astutely raised by one reviewer. As they pointed out, this issue might necessitate its own essay! The possibilities and pitfalls of decolonializing are discussed at length by decolonial thinkers (cf. Mendieta 2012), especially considering prevailing colonialism on top of coloniality. In my case, as a Puerto Rican studying Puerto Rico, I must presume a “phenomenological bracketing” of my coloniality while doing decolonial work. In the end, however, I would say that liberative hope is of the essence of any decolonializing, and there it encounters theology.
- 15 Methods in material culture studies are numerous and diverse. One excellent methodology and four-step method foundational to my own work as theologian is in Prown 1982. In my second step, I present *El Velorio*’s normative interpretation and my critical reinterpretation, which then leads to “alternative” decolonial signification.



in the French capital at the time of the first stirrings of Impressionism, he became very skilled in its form and techniques and is considered one of its foremost even if less well-known exponents.<sup>16</sup> He also favored realism especially in subject matter, as *El Velorio* and other paintings such as *El Estudiante* (“The Student”, 1874) and *La Escuela del Maestro Rafael Cordero* (“The School of Teacher Rafael Cordero”, c. 1892) evince.<sup>17</sup> Oller is also a Caribbeanist in both form and content.<sup>18</sup> *El Velorio* certainly reflects that trio of stylistic preferences: the painting presents the Puerto Rican *bakiné*,<sup>19</sup> a real thing, yet with a special emphasis on the metaphorical, meaning-conveying qualities of light, color, and movement. According to the interpretation that has become normative, Oller was using the content of *El Velorio* to issue a scathing social and moral judgment of the Puerto Rico of his time while also showing his mastery of the Impressionist art form. Besides the deep resonances that the painting has had for Puerto Rican art due to its style, at eight feet by thirteen feet in size, *El Velorio* shadows Oller’s other existing paintings. As explained next, the work is monumental literally and, more importantly, content-wise.

In *El Velorio*, one can see the funerary wake of a small child in the late 19th century in a hilly area of Puerto Rico. The child’s body rests on top of a table in the main room of the modest house of a family of rural farmworkers. In the island, these farmworkers are called *jíbaros* and *jíbaras* (*jíbares* to be inclusive). The house is made of wood, with dimensions, materials, construction techniques, furnishings, and decoration that indicate a lower economic status: the house is not large or sturdy, and it is sparsely furnished and decorated. The people present are humbly dressed (most do not wear shoes, for example) and many *jíbares* are wearing *pavas* and *machetes*, the cane-field worker’s hat and the large knife used to cut the cane, respectively. There are corn cobs and plantains hanging from the rafters. Only trees, hills, and the sky are visible through the doors and windows. Clearly, the owners of this house and almost all those in attendance are poor, working-class people and live in a rural area of the island – *jíbares*.

The wake scene itself is chaotic, meaning that multiple stories are present simultaneously: one can see small children and dogs running; other attend-

16 Taylor 1983, 1–7.

17 Delgado 1998, 43.

18 Sullivan 2014, 1–7. “Caribbeanist” refers to Oller’s preference for themes and techniques identified with the Caribbean, located between North and South America in the Atlantic Ocean.

19 The word *bakiné* has an opaque etymology and no direct translation to English. The closest referent would be “young child’s wake”. See Alegría 2001 for further information regarding the word.

ees playing musical instruments, singing, and/or drinking; food about to be served under the gluttonous eye of a cat; men reaching for their *machetes* and staring menacingly at each other as if preparing to fight; the white-turbaned mother smiling despondently and offering the priest a drink, while an *hacendado* (“landowner”, probably the *jibare* father’s rich landlord) offers him gossip; a couple lusting in a dark corner; a *jibare* headed home on horseback; and an old dark-skinned man (given the late-19th century context, probably an ex-slave) thoughtfully paying his respects to the dead child. Notably, this last participant is the only one focused on the dead body itself while the rest are, arguably, amid a party filled with laughter, lust, and liquor.

In Puerto Rico, this wake is famously known as a *bakiné*. Grounded on the popular Christian belief that children who died at a young age are free of sins and therefore rise unimpeded to heaven, the *bakiné* celebrates the dead child, now an angel, and hence the funerary ritual is also called *velorio del angelito* (“angel’s wake”). The peculiar practice has roots in both Spanish and African religious traditions and in the 19th century is ubiquitous throughout Spain and Latin America, where it goes by several other names.<sup>20</sup> The *bakiné* is a joyful family and community celebration, many times lasting several days. Indeed, songs were composed specifically for *bakinés* and drinking home-brewed alcoholic beverages (locally known as *pitorros*) was encouraged. The ritual is well-documented in Puerto Rican and Spanish cultural histories.<sup>21</sup> Its place in the island’s folklore is also secured by its presence in influential 20th-century Puerto Rican literature and popular culture.<sup>22</sup>

## Elitist and Colonialized: (Re-)Interpreting *El Velorio*’s Background and Oller’s Worldview

For Oller, as for many of the island’s “elite” (meaning richer, landed, and formally educated), 400 years of Spanish imperialism had left the island in dire need of economic development and social transformation while at the cusp of an autochthonous Puerto Rican-ness.<sup>23</sup> The Spanish colonial project was

20 Some of these are *velatorio del angelito*, *quiniván*, and *florón* (Alegría 2001). In fact, a cursory online search yielded evidence that the practice continued deep into the 20th century but has been abandoned for decades, at least publicly.

21 See Abad y Lasiera 1788; Davillier 1874.

22 See Palés Matos/Steeves-Franco 1937/2010; Díaz Alfaro 1947/1996.

23 Delgado 1998, 42–44.



spent for these rich *hacendados*, and a cosmopolitan identity was emerging. *Bakinés* were but one example of the backward “superstition” of “country people”.<sup>24</sup> For this so-called elite, the solution was more political autonomy. And since Spanish Catholic and monarchic powers were deeply aligned, greater religious autonomy was needed as well. One also cannot forget that the United States was already a major global power by the late 19th century and had its eye set on the Caribbean as the staging site for its hegemonic control of this hemisphere, supported by the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny with its connection of militarism and Protestantism. Soon after Oller finished *El Velorio*, Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory – unfortunately, the dream of either political or religious autonomy did not come to pass. This burgeoning Puerto Rican identity and its relationship to empire and Western religion is the social background and agenda of *El Velorio*.

Given his “position” (in Hall’s sense), it is unsurprising that Oller envisioned the painting as social commentary on Puerto Rican everyday reality. The wake is represented as chaotic, a sign of the socio-political upheaval in the Puerto Rico of his time. While the funerary practice itself is not scandalous (that is, a wake at home was fairly common then), the undisciplined behavior of almost all attendees during a funeral is beyond inappropriate for Oller, exemplified best by the aforementioned lusty couple. There are other not-so-subtle hints of Oller’s displeasure with the island’s religio-political situation expressed in *El Velorio*: the incoming *lechón asao* (“roast pig”) is impaled and together with a rafter, it forms a cross-shape, turning the pig into a sort of Christ idol, and the priest sins by attending more to the pig than to the dead child or the family. The *hacendado* seems to further provoke the idolatrous priest; here Oller seems to hint at the unsavory (unholy?) alliance between the Catholic Church and Spanish empire. The pig stick also seems to stab the child’s body, which is nonetheless bathed in an incoming ray of light, ultimately transforming the child into a redeeming Christ icon and the house into Golgotha in the middle of chaos. Darker-skinned folk are much less present in the painting than light-skinned ones, with the notable exception of the centrally placed old ex-slave, who ironically is the only one behaving appropriately (at least for Oller), even when his skin marks him as less-welcome and unworthy of much attention by either the powerless *jibare* or the powerful clergy and landed men – a clear commentary on race and class.<sup>25</sup> For

24 See Oller’s quote below for these specific words.

25 In fact, Osiris Delgado emphasizes the centrality and significance of the old dark-skinned

Oller, societal backwardness seems to be solved by a total transformation of Puerto Rico through education and an emphasis on a purified Puerto Rican human being free of empire and religion, exemplified by the dissolution of “uncivilized” practices such as the *bakiné*. In that sense, *El Velorio* is intensely humanist while inherently theological: intentionally or not, it mediates God-talk in pictorial form.

Beyond the pictorial representation, Oller’s productive intent is clear in his reasons for submitting the painting for the 1895 Paris Salon, sent to its organizers:

Astonishing criticism of a custom that still exists in Puerto Rico among country people and which has been promulgated by the priesthood. On this day the family and friends have kept vigil all night over the dead child [...] extended on a table with flowers and lace tablecloth. The mother is holding back her grief, on her head she wears a white turban; she does not weep because her tears might wet the wings of this little angel that will fly to heaven. She grins and offers a drink to the priest, who with eager eyes gazes up at the roast pig whose entry is awaited with enthusiasm. Inside the room of indigenous structure, children play, dogs romp, lovers embrace and the musicians get drunk. This is an orgy of brutish appetites under the veil of gross superstition. Two figures, in the midst of the chaos: the old countryman, [...] pants rolled up [...], who comes to bid farewell to the dead youth who left forever.<sup>26</sup>

Oller’s socio-cultural critique shows in his own interpretation of the *bakiné* tradition as an “orgy of brutish appetites” and the beliefs supporting it as “gross superstition”. He embodies the minority “cultured” elite in contrast to the majority “uncultured” masses. However, even if genuinely desirous of a *puertorriqueñidad* unfettered from an imposed *hispanidad* and *catolicidad*, Oller and this elite were deeply colonized.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in his desire to critique the lack of social discipline of rural Puerto Ricans, Oller ends up

man in *El Velorio*, even calling him Oller’s “*alter ego*” (Delgado 1998, 45). However, even allowing for Delgado’s interpretation and its potential implications (for instance, that Oller’s positive take on dark-skinned folk means he was not racist), Oller’s description of the *bakiné* quoted below makes plain his elitist worldview.

26 Benítez 1983, 193.

27 *Puertorriqueñidad* (“Puerto Rican-ness”), *hispanidad* (“Spanish-ness”), and *catolicidad* (“Catholic-ness”) are terms common in Puerto Rican literature; I introduce them in Spanish here, though I translate them later for the sake of English readers.

immortalizing a reductive and discriminatory, racist even, view of Puerto Rico as backward, indeed justifying the colonial agenda of both Spain and the United States!<sup>28</sup> In the eyes of empire, any difference between cultured and uncultured in *El Velorio* vanishes. Simply stated, in his critique of Spain and imperialism, Oller sacrifices his own people. Sullivan argues that his art “mirrors the colonial experience” and is “marked by ambivalence and conflicted affinities”.<sup>29</sup> *El Velorio* as pictorial God-talk is both colonized and, worse yet, colonizes its beholders.

## Signification in a Latinx Key: Life not Death, Redemption not Sin, and Creation not Chaos

As evidence of a real cultural event, the *bakiné* shown in *El Velorio*, like all *bakinés*, is not an “orgy” in the strict sense of excessive indulgence but literally an everyday family and community event. And it is from this that *lo cotidiano*’s decolonial force can spring: *bakiné* is now seen as a religiously orthodox and popular celebration of full humanity. First, whether this specific celebration was excessive for 19th-century “elite” morality or an incipient “Puerto Rican-ness” is beside the point in a decolonial *lo cotidiano* reading. What *bakiné* represents is a celebration of life at the border with death. For these mourners-celebrants, death does not win – *bakiné*, like the smiling mother, is actually laughing at Death. Oller sees disrespect for the dead child, that is, a lack of attention by empire, Church, the community, and the family. However, that is colonialized thinking. From the standpoint of those that truly matter in all funerary rituals, that is, family and friends, paying respect means celebrating life, the joy that was on earth and will be in heaven. From the perspective of *lo cotidiano*, Oller misses the *bakiné*’s point. Indeed, celebrating life upon death is orthodox Christian belief: through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascent to heaven, believers affirm that death does not have the final word.<sup>30</sup>

28 Calling *El Velorio* “discriminatory, racist even” is justified by the analyses below. However, that interpretation does not determine Oller’s own views on race, which could arguably be not racist (see note 24). Many times, decolonializing work sheds light on implied or less visible traces of racism yet conclusions remain open to critique.

29 Sullivan 2014, 7.

30 The doctrine of the resurrection is central to Christianity in all its forms (see for example Catholic Church 1994, ¶988–991). Christians believe that, just like Christ after his earthly

Second, Oller's characterization of the ritual as "gross superstition" reveals more about his own misunderstanding of Catholic religion and Puerto Rican rural culture than about the nature of *bakiné* itself. Indeed, the *bakiné's* orthodoxy is evidenced because the celebration is based on the Catholic belief of the purity of the dead child's soul; that is, this soul is untainted by sins committed if still laden with concupiscence.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Oller's dead child, if baptized, was purged of sins, and even if not, the child is presumed too young to have sinned intentionally and is assumed to be welcomed into heaven by a compassionate God.<sup>32</sup> *Bakiné*, then, is a celebration of a child's sinless life in perfect accordance with Catholic belief even if surrounded by a sinful environment. In my view, this is what the old ex-slave man is pondering as he looks at the still child: the paradox of the fallen yet redeemed nature of humanity. Considering Oller's misunderstanding of doctrine, I suggest that Oller was deeply colonized in a religious sense as well.

Third, taking Oller's representation as faithful to the reality of *bakinés*, the "brutish appetites" represented are not primitive or animalistic but fully human. In other words, a decolonial reading does not see anything "brutish" in the painting but people's lives as they truly are. On the one hand, one can certainly see the sins of lust, wrath, envy, and gluttony in the painting (and perhaps pride, sloth, and greed as well), represented in a range of figures from the lustful couple to the covetous priest. Yet, on the other hand, the theological values of hope, faith, and love are also visible, from the playful child to the pensive old ex-slave. Therefore, the *bakiné* painted by Oller is reality, that is, full human life in all its beauty and ugliness. In essence, what Oller expressed in *El Velorio* is creation, God's work on earth. In his colonized mind, he interprets the creative as chaotic, "brutish". But inside *lo cotidiano*, the chaotic aspect of creation is not inimical to but an intrinsic part of the meaningful complexity of being human.<sup>33</sup> As stated before, for Latinx theological anthropology, the fullness of Latinx self and reality includes both joy and toil, health and sickness, harmony and chaos. Such is *lo cotidiano*: an amalgamation of experiences in the quest for human

demise, the faithful that have died throughout the ages will live again eternally when God establishes the kingdom of heaven on earth. The child's death is doubly hopeful in this regard because of their immediate presence in heaven and assured reunion with family at the end of days.

31 Catholic Church 1994, §1250.

32 Catholic Church 1994, §1261.

33 This insight is partly indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this article. Thank you.

fulfillment. Calling this event an “orgy” reveals Oller’s colonialization in the socio-cultural and religio-moral sense.

Lastly, contrary to Oller’s arguably humanistic intent, *El Velorio* values the religious besides the non-religious in this material space. The small cross over the entry door marks the humble rural dwelling as Christian. The presence of the priest makes “Catholic-ness” abundantly clear as well, even if ironically so: as previously stated, his face and body language express Oller’s critique of the institutional Church. I already mentioned the plausible religious meaning of the ray of light shining on the dead child and of the “cross” formed by the stuck pig and the dwelling’s roof beam, the latter turning the pig into the crucified Christ. I also see a less-defined figure behind the old black man – is it perhaps some sort of angel? Can one make out wings and the angel coming out of the child’s body into the light? Could it be a veiled attempt at an allegory for the soul? Thus, a decolonial reading of this *bakiné’s lo cotidiano* does not separate the religious from the non-religious. Religious presence emerges in and sustains non-religious spaces, and apparently non-religious acts can express a religious intent. Indeed, the religious and non-religious collapse into each other in the materialities of *lo cotidiano*.<sup>34</sup>

## Further Signification, Now in a Theological Key: Hermeneutics, Relationality, and Creative Faith

Signifying *bakiné* as an everyday celebration of life and popular beliefs has consequences for knowing and understanding popular religion, that is, for the theology behind religio-cultural practices such as the *bakiné*. Since *El Velorio* as pictorial God-talk springs from a colonial context, decolonial theology’s allegiance with other disciplines that think decolonially can be helpful in parsing out these consequences. In the context of Puerto Rico, the decolonial subversive and liberative effort starts with a recognition of an autochthonous identity and culture that spring from a complex 500-year

34 “Materialities” are opportunities for the “material” to occur (see note 3 on material). In *El Velorio*, there are materialities visible in all those present in the *bakiné* which matter in various ways to each individual and to all together; for example, materialities of hospitality and solidarity between friends and family, and materialities of grief in the mother. Indeed, there are materialities between *El Velorio* and its beholders as well, some of which are made evident in this essay, like the materiality of colony.

colonial history. For instance, Luis Rivera Pagán parses out some of that complexity in terms of language. To be Puerto Rican is to be born of at least two worlds, one Spanish and one U.S.-English: islanders are habituated to be bilingual.<sup>35</sup> I would also add the indigenous Taíno and African for a total of four entangled worlds and worldviews. The larger implication is that Puerto Ricans are in essence both of one culture and multi-cultural, that is, partially belonging to several cultures in discrete areas, such as traditions and political leanings, but not belonging completely to any one of them. Being Puerto Rican is both fixed and dynamic. This specifically Puerto Rican kind of Taíno-African-Spanish-U.S. “in-betweenness” is part of a paradoxical popular hermeneutics that tinges Puerto Rican autochthonousness both in the island and in the diaspora.

With this autochthonous hermeneutics in mind, *El Velorio* “looks” different. I do see the painting not as “astonishing criticism”, to quote Oller again, but as a visual record of this paradox. Indeed, its ultimate concern shifts from critique to praise if viewed thusly. Beholding *El Velorio* plurally emphasizes its display of Puerto Rico’s “in-between” relationality, in this case the collapse of racial, class, and generational barriers in celebration and in crisis. *El Velorio* certainly is not a romantic fictional account of *jibare* existence; *bakinés* were a real thing and Oller’s representation is fairly accurate. However, as developed above, what I see is moving hospitality and solidarity, not chaos. I also do not see idolatry in the pig or in the priest. I see an interacting trio formed by dead child, old man, and pig, the divine and the human relating materially. The Christ icon bursts into this domestic sacred space and completes a Trinity, with God and the Spirit-Consoler already there. The pig signifies commensality in the human realm and communion with the divine realm, collapsing their boundary and recording their relationality for the revelers in the painting and the beholders of the painting. Indeed, the mother is serving a drink to the beholder, not to the priest. In addition, *El Velorio* freezes in time an “in-between” autochthonous-ness wished for by those that celebrate a plural and harmonious Puerto Rican-ness. Oller’s intention was to impactfully portray the *bakiné* as “backward”. Indeed, the opposite has happened. *El Velorio* has transcended its eight by thirteen frame in the Puerto Rican mind because of its plural creative energy. *Bakiné* is not only about suffering but also about hope: what I see in the priest’s eyes when he looks at the pig is “eager” expectation not gluttony. The *jibare* life is sparse

35 Rivera Pagán 2019, 52–53.

but plentiful in other ways; in love, for one. Straining under the colonial yoke is hard, but those oppressed find ways to survive, and sometimes thrive, by drinking *pitorro* and dueling with *machetes* when called for.

*El Velorio*, then, is not predominantly about a ritual or the politics of rural versus urban or orthodox versus popular religion but about the *imago dei* Puerto Ricans should aspire to be: Oller's painting is nothing less than a *jíbare* decolonial Christian theological anthropology. Since the *imago dei* is a challenge to approach the human to the divine as much as possible, Oller's creation unintentionally expresses an imagined yet carefully curated Puerto Rican-ness as a challenge for the rest of humanity: being Puerto Rican by way of *El Velorio* is being eager and grateful to God, creatively faithful even in the direst of circumstances.

## Theological Insights: *El Velorio* as Decolonial Ecclesiology, Creativity, and *Mestizaje/Mulatez*

After progressing from the description through (re-)interpretation to signification of *El Velorio* in light of the decolonial *lo cotidiano*, I offer three insights into the decolonializing power of *El Velorio* itself, in other words, three ways in which the painting decolonializes its beholders and their understanding of Latinx being human. This is a constructive endeavor, meaning it is open-ended and forward-looking, because each beholder must rethink their own hermeneutical lens and will not necessarily adopt mine or its implications.

*Lo cotidiano*, as central to Latinx theology, makes visible its particular hermeneutical lens, the preferential option for the poor, as reality is interpreted from the side of the socio-economically and spiritually deprived, that is, those marginalized by human non-religious and ecclesial kyriarchies. That *El Velorio* presents a particular moment of rural, impoverished family and communal life is self-evident. What is less evident is its Latinx ecclesiology, that is, the painting's interpretation of this Latinx community from a theological perspective. For these mourning-celebrating poor Puerto Ricans, as for many other less-privileged believers, funerary wakes in churches are for the rich. However, the church is not the building but the humans that dwell inside. The family house then serves as sacred space, confirmed by Oller through the small cross above the door in the painting. This sacredness is



made present or augmented not by a priest (especially an aloof one!) but by family and friends, that is, by a loving community in solidarity throughout days and nights of mourning. Seen from the perspective of the poor, this wake turned the family home into a church of the poor, a fact emphasized by Oller's placement of the roast pig as Christ icon. A decolonial reading sees this icon-pig not as idolatrous but as mediating the sacredness of family and friendship.

Another important aspect of *lo cotidiano* is movement, the everyday comings-and-goings of life in general. Oller the impressionist uses movement in *El Velorio* to wonderfully balance existence. For Latinxs, movement is a fact of life, many times tragic yet ultimately salvific under the grace of God. *El Velorio* is a factual snapshot of this movement among life and death. There is chaos but also order: one side of the painting is happier, the other sadder; folks and food are coming in through one door and others have already left (or are thinking of leaving) through the opposite door, perhaps after a long night of celebrating. Human and non-human glances crisscross. The dead child lies still and the old man stands without moving while children and adults play. A decolonial reading of *El Velorio* sees the painting's chaos not as lack of discipline or decorum but as creative force. Indeed, the chaotic scene counteracts the presumed finality of the child's death ("left forever", wrote Oller) and confirms the continuity of the child's soul. And it is a creative continuity in which all creation participates: human and non-human; man, woman, and others; child, adult, and senior; nature and culture; powerful and powerless, sacred and profane. Undoubtedly, there is darkness and light in this celebration: sadly a child is dead, even if happily now an angel. But that duality powers the moving *cotidiano*, a self-evident salvific process as ineffable as its ground of being, God.

Oller wittingly represented a racial cross-section of Puerto Rican society distinguishable in his time, and to this day. In the painting, some are or can pass as white while others are dark-skinned.<sup>36</sup> Seen as a spectrum with Taíno, Spanish, and African influences, all are inside of what could be called a "Puerto Rican" race where skin color and phenotype are undetermined within the spectrum. Indeed, for those of Latinx ethnicity, questions about race are fraught and extremely difficult to answer. Some Oller scholars have

36 These racial categories certainly would not mean the same thing in Oller's time and in our time. "White" would be much more associated with Spanish heritage, and "dark-skinned" would signify *mestizaje* and *mulatez* to varying degrees (from the miscegenation of Taíno, Spanish, and/or African peoples).

identified *méttisage* in the painter's work, especially in *El Velorio*, as part of his attempt at developing an autochthonous Puerto Rican-ness, yet it must be interpreted in light of his elitism.<sup>37</sup> Latinx scholars have teased out theological valences of *mestizaje* (and *mulatez*, a related concept) that would contrast with Oller's views.<sup>38</sup> For one, *mestizaje* construes mixed/hybrid race in a hopeful light, as a symbol of the Latinx Christian unity-in-difference or as the *telos* of Caribbean ethno-political unity and not as an expression of racial difference. By preferring difference, Oller just reinforces the colonial trope of Catholic institutional versus popular or European versus Caribbean – of us versus them. A decolonial *El Velorio* does not forget difference yet sees *latinidad* (“Latinx-ness”) in both its chaotic and harmonious complex meanings, perhaps best represented by the yellowish skin tone, the blue shoes, and the red-laced pillow of the dead child: the *raison d'être* of this celebration is not the different colors or the blending of color but being beyond indigenous, imported, and/or imposed skin color as a whole – the anti-colorist stance of *mestize/mulate* joy and suffering.

## Final Word on Humility, Self-reflexivity, and Transcendence

These theological insights laid out above barely scratch the surface of the decolonializing force of *lo cotidiano* on *El Velorio*. As a “particular actualization” of “human transcendence”, its meanings certainly are “unfathomable”.<sup>39</sup> Yet decolonializing through *lo cotidiano* still opens up the painting's agency and transcendence to the benefit of a Puerto Rican (and Latinx) knowledge base. Decolonializing makes the beholder uncomfortable with their history and identity, more so if Puerto Rican, but productively so. As pictorial God-talk, the painting remains, yet the beholder transcends. This is what I take to be Rahner's meaning in the passage quoted above. Theology and art intersect in their transcending force, and the transcendent nature of the human connects with both through *El Velorio*'s theological and artistic agencies. This is one of the “so-whats” of decolonializing *El Velorio*: its ability to communally (that is, ecclesiological), chaotically (that is, creatively), and racially/ethni-

37 Sullivan 2014, 1–7.

38 Nanko-Fernández 2015, 19–20. *Mestizaje* and *mulatez* are not easily translated; they both express the racial mixing/hybridity present in many Latinxs today.

39 Rahner 1982, 29.

cally (that is, theo-anthropologically) entangle Puerto Rican beholders (and by extension, all other beholders) with their own histories and identities in their sojourn as Latinx and/or Christian.

Thus, a decolonializing interpretation using *lo cotidiano* forces the interpreter to humility and self-reflexivity: imagine the audacity of implying one knows more about *El Velorio* than Oller!<sup>40</sup> That is why a constructive approach is so useful. Decolonialization has an opaque *telos*, so understanding depends on the beholder's own experience. And even if any decolonial epistemologies can lead to further erasure of the painting's encoding on the part of decoders, it is still forward-thinking in an ethical sense.<sup>41</sup> However, this other "so-what" is less clear. Simply stated, once the decolonial change has occurred, what reality are we left with? What real-life implications does it have or produce? Have the powerful lost and the powerless gained power? Is this new knowledge agentic enough to subvert kyriarchy? Many of these questions are difficult or impossible to answer. The work is necessary, though, and can be fruitful for rescuing alternative (actually, native) epistemologies that colonialism destroyed or coloniality keeps erasing.

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40 For these two and other methodological implications, see Tuhiwai Smith 2012.

41 See Mendieta 2012.

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