



Radford, W. (2017) Meaning in the margins: postcolonial feminist methodologies in practical theology. *Practical Theology*, 10(2), pp. 118-132.

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Deposited on: 13 September 2017

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Meaning in the Margins: Postcolonial Feminist Methodologies in Practical Theology

This paper troubles research approaches in practical theology by exploring how attention to lived experiences of marginalisation in postcolonial feminist theologies shapes theological methodologies. Drawing on the work of Walter Mignolo and Marcella Althaus-Reid, the margins are explored as epistemological and material sites that shape theological knowledge production. The complex intersections of experiences and identities of lives on the margins require a resistance to taxonomic or technical theological methodologies. As discussed by Mayra Rivera and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the margins are not sites of deprivation, but of critical praxis, so theological methodology must be attentive to everyday experiences of the margins. The paper highlights where postcolonial feminist theologies add to practical theology about poetics by attending to making meaning. The paper concludes by reflecting on academic engagement with postcolonial feminist theology and the lived experiences of the margins.

Keywords: postcolonial theology, feminist theology, theological methodology, lived experiences, liberation, poetics

Introduction

This paper seeks to offer a necessary troubling of approaches to research in practical theology by exploring how attention to lived experiences of marginalisation in postcolonial feminist theologies shapes theological methodologies and attends to the production of theological knowledge. In the first section, I examine the margins as material and epistemological sites, and the implications this has for theological knowledge production. The second section explores how attention to the complexities of lived experiences of the margins challenges taxonomic approaches to theological knowledge. Thirdly, I discuss recognition of the margins not as a site of deprivation, but of critical praxis, and how practical theology is challenged to work with this critical praxis. In the fourth section, I suggest that postcolonial feminist theologies add to existing practical theologies of poetics through this attention to the making of meaning. By way of conclusion, I want to question the possibilities of Western academic engagement, including my own, with postcolonial feminist theology and the relationship between the discipline of practical theology and lived experiences of those on the margins.

In my own research, I engage with community approaches to transforming socio-economic marginalisation in the UK, working with and alongside communities to research theological questions raised in these practices. Central to these approaches is the understanding that those with experiences of marginalisation should be at the heart of movements for liberation. This engagement continually raises questions for

me about the way socio-economic marginalisation is understood, spoken about, and responded to, including in my own theological praxis. How have I ‘deployed’ experiences of marginalisation in my theological discourse, and who benefits from this? Even in engaging liberative praxis, where might my efforts reinforce power and privilege? Who and what informs decisions about what is and is not relevant to marginalization? What determines the questions and themes explored in interviews and reflective workshops, or what paths to pursue in academic writing and community activism? In the desire for theologically coherent and politically salient praxis, where have I avoided speaking about the complex and ambiguous? My suggestion is that postcolonial feminist theologies enable further exploration into these concerns, highlighting the way questions of ethical responsibility are tied to how we come to know and represent social and political realities.

Postcolonial feminist theology is not a homogenous field or discipline, but rather a varied and contested area of dialogue and discussion, as it engages with the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, geo-historical location, class, and economic status. The term ‘postcolonial’ is itself a contested term, although thinkers drawn on here follow Homi Bhabha’s argument in *The Location of Culture* that ‘post’ does not signify an historical stage after colonialism; rather postcolonialism requires a restless energy and critical resistance to the ongoing legacies of colonialism and the renewed ways in which power differentials and oppression present themselves. Postcolonial feminist theologies seek the transformation of injustices and a theological praxis that is engaged in and responsive to lived experiences, meaning that postcolonial feminist theologies are often theologies that are deeply engaged in practice. In her keynote address to the International Academy of Practical Theology in 2013 Kwok Pui-Lan noted that whilst the concerns of postcolonial theology are ‘not new for practical theologians’, practical theology still needs to adequately engage with postcolonial theology for tasks such as unmasking colonial epistemological frameworks; facilitating the development of inclusive, liberative practices in worship, education and community life; understanding ‘hybrid identities of immigrant and diasporic in Christian formation and social practice’; and cultivating new cultural imaginary (2015: 122-125).

Within the field of practical theology the role of lived experience has produced much debate. The prominence of the action-reflection or pastoral cycle has encouraged practical theologians to integrate experience into theological reflection,

however criticisms are raised that modes of action and reflection remain polarized within the field (Ward 2008: 33-50). Questions also remain about the integration of social scientific methods within practical theology, either as criticisms of the non-theological epistemological basis for such methods, or as seeing theology as ‘too separate’ a mode of reflection when it is placed ‘after’ social scientific research rather than seeing theology as a ‘sensitivity that permeates the enquiry’ (Fulkerson 2007: 13). Heather Walton indicates that both feminist and empirical theologies can treat theology as a ‘higher sacred frame’ into which insights from lived experience of qualitative research can be received and given meaning (2014: 176), and Elaine Graham is critical of certain methodological approaches in practical theology that result in measuring Christian practices up against a ‘script’ of revelation; such reflections raise the question of whether lived experiences and practices are potential sites of revelation in themselves (Graham 2013:160). I suggest that postcolonial feminist theologies contribute to this debate not by offering easily accessible and replicable methods for engaging experience in theological reflection, but rather in the way that listening to the experiences of those on the margins may offer a vital questioning of the processes and norms across the discipline of practical theology.

Margins as material and epistemological

In exploring how experiences of the margins shape theological enquiry, I draw on the work of Walter D. Mignolo and Marcella Althaus-Reid, focusing particularly on where they articulate the margins as material and epistemological. Mignolo’s work on decolonizing epistemologies articulates where systems of knowledge have been produced through oppressive colonial relationships and his calls for critical, alternative forms of knowledge or ‘border thinking’ have been deeply influential for a number of postcolonial theologians working on theologies of the margins. Althaus-Reid pioneered postcolonial feminist practical theology,¹ engaging with multiple perspectives and communities in her work, and my focus here is on her critique of the production of theology within existing relationships of capitalism. Mignolo and Althaus-Reid have a different context and purpose for their critiques, but for this paper I focus on three significant similarities in their arguments that impact

¹ Althaus-Reid was a member of the International Academy of Practical Theology, taught practical theology at the University of Edinburgh, and worked in grassroots adult theological education.

understandings of ‘the margins’, and how lived experiences of the margins relate to the production of theological knowledge.

Firstly, in articulating the margins as material and epistemological, both situate the production of knowledge within existing colonial or capitalist relationships. Mignolo affirms Enrique Dussel’s analysis that whilst the relationship between colonized and colonizer is paradigmatic for the production of European epistemologies, the contributions of these relationships were unacknowledged in order to legitimize the European, independent knowing self (2002: 57). Mignolo’s concept of ‘border thinking’, or dwelling in ‘exteriority’, as he explains, ‘is not the outside, but the outside built from the inside in the process of building itself as an inside’ (2011a: 36). For Mignolo, this is a recognition that being termed ‘outside’ or ‘other’ is a discursive invention by those who benefit in terms of power by defining the world from their ‘inside’, and thus border thinking requires changing the terms of the conversation as well as its content (2011b: 275).

In *From Feminist to Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid takes up an historical-materialist analysis of the production of theology, in which she argues that the tensions between church and theology in Liberation Theology are ultimately determined by their location within a capitalist system. She articulates that it is not that grassroots communities have been excluded from the production of theology, rather it is that they have been alienated from their participation in the production of theology, including in Liberation Theology.² Althaus-Reid highlights that the concerns for retaining the ‘rigor of theology’ whilst engaging with Base Ecclesial Communities results in Liberation Theology preserving the idea that ‘the theological needs of the academic are in tension with pragmatic or ecclesial needs’ (2004: 110). Thus debates surrounding the production of theology remain focused on the tensions between church and academy, rather than recognising that both institutions, and the production of theology, are located within the wider economic system that defines human relationships and needs. Althaus-Reid goes on to argue that this model of the production of theology replicates the dualistic tension between ‘thinking’ and ‘action’, with liberationist thought being focused on ‘action’ – the needs of the church – and a devaluing of ‘thought’. In this dualistic presentation, she argues that

² Essentially, whilst grassroots communities are producing theological reflections tied to their material context, the ‘product’ of theology is removed from their control, and circulated without reference to those material conditions.

Liberation Theology retains a conception of ‘thinking’ as rooted in idealism, and she states ‘as if thinking was not the symbolic of action and the living metaphor of possible history’ (2004: 10). Ultimately this thought/action dualism is perpetuated by and in the capitalistic presentation of the relation between church and theology, and she calls for church and theology to dwell on the margins of the capitalist system – both in the margins of the epistemology of the market, and dwelling with those on the margins of society.

What this suggests is that theological methodologies require a recognition that their epistemologies are already tied up in colonial and capitalist systems that have already named, represented, and valued the world, determining what is central and what is marginal. From this, debates in practical theology surrounding the tensions between the ‘needs of the academy’ or ‘the needs of the church’ may be re-orientated toward recognising the placement of both within oppressive economic systems, and the material and epistemological implications these systems have for theological praxis.

This leads to the second point, that whilst Mignolo and Althaus-Reid advocate turning to what has been excluded from these epistemological systems, namely the embodied experiences of those on the margins, they are wary of ways of interpreting these experiences that result in the perpetuation of oppressive theologies. Mignolo identifies that ‘you have to go to the reservoir of ways of life and modes of thinking that have been disqualified by Christian theology since the Renaissance and which continue expanding through secular philosophy and sciences’ (2011b: 275). Specifically, he argues that it is the embodied experiences of colonial subjects that have been disqualified from knowledge generation; and that these experiences are productive of ‘border thinking’, critical, alternative ways of thinking and doing. However, he is clear that decolonial epistemologies cannot proceed by attempting more inclusive, expanded versions of colonial epistemologies, aiming to make the previous ‘other’ appear as the individual, knowing self of western thought. Re-phrasing Frantz Fanon, Mignolo questions the idea that those who have been signified as others or ‘anthropos’ by colonial systems of knowledge ‘*will come closer to being a real human being in direct ratio to his or her mastery of disciplinary norms*’ (2009: 7, italics original). Mignolo makes it clear that border thinking is not about becoming recognized as a human through a dehumanising system, but about questioning the systems that regulate and dictate what is central and what is marginal, economically

and epistemically, that dictate what it means to be human. As a result, he articulates that it is the bodily, geo-historical experiences of those on the margins that are productive of border thinking and decoloniality, rather than those that critique Western epistemologies from within (2011b: 277). Essentially, not all alternative or critical thinking is border thinking; rather border thinking emerges from the lived, bodily experiences of the margins.

For Althaus-Reid, whilst Liberation Theology has focused on the experiences of those in poverty, it has failed to account for the complexities of these lived experiences, as she argues “[t]he poor” as the subject of Latin American theology functioned as a Metaphysics of presence or abstract authority obliterating the contradictions that gender, sexuality and race introduce in the analysis of the poor masses’ (2004: 127). This failure to remain with the contradictions and complexities around gender and sexuality is part of what made ‘the poor’ such an easily marketable, re-locatable product between Liberation and Western theologies. She argues that whilst Liberation Theology has acted as the ‘theology of the poor’, it ‘still obeys the tradition and thinking of the logic of the centre, and, although in opposition, it perpetuates the centre’s discourse by default’ (2004: 129). The logic of reversal – of stating ‘the preferential option’ for the marginalized without critiquing the very norms that have determined the centre and the margin – has, for Althaus-Reid, perpetuated rather than dismantled oppressive epistemologies and theologies.

Further, she critiques the way in which Liberation Theology has become a marketable product in Western theology, that the experiences of those on the margins are treated as ‘theme parks’ or ‘botanic gardens’ for Western theologians – an interesting place to visit rather than a valid location for dwelling and producing theology – and where the meaning of the marginalized person’s experiences is still ‘brought’ and controlled by the Western visitor (2004: 129). Thus for Althaus-Reid, Liberation Theology’s failures to account for the complexities of gender and sexuality has resulted in portrayals of ‘the deserving, asexual poor’, an easily commodified product, readily exchanged for a notion of ‘the poor’ in other global locations. As a result, in much of her own work, Althaus-Reid focused on these excluded elements of gender and sexuality alongside economic issues as a way of challenging hegemonic theological systems. Althaus-Reid argues that ‘one of the most important challenges that Queer theologies bring to theology in the twenty-first century: the challenge of a theology where sexuality and loving relationships are not only important theological

issues but experiences which unshaped Totalitarian Theology (T-theology) while re-shaping the theologians' (2003: 8). As Hannah Hofheinz argues, Althaus-Reid's focus on indecent theology was to expose the materiality of lives on the margins, to 'gesture toward the resurrection of that which has been or is disappeared, whether that is the exclusions of sexuality or economics or the forced disappearance of whole human beings' (2015: 110). For Althaus-Reid, 'Postcolonial Theologies go further than liberationist ones because their quest is to dehegemonize multiple bodies, such as human bodies in the discursive limits of sexuality, for instance, but also bodies of knowledge, including cultural and economic knowledge' (2004: 129).

Thus, even when practical theologies may focus on the lived experiences of the margins, if they do so without examining where theological epistemologies have disqualified certain embodied, geo-historical, sexualized experiences, these same exclusions will be perpetuated, continuing norms that recognize only some experiences as valid for theological knowledge.

Thirdly, turning to the margins raises the issue of the purposes of knowledge production as Mignolo and Althaus-Reid question whether knowledge is for the purposes of domination and control, or whether it can place people first. Mignolo draws on the example of Linda Tuhiwai Smith as someone who 'practices anthropology as Maori rather than studying the Maori as an anthropologist' (2009: 12). Here, Mignolo presents the option for decolonial thinking as engaging in 'knowledge-making to "advance the Maori cause" rather than to "advance the discipline" (e.g. anthropology)' (2009: 14). Decolonizing epistemology requires a shift from knowledge making as a means of 'controlling and managing populations for imperial interest' to knowledge making for wellbeing as defined by the experiences and needs of local people (2009: 12). However, Mignolo is wary of the 'honest liberal' who thinks they are working with the locals rather than imposing knowledge and experiences, but is still implementing their own agenda, because they consider some regions and bodies of the world as more developed and therefore able to assist other regions who are 'behind' in that development (2009: 19). For Mignolo, decolonial thinking does not spring from a 'transformation of the disciplines' but rather the placing of specific human lives, and life in general, first (2009: 20).

Returning to Althaus-Reid's argument that the church and theology will only be able to challenge the system from the margins, she argues that they need to exclude themselves from the logic of the market and the market's framing of human

relationships through need. For Althaus-Reid, such a shift requires the reintroduction of God herself to the debate in such a way that ‘the church will not need theology, nor vice versa, but the people defining needs and relationships in their own terms from the margins’ (2004: 112). In the contemporary context, such a call to reintroduce God, and for a ‘people-centred’ theology are at risk of sounding hollow, if the person is once again separated from the various interactions of gender, sexuality, and economy in theological production. For practical theologies, this means that turning to the lived experiences of those on the margins cannot be conceived of as a project that may restore or transform the discipline of practical theology, or a project of transforming churches in this country. Thus even as I suggest that practical theologies may be able to learn from and draw on postcolonial feminist theologies’ deconstruction of the margins, I am wary of phrasing this as a way of reshaping or bolstering the discipline of practical theology.

Overall, recognising the material and epistemological nature of the margins brings to practical theologies a questioning of who and what has been systematically excluded from and devalued in the production of theological knowledge. In my own practice of theological research, I recognize the need to ask whose experiences I welcome as part of theological reflection, and where I might be screening out or reducing the embodied, complex nature of these experiences. These questions can be examined further through two points for exploration: the complexity of experiences on the margins, and the margins as sites of critical praxis.

Approaching complexity

Postcolonial feminist theologies trouble Western theological conceptions of the self and identity by bringing to the fore complex, hybrid identities and relational anthropologies. Again, postcolonial feminist theologies do not have one central theory of these alternative conceptions of self and relationships, rather diverse critiques and constructive theologies emerge from different traditions and locations. These theologies are critical not only of the notion of the white, European male as the ‘universal’ position for knowledge, but also of feminist constructions of essentialized identities and experiences as authoritative sources for theological knowledge. In exploring the intersections between postcolonial and feminist theology, Namsoon Kang articulates that as there are ‘multiple axes of oppression and colonization in our reality’, binary representations of oppressor and oppressed have to be resisted,

especially when ‘women from the global South are at the crossroads of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and nation’ (2013: 63). Similar to Mignolo’s argument above, Kang argues that recognising this intersectionality means that decolonizing theology cannot undertake a ‘reversal’ whereby the ‘theological interlocutor’ from a dominant location is replaced by one from the margins; rather this requires a ‘questioning of theological norms and standards, regardless of the regional or biological origins of such norms that inferiorize the power/knowledge of the other, the racialized other, gendered other, sexualized other, and so on’ (2013: 66).

Yet as Mayra Rivera explains, the complex intersections of experiences and identities cannot be understood by simply adding additional ethnographic categories: this breaks down as ‘the well-known hybrid, and other postcolonial characters...offer us a critique and alternative understandings of subjectivity under multiple, mutable, multidimensional force-fields of power and allegiance’ (2008: 124). Thus in her work on a postcolonial theology of transcendence, Rivera suggest that it is the bodies of those excluded by oppressive systems, and the transcendence manifested in those bodies that ‘offers a unique testimony to the deceptiveness of totalities’, of political and theological claims to adequately know and represent ‘everything and everyone’ (2007: 113).

This has implications for the way complex experiences are reflected on and represented in practical theologies. As noted above, Althaus-Reid is critical of the theological tendency to homogenize experiences of sexuality and poverty in the face of many contradictions, and she laments ‘theology has become the art of erasing them’ (2000: 45). Although she is speaking specifically here about the erasure of contradictions, there is the sense that this also becomes the erasure of the realities of contradictory and complex lives. Althaus-Reid questions the ‘order of submission’ to the ‘administrative, taxonomic and colonial order in which historical experiences of some discourse about God and humanity are comprised’ (2004: 132). As she expresses, ‘theology’s permanent search for coherence is only an expression of its hegemonising objectives, a taxonomy’, and she questions ‘what is so wrong with being incoherent theologically?’ (2000: 24).

Commenting on Althaus-Reid’s concern for the erasure of contradictions, Marian Grau encourages theologians to ‘live and engage the questions they keep trying to settle too quickly’, and goes on to argue that remaining ‘with the presence of ambivalence’ keeps open and alive texts and traditions, calling us ‘to experience the

full reality of God, of life, beyond our attempts to domesticate divinity' (2004: 183). In a similar way, Kwok Pui-Lan articulates her interest in the 'cracks, the fissures, and the openings, which refuse to be shaped into any framework, and which are often consigned to the periphery' yet 'have the potential to point to another path, to signal radically new possibilities' (2004: 30).

In a workshop with activists, we sat and worked together on 'being heard' when talking about experiences of poverty and I was challenged by the assertions that the policy makers and researchers listening could afford to make generalizations. This might be in a researcher claiming to already know someone's story because they have heard similar; or in labelling someone's life story as being 'about', for example, mental health or homelessness. This has challenged me to consider my own taxonomic approaches in the desire to make my own research useful and practicable. One of the ongoing tensions is maintaining sensitivity to a person's specific experiences whilst being able to critically explore similarities with others' experiences in order to enable tactical understandings and action in the pursuit of justice. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (2004) offers an account of this challenge in her elaboration of *mujerista* theology, noting ways of bringing together the accounts of grassroots Hispanic/Latina women that can value difference and avoid aggregation. She draws on meta-ethnography to 'translate' accounts into one another by noting similarities whilst protecting the particular and drawing attention to difference; she gives the example phrase of noting 'this seems to be similar except that' (2004: 87). Isasi-Díaz is also clear that the generative themes created in this process are not about researchers developing a 'line of argument' for themselves; rather the goal in analysis is liberation for the grassroots community (2004: 87).

Yet I also recognize that my own work still lags behind, I still read and research within a taxonomic system. Even in researching postcolonial feminist theologies, I screen out books, chapters, sections and theories that I consider irrelevant to my topic. Engaging in Althaus-Reid's work, I focused on her writing on the production of theology, the sections labelled under 'postcolonialism, feminism and liberation' and not on sexuality, as if believing these to be different subjects, as if her work on sexuality is not also about economics, postcolonialism, and liberation. Additionally, in seeking to define my argument, I have run the risk of presenting an all too homogenous 'postcolonial feminist theology' by focusing on similarities, rather than the diversity of stances, locations and interests.

Resistance and critical praxis

Discourse around the margins raises questions of on whose terms the margins are defined, and indeed on whose terms the margins are reconceptualized. Mignolo's concept of 'border thinking' is influential in postcolonial feminist theology, as it articulates the margins as the spaces where the dominant epistemic system finds its limits and critical challenge becomes possible. Drawing on this, Mayra Rivera notes that in postcolonial theology, the concept of 'the margins' has been redefined away from what Gayatri Spivak critiques as the desire for the locatable marginal (1993: 55), toward understanding the margins as sites of critical engagement. Thus Rivera is critical of theories of neo-colonialism, such as those of Hardt and Negri, that suggest that domination in the global economic is so complex that nothing stands outside of this neo-colonial system. Rivera is critical of this precisely because it refuses representation of the margins: if it is thought that the margins do not exist, this means there are no marginal or border spaces from which critical thinking and resistance can emerge. Drawing on Mignolo's 'border thinking' in which the margins are spaces where alternative knowledge is being produced, Rivera argues that marginal spaces 'are described not merely as places inside or outside realms of domination, but as spaces produced by critical praxis' (2008: 126). Thus Rivera argues that a key theological task is to open spaces for those who are not heard and represented within contemporary economic and epistemic systems, and to remain attentive to the different forms of domination that produce multiple and complex experiences of the margins.

Practical theologies that seek to open the margins as sites of critical praxis must then seek to listen to different experiences of the margins. Kwok Pui-Lan argues that it is not multiple differences between people that are barriers to solidarity, but rather 'indifference, ignorance, egoism and selfishness' (2004: 60). Detailing her own engagement with womanist theologies, she draws on the work of M. Shawn Copeland to articulate solidarity as a question of speech and action, rather than an act of straightforward identification. Throughout her work, she highlights the ongoing necessity of dialogue, listening to and learning from experiences of people from different marginal locations, as she argues that we 'cannot understand ourselves without listening to others, especially those we have oppressed or have the potential to oppress. Such critical engagement is the beginning of solidarity' (2004: 60).

For practical theology to be attentive to the lived experiences of those on the margins, it must also recognize these lived experiences as forms of and contributions to critical theological praxis. Developing her own earlier argument that the margins are a site of possibility more than of deprivation, bell hooks comments that these margins are not ‘mythical’, but come from lived experiences that nourish critical resistance (1991: 150). In her articulations of *mujerista* theology as a decolonial discourse, Ada María Isasi-Díaz argues for the centrality of ‘lo cotidiano’ or ‘the everyday’, which is both the everyday experiences of Latinas and their critical engagement with it. As Isasi-Díaz describes it, lo cotidiano is:

the space – time and place – which we face daily, but it also refers to how we face it and to our way of dealing with it. Realizing that lo cotidiano has hermeneutical value, that is, that it is not only what is but also the interpretive framework we use to understand what is, lo cotidiano is a powerful point of reference from where to begin to imagine a different world, a different societal structure, a different way of relating to the divine...as well as a different way of relating to ourselves: to who we are and what we do. Lo cotidiano, therefore, has an extremely important role in our attempt to create an alternative symbolic order. (2011: 49)

Isasi-Díaz argues that academic theology struggles to truly encounter ‘lo cotidiano’ because it focuses too readily on large structural issues rather than seeing the political implications of everyday reality as a source of theological knowledge; again this is a question of what has been traditionally excluded from theological epistemologies (2011: 55-56). She argues that what is required in *mujerista* theology is ‘a constant commitment to encounter the reality of impoverished Latinas’, without which we ‘cannot claim to value Latina’s subjugated knowledges’ (2011: 55). Engagement with lived experiences of those on the margins requires an understanding that daily life for those on the margins is itself critical resistance. However in commenting on Isasi-Díaz’s articulation, Christopher D. Tirres calls for a greater distinction between ‘lo cotidiano’ as daily reality and as a subversive, conscientized everyday reality and seeks clarification of how people move from their experience of the everyday to subversive practices (2014: 317).

This furthers my questions about listening to and learning with diverse experiences of the margins. The group of practitioners and activists I have been reflecting with have challenged my assumptions that discussions of injustice always need to be speaking directly ‘about’ structural issues like food poverty or

benefits sanctions. I am trying to think more about how I can continually welcome embodied, everyday experiences on their own terms as practices of critical resistance. Even in stating this, is it only as 'critical resistance' that I am starting to value the everyday, still struggling to encounter my own embodied reality and those of others? Recognising the margins as sites of critical praxis indicates that practical theologies must resist framing experiences of the margins as experiences of deprivation and lack, and instead as experiences of active working, supporting and struggling against oppression together. Such an approach, drawing on existing wisdom within practical theology, requires respect for and sensitivity to the critical engagement and meaning-making agency of others.

Poetics and postcolonial feminist theologies

I have been arguing that in deconstructing the margins as complex, material, epistemological sites of critical theological praxis, postcolonial feminist theologies continue to draw attention to the dynamics at work in the construction of theological knowledge. In this way, these discussions intersect with and contribute to our theology about poetics, which examines ways of making meaning in practical theology. Rebecca Chopp's influential work on the 'poetics of testimony' revisions theology as 'a kind of practical and poetical ordering that helps us frame events, listen, make connections of meaning and politics, and explore new possibilities' (2001: 61). Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes of the 'poetics of resistance' for a pastoral theology that refuses the pretence of objectivity and violates theological decorum in order to 'get at the inexpressible' and to invite participation into the midst of struggle (1998: 186-196). Heather Walton's *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* explores poetics across the discipline of practical theology, drawing attention to the elements of poetics in writings on congregational life, public theology, and pastoral care. Walton also advocates a poetical practical theology attentive to the divine in material, everyday life. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on three areas where postcolonial feminist theologies resonate with and develop these explorations of poetics in practical theology.

Firstly, in questioning where practical theology has sought stable, objective, empirical knowledge, poetics attends to forms of knowledge that have

been typically excluded in practical theology, in particular the bodily and the everyday. Drawing on the work of de Certeau and Lefebvre, Walton suggests a poetical practical theology that goes 'beyond the boundaries of current epistemological categories' and engages 'with things we may have perceived as being of little worth which are hard to study and impossible to pin down in texts and tables' (2014: 183-184). Through her own creative life writing as well as discussions of theory, Walton makes clear that everyday life is not only a source for but also a site of theological wisdom. For Chopp, the 'poetics of testimony' is concerned with 'poetry, theology, novels, other forms of literature that have expressed how oppressed groups have existed outside modern rational discourse' (2007: 155). Thus Chopp's poetical and practical ordering in theology is attentive both to those who have been excluded from theological and public discourse, and also the forms, languages and images that have been determined as not valid for speaking of 'the real' in these discourses. This resonates with postcolonial feminist articulations of the exclusion of certain groups from theological knowledge production, as well as discussions about the embodied and everyday being overlooked as forms of critical, resistant knowledge. Furthermore, postcolonial feminist theologies add to these discussions on poetics by highlighting the need for continued analysis of the multi-dimensional dynamics of power in theological discourse.

Secondly, influenced by the work of Paul Ricoeur, discussions of poetics suggest the transformative aspects of making meaning in practical theology. Explaining Ricoeur's theory of metaphor as the meeting of different terms, Walton describes metaphoric construction as 'what enables human beings to engage in transformative action in the world as they create new conjunctions that empower them to apprehend existence in fresh ways' (2014: 144). For Chopp, the 'poetics of testimony' shapes a theology that is constructive and creative in seeking to speak of what has been previously excluded, and she draws on Ricoeur to suggest this poetical practical theology 'seeks not so much to argue as to refigure, to reimagine and refashion the world' (2001: 61). Thus poetics indicates where practical theology must attend to our apprehensions and imaginings of the world as inseparable from our actions in justice-orientated praxis. Again, this resonates with the attention in postcolonial feminist

theologies to the margins as epistemological and material sites, and the creation of an alternative symbolic order that is part of a critical, liberative theological praxis. However, postcolonial feminist theologies may pose the following question: on whose terms have such refashionings and reimaginings of the world been deemed transformative?

Finally, poetics in practical theology has attended to 'the unspeakable', where we are confronted by the limits of speech in attempting to articulate trauma and suffering, or indeed, the divine. Drawing on trauma theory, Chopp considers theology ordered by 'the poetics of testimony' as able to 'hear' broken and fragmented language and silence, aware that experiences of suffering cannot be fully expressed or represented (2001: 64). She argues that the 'failure' of language in response to trauma does not need to be overcome, but rather poetical practical theologies should be 'respecting and protecting this gap between the named and the unnameable' as it is something 'Christian theologians should know something about' (2001: 64). Walton comments on Chopp's poetics of testimony as a 'discourse of alterity' that 'speaks powerfully out of the realm of the silenced and we encounter it as prophecy; speech that transcends our current context and calls to us with the voice of God' (2014: 146). However, Walton also takes Chopp's insights further, arguing that poetics offers a 'more disruptive and threatening form' through which we can begin to 'discern the irruption of an unmanageable transcendence' (2014: 162). Poetical practical theology then is not aiming for an alternative system of knowledge, but rather it is an orientation toward alterity even in the midst of encounter. Again, this resonates with where postcolonial feminist theologies have articulated the limitations of theological systems in the face of the full reality of existence. Both poetics and postcolonial feminist theologies remind us that liberative praxis is about both practical action *and* the kinds of claims made in theological discourse to adequately know and represent God and the world.

Concluding

I have argued here that postcolonial feminist practical theologies offer alternative understandings for engaging with the embodied, everyday experiences of the margins. However, such an approach also troubles the possibility of setting up easily replicable

methods that one can recommend or lend in practical theology; what it argues for instead is the recognition of the margins as material and epistemological, for the complexity of intersectional experiences, and for the necessity of recognising everyday experiences of the margins as sites of critical, resistant praxis.

Such an approach also requires a questioning of academic engagement with postcolonial feminist theologies, and with the experiences of marginalization. Althaus-Reid is sceptical of Liberation Theology's retention of Western Christian norms, and the re-appropriations of Liberation Theology within Western Theology; however she is also critical of attempts to categorize dualistically 'bad theologies' (Western) from 'good theologies' ('third world liberation') or vice versa, as such attempts are paradigmatic of 'the Western style of obsessive classifications and moralization of ideas and behaviours' (2004: 127). Mignolo argues that although there is nothing stopping 'a white body in Western Europe from sensing how coloniality works in nonEuropean bodies', such an understanding 'would be rational and intellectual, not experiential' (2011b: 280). Thus, whilst it is not clear that First World academics can engage in postcolonial theologies, it also remains unclear that they cannot (Keller 2004: 223). This engagement remains ambivalent.

I want to question whether as a white, academic woman from the global North I can engage with postcolonial theologies, but I also want to trouble the construction of the question itself. As noted above, postcolonial theorists argue that modern systems of representation emerged from the relationship of the colonizer to the colonized, but this relationship was submerged or foreclosed, with the European colonizer emerging as a self-defining, self-enclosed individual. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that as well as examining its role in global economic and political frameworks, Western feminist scholarship must consider itself 'in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship – i.e. the production, publication, distribution and consumption of the information and ideas' (1984: 336). Mohanty goes on to argue that without the 'discourse that creates the Third World', 'there would be no singular (and privileged) First World', and that 'the one enables and sustains the other' (1984: 352). What sustains privilege here is perhaps being able to phrase the question in ways that suggest the ability to ignore or foreclose this globalized, geo-historical, embodied, gendered, sexualized network of relations in the production of theology. First World academic theology, including practical theology, is always already entangled in this network of relations, whether or not it chooses to

name itself as such. As Catherine Keller notes, ‘from the perspective of any relational thinking, the relationality does not become ethical unless in some way acknowledged. With whatever stylized repetitions we perform ourselves, our sex/genders, our ethnicities and economies and species, we may veil or reveal our interdependence’ (2015: 226). As a result, the question becomes not whether practical theologians can engage with postcolonial theologies and those on the margins, but how to recognize these relationships adequately and ethically.

Whilst these may appear to be largely theoretical concerns, ethical relationships with others are at the heart of liberative praxis; attending to injustices in our communities, societies, and world deeply impacts theological approaches and practices. Attention to poetics in practical theology addresses where ethical questions are about both our practical engagement with others, *and* our language, texts, images, and forms. Essentially, this engagement requires continued analysis of where our theological discourses determine and reinforce what is central and what is marginal, what is oppressive and what is liberative. Engaging with postcolonial feminist theologies encourages me to stay with these questions about interpreting what is liberating, and to explore these in dialogue with others. This demands that I listen again, and again, with others; listen to elements of conversations, interviews and workshops that I have or are likely to exclude as being irrelevant because they not ‘about’ inequality as defined by the academic discipline, faith community, or voluntary organisation with which I associate. People’s experiences continue to be erased when everyday life is screened out, or sorted into different categories; ultimately, when people are treated as offering ‘useable’ information, rather than as collaborators, co-interpreters. These issues of liberative theological praxis are not simply raised and resolved, and certainly not on one’s own, but require ongoing engagement with others in attending to the dynamics of power, representation, and transformation.

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