

9 Intersectionality in Latin America?

The possibilities of intersectional analysis in Latin American studies and study of religion

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In this article, I ask how intersectionality might be used as an analytical category in Latin American gender studies and especially in the case of seeing religion as possibly one "difference" that has to be taken into account in intersectional theorizing. I trace the history and different ways of using the concept of intersectionality, also asking critical questions. Then I ponder the possibilities and difficulties of seeing religion as a difference. My concrete case study is the cult of *La Negrita*, the most important personification of the Virgin Mary in Costa Rica, and women's interpretation of her.

En este artículo investigamos cómo el concepto de interseccionalidad podría ser usado como una categoría analítica en estudios de género en el contexto de América Latina, y en especial si se puede entender la religión como "una diferencia" que debe ser tomada en cuenta en las teorías sobre interseccionalidad. Además de ello también se analizan la historia y las diferentes formas de uso del concepto de interseccionalidad desde un punto de vista crítico. Posteriormente se presentan una serie de reflexiones sobre las posibilidades y dificultades de entender la religión como una diferencia. Mi estudio de caso es el culto de *La Negrita*, la personificación más importante de la Virgen María en Costa Rica, y las interpretaciones de las mujeres de ella.

In the early nineties, I was working as a visiting scholar at a research institute in Costa Rica. The institute organized and hosted two-month training courses for NGO, church, and social movement activists from all over Latin America, with the intention of giving them theoretical tools and perspective for their activism. I was asked to teach the group of people, which consisted of indigenous, church, environmental, and human rights activists, about feminism and gender issues, which I did. After I finished my talk, a middle-aged Colombian *mestizo* Catholic priest (male by definition) thanked me warmly but also gently pointed out how the issues that I was talking about might have relevance in Europe, but that, since I was European, I might be blind to or not know well enough the Latin American context. Before I had time to reply, a Kuna indigenous woman from Panama, who until then had been silent, commented furiously, “If Elina cannot speak for Latin American women as a European, how can you as a man speak for us either? Or who are you to speak for the indigenous people if you are not one yourself? I fully agree with what Elina said, but it is our responsibility to think about it in our own contexts.”

At that time, in the early 1990s, nobody was speaking of intersectionality, but that is exactly what was at play in that little seminar room. The concept of intersectionality has since become important in contemporary feminist theory. The diversification of central concepts such as gender and women, and the inclusion of differences between women, have by and large meant taking into account race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality is a way of theorizing gender in relation to these other differences or constructions of identity and selfhood. In other words, it has been understood that focusing only on gender is not enough for understanding and explaining the different forms of female subjectivity or agency. Understandably, gender and gender difference have been the principal focuses of feminist theory. Taking other differences and their interaction with gender into account does not mean diminishing or excluding the meaning of gender but, rather, understanding it more broadly. Differences within one gender (between women, between men) may be greater and more important than differences between men and women of the same society and class. In intersectional analysis, these differences are not contrasted with each other. Rather, the focus of analysis is on their hierarchical ordering and on the ways they interact with each other.

In this article, I will present and analyze the concept of intersectionality, also critically, and ask under what kinds of conditions it could be applied in Latin American gender studies, in which it has not been widely used until today. I will also briefly present some concrete examples from the study of religion in the Latin American context.

How to understand intersectionality?

Intersectionality is not a unified theory or approach. It is not a new grand theory, but rather a way to combine some central theoretical developments in recent feminist theory under one concept. There are different ways of understanding and using the concept of intersectionality in contemporary feminist theory. Sometimes these differences are related to disciplinary differences. There is something in the concept itself that has made it useful for many feminist scholars, on the one hand, and has resulted in unclear uses of it, on the other.

In general, the invention and application of the concept has been a response to the critique of the predominance of analyses of gender of the kind that have tended to obscure the vast differences between women inside even one society, not to speak of cross-cultural differences, and the lack or weakness of theorizing race, ethnicity, and class as principal markers of these differences in relation to gender. Thus, the emphasis in the use of the concept is not as much on differences between women and men as on trying to theorize differences inside each gender. To put it more concretely, differences between men and women may be – and often are – smaller (not meaning that they do not have any relevance) within the same class and ethnic group in a given society than differences between persons of the same gender across class and ethnic differences. Thus, a well-educated Nordic academic woman – such as myself – may have more in common with the men of the same group than with another woman from a very different cultural, class, and ethnic context. By this, I do not mean that women across different ethnic and class boundaries would not still have commonalities which they share as women. An important question in this regard is the meaning and importance given to the body in feminist theory, something I am not going to deal with here. Nevertheless, the greater the other differences, the greater the difficulty in speaking of either women or men as a homogenous group marked mainly by their gender.

The term was coined by the legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw from the United States (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). According to her, domestic abuse and rape affect women of color differently than they affect white women because the programs developed to help abused women and the laws created to punish domestic violence ignore the ways in which race and gender discrimination combine to exclude women of color in the United States (Crenshaw 1991). Thus, intersectionality was intended to address the fact that the experiences of black women were ignored and misunderstood by both feminist and anti-racist discourses. Crenshaw argued that theorists need to include race and gender as well as their interaction in the analysis of the multiplicity of black women's experiences in a racist and sexist society (Crenshaw 1989).

Ever since, the concept has been clarified and developed further by various scholars. My intention is not to go through that history but to take examples of some of the main uses of the concept, including the differences between them. Obviously, gender is central in all these uses. But what exactly is seen as intersecting with gender, and how that intersecting happens, remains somewhat unclear, as can be seen in the principal different ways of understanding and naming the forces that intersect.

Different uses of the concept

The most common answers to the question above, which nevertheless are not commensurate or interchangeable, are the following. Some theorists speak of differences or social divisions (Yuval-Davis 2006: 199), while others talk of identity or identities (Nash 2008). According to some, it is explicitly positions, hierarchies, or asymmetries of power (Lykke 2003, 2005) that intersectionality intends to theorize. Further, some speak, in much more neutral terms, of categories (of difference) (McCall 2005; Ludvig 2006; Davis 2008). Thus, there are various ways of understanding and naming the object of an intersectional analysis. Some theorists would say it is about analyzing social power structures (such as class), while others apply the term to denote how identity formation is a complex, and often changing, process (such as age).

Yuval-Davis points out these multiple uses of the term and the potential problem of this multiplicity itself in the absence of a > clear consensus on the meaning of the term.

According to her, the question of whether to interpret the intersectionality of social divisions as an additive or as a constitutive process is still central. At the heart of the debate is “conflation or separation of the different analytic levels in which intersectionality is located” (Yuval-Davis 2006: 195). She herself talks of social divisions. There is a need to differentiate carefully between different kinds of differences. Social divisions are historically and culturally specific, include power aspects, and are always both social and individual (Ibid.: 199–201).

Kathy Davis, for her part, says that there has been considerable confusion concerning what the concept actually means and how it can or should be applied in feminist inquiry (Davis 2008: 67). However, this very weakness or confusion may be the source of the concept’s strength: “It offered a link between critical feminist theory on the effects of sexism, class, and racism and a critical methodology inspired by postmodern feminist theory, bringing them together in ways that could not have been envisioned before” (Ibid.: 73). Thus, she claims that it may be the very paradox of the term’s weaknesses and open-endedness that has allowed it to become so successful. The concept’s lack of precision and its myriad missing pieces are what have made it such a useful heuristic device for critical feminist theory (Ibid.: 77–78). Intersectionality is obviously in need

of a definition and further development. I intend to take part in this endeavor by raising some new critical questions, some of a more general nature, others from the perspective of my specific fields of research, Latin American studies, on the one hand, and feminist study of religion, on the other.

Some critical questions

With regard to content, because of the history of the concept, gender is most often “intersected” with class, race, and ethnicity. Less common, but nevertheless used, are sexual orientation, age, nationality, language, and religion. In principle, there is of course no end to these differences or categories, which may be one of the weaknesses of the concept. The list of different differences runs the risk of becoming as empty as the list of positions that has been important for feminist scholars when they want to be open and transparent about their position vis-à-vis the subject of their research. I am fully aware of the important epistemological underpinnings that this development in feminist and cultural studies has. The question is rather about the (im)possibility for any of us of being aware of the vast array of “differences” between human beings. Further, we see ourselves differently from the ways others see us. A difference that I as a scholar name as central for my possible epistemological and other limitations in a given context may have less importance for my informant or someone else I am collaborating with.

The story with which I started the article is an example of this. It takes us back to the question of who names differences between people as relevant or, conversely, irrelevant – and when and for what purposes these differences are named. At the same time, my example also illustrates the fact that in Latin America, as well as in other parts of the global South, the inclusion of issues of race, class, and ethnicity in gender was well developed before the term intersectionality was even coined.

With this in mind, I propose that even though an umbrella term such as intersectionality may be useful for theoretical purposes, it is through concrete examples and in specific contexts that it can gain its potential force. To go back to my example, especially in a culture which is not my own, I can never be sure which one of the “differences” is more important and in what kinds of ways: my being a European, white, and educated or my being a woman? As my example also shows, it does not always depend on my own self-definition. And further, in concrete situations it is also about the interplay of multiple and simultaneous power structures: delegitimizing feminism as “European” may result in delegitimizing Latin American indigenous women by a priest whose self-definition was working in solidarity with the poor – including the indigenous people – of his country. In fact, he probably looked as “European” as I in the eyes of the Kuna woman.

The different uses of intersectionality, in different disciplines, point to yet another open question. Is the term descriptive or analytical? In other words, is it the “results” (simultaneous effects of differences or asymmetries) or the “starting points” (different differences) that is meant by intersectionality? Or is it both? For example, race or ethnicity as parts of a person’s (positive) identity is not the same as racism or ethnic discrimination, which are (negative) results of society’s asymmetrical power structures. Similarly, a gender identity is not consummate with sexism or heterosexism. In a sexist or racist society, these identities are affected by power structures, but they are always more or something different from them. In fact, the positive self-identification, individual or communal, is the source of critique of racism and (hetero)sexism. Thus, whatever is meant by power asymmetries, they are not universal, one-way-only, and simple, and it is important not to use them interchangeably with racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities.

Further, some “differences” that are bodily rooted and experienced are more stable and powerful than others. Gender, even in its possible malleability, is difficult to place in the same category with, for example, nationality or age. We come back to the question of what is meant by “difference” and which differences are seen as important or even central. As lived experiences, some “differences” are more powerful and “fixed” than others. Some of them change over time (such as age), some can be changed (religion, class, nationality, and even gender), some obviously cannot and should not (race, ethnicity).

How, then, do we choose between the different, sometimes even conflicting, uses of “difference” in intersectional theories? How and why do we prefer some and exclude others? Without giving any definite answer to this difficult question, I will briefly present some further questions that could help in that task. First, issues of methodology are central. One example of the methodological development of intersectional analysis is Leslie McCall’s proposal for three different approaches as methodological tools in the intersectional analysis of different categories. These are: anticategorical complexity (since social life is so complex, fixed categories of any sort are simplifying), intercategory complexity (using categories strategically to analyze changing configurations of inequality), and intracategory complexity (focusing on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection, while also maintaining a critical stance toward categories) (McCall 2005: 1773–74).

Second, questions of method are of course tied to methodological differences in different disciplines. If intersectionality is some kind of new grand theory or

umbrella concept, does this mean that research has to be done with different methods, even in the case of a single researcher? What implications does interdisciplinarity have for the intersectional approach? Third, the development of the term intersectionality has a specific history in the Anglo-American academy, especially in the United States. How to take cultural criticism and the possible difficulties for cross-cultural implementation of concepts and theories seriously? Fourth, as I have already discussed, a clarification should be made in the case of each piece of research of whether, by intersectionality, one is referring to theorizing identity or social power or both. Fifth, the vast debate between universality and cultural relativism as it is related to gender issues and women's rights is still – or even increasingly – important for gender studies and feminism. It is central to any feminist project, theoretical or practical, to take into account that the potential dangers of cultural relativism or cultural essentialism are as important as the dangers of universalism. This issue is directly related to the ways we understand and use the concept of intersectionality.

For example, according to Uma Narayan,

The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between “Western culture” and “Non-western cultures” and the women who inhabit them. Seemingly *universal* essentialist generalizations about “all women” are replaced by *culture-specific* essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as “Western culture,” “Non-western cultures,” “Western women,” “Third World women,” and so forth. (Narayan 2000: 81)

For her, in a way that is similar to gender essentialism, cultural essentialism assumes and constructs sharp binaries, and in both cases, the discursive reiteration of essential differences often operates to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such “differences” (Ibid.: 82). She calls attention to the importance of paying attention to internal plurality, dissension, and contestation over values and ongoing changes within any category (nation, religion, gender, etc.) – which is not to deny the existence of differences *per se* (Ibid.: 96). Narayan theorizes from within a postcolonial feminist context, which is why her critique has relevance not only to theories of intersectionality in general, but especially to feminist theorizing in the global South, including Latin America.

Latin American studies and intersectionality

Given these problems in the concept of intersectionality itself, could it have some relevance in Latin American studies, especially gender and feminist studies? As I have already pointed out, the term has its roots in Anglo-American English-speaking feminist theorizing, reflecting the specific conflicts between white and black feminisms in the United States. Unlike the term gender, which has found its way into mainstream gender theory in Latin America (*género*), it is rare to see intersectionality used in Spanish (*interseccionalidad*). I am not saying that it should be. With regard to our joint research project, Sarri Vuorisalo-Tiitinen has made an innovative effort to theorize intersectionality in the context of Latin American gender and ethnic studies, applying the concept in the case of Zapatista women. She uses the term *interseccionalidad* (Vuorisalo-Tiitinen 2011).

It is important to keep in mind the historical and cultural specificity of any concept, even when it is considered to be usable in a different cultural and linguistic context. For example, Finnish gender theorists are proposing various “indigenous” Finnish translations for the term intersectionality – a process which is fascinating epistemologically as well. Obviously, English and Spanish, as Indo-European languages, are more closely related, but it is nevertheless important at least to ask critically if concepts such as intersectionality can and should be used also in Latin American gender theorizing.

Issues of race, class, and ethnicity have been part and parcel of Latin American feminism and feminist theorizing from early on, even when not always without conflict and critique from minority women. Edmé Domínguez has analyzed this tension in the context of Mexican feminism as a different approach by “hegemonic feminists” (*feministas hegemónicas*) and “grassroots feminists” (*feministas de campo*) (Domínguez 2004). More broadly in the Latin American context, the same tension or difference has been described as a difference between feminist vs. women’s movements (*movimientos feministas* vs. *movimientos de mujeres*).

The conflicts and opposition between these two politically active women’s movements have shaped, at least to certain extent, the specific characteristics of Latin American feminism(s). Since the 1990s, these two different ways of feminist organizing have come closer to each other both theoretically and practically. Incorporating the demands of an increasingly feminist *movimiento de mujeres* type of activism in the construction of a more inclusive, racially and ethnically aware, and class-conscious feminist transnational project is the biggest challenge facing Latin American and Caribbean feminisms (Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992: 433). That article, with its prognostic for future challenges, was written twenty years ago. Whether that challenge has been met or not, and whether it is still

relevant, is not a question I am addressing here. However, some scholars were already then pointing out that it might be unnecessary to draw such a clear-cut line between the two groups or ways of organizing and theorizing. According to Amy Conger Lind, it is through the making of a collective identity that Latin American women have come to take a stance against several forms of power represented in their daily lives (Lind 1992: 147).

These are examples of how Latin American feminist practices and theorizing have been influenced by different factors, not just by U.S. or European feminist theory, but also by each country's own specific political and historical contexts, Third World and postcolonial feminisms, as well as by development discourses and practices. Should these specific influences on Latin American feminist thought and practice now be called intersectionality?

In the discussion at the Red Haina conference, where this paper was first presented, María Clara Medina pointed out that one possible problem in the use of the term intersectionality in the Latin American context is the way it has been theorized – and even proposed as “a weapon against discrimination” in the context of the United Nations – principally from the context of hegemonic countries, from “the North.” Can those who are discriminated against apply it to themselves, and if so, how? Medina also asked if intersectionality is a way of articulating rather than constructing something (for example, identities). Merely to identify “differences” easily becomes another hegemonic list or litany of various sorts of oppressions. Whatever the ways we use the term, we have to be aware of its theoretical and political connotations. If this is not done, speaking of intersectionality may be problematic in a variety of contexts that differ from the European and North American contexts because of history, political structures, and culture.

I think the term intersectionality can be used also in the Latin American context, if it clarifies and gives structure to at least some intentions to theorize gender in the multiethnic and class-divided Latin American continent. That is, the concept itself should be re-theorized in relation to the various specificities of the continent, including its feminisms. It is important to build on the continent's specific history and character of gender theorizing. For example, besides the above-mentioned development of Latin American feminisms, could the long history of *indigenismo* in various Latin American countries offer something that would make theorizing about intersectionality both genuine and critical? In religious studies, to which I will turn at the end of the article, movements such as liberation theology are specifically Latin American ways to combine theory and practice in a continent which is marked both by high religiosity and by class differences.

Religion and intersectionality

Religion has rarely been mentioned in the discussions of intersectionality, with some few exceptions. Nira Yuval-Davis mentions religion as one of the important social divisions (Yuval-Davis 2006:205). Erika Appelros writes explicitly about religion and intersectionality (Appelros 2005). However, many scholars of religion, especially those working in the field of gender and religion, have pointed out the lack or superficiality of theorizing religion in gender studies.

For example, according to Elizabeth Castelli:

If “women” has long been recognized as too abstract a category to be useful for analysis, “religion” has rarely been included in the litany of qualifiers (“race, class, culture, ethnicity/nationality, sexuality”) by which “women” becomes an ever-more marked and differentiated category. Yet feminist scholars who intervene in the academic study of religion have often drawn attention to the complicated role that religion has played in identity formations, social relations, and power structures. “Religion” as a category often cuts across other categories by which identities are framed (gender, race, class, etc.), and it often complicates these other categories rather than simply reinscribing them. (Castelli 2001: 4–5).

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who has done fieldwork among conservative Muslim women in Egypt, has a similar view:

Over the last two decades, a key question has occupied many feminist theorists: how should issues of historical and cultural specificity inform both the analytics and the politics of any feminist project? While this question has led to serious attempts at integrating issues of sexual, racial, class and national difference with feminist theory, questions regarding religious difference have remained relatively unexplored. (Mahmood 2005: 1)

For Mahmood, understanding women’s agency only or principally in political terms is too narrow. A binary logic of submission versus resistance is based on a teleological understanding of emancipation, which easily omits other forms of agency. She pays attention to women’s religious and ethical agency, which is also reflected in the title of her book, *The Politics of Piety*. Since religion and ethics are often so intertwined, she wishes to interpret her informants’ self-understanding also in terms of ethical agency.

Historian of religion Ann Braude, who in 2002 convened a conference of first-generation feminist theologians and religious leaders from different faith traditions in the United States, writes in the introduction of the book that contains the papers delivered at that conference:

As a group, religious feminists have worked over the last forty years to lift the religious women of the ages from obscurity, to acknowledge their roles in scripture, ministry, theology, worship, teaching, and devotion. Imagining and constructing non-sexist religious models for the women and men of the future, they have critiqued the conditions that fostered women's exclusion, so that those conditions can be changed. What a dreadful irony it would be, if their own history, the story of religion's interaction with feminism, fell out of the narrative, just at the moment when the history of the second wave is being written... Braude 2004: 3)

Braude is referring here to the way the historiography of second-wave feminism (in the United States) tends to leave out the voice, thoughts, and activities of religious feminists and academic feminist theologians. That, for her, as a historian, is "inaccurate, a misreading of America's past" (Braude 2004: 2). Religious feminists fell (and fall) between two hegemonic discourses. On the one hand, religious hierarchies and academic theology have often discouraged women's public leadership and ways of theorizing, or, at worst, portrayed them as agents of secularism and destruction of religious values. On the other hand, feminism has been reinforcing these views by mentioning religion only when it is a source of opposition (Braude 2004: 2).

I myself have pointed out these problems in Latin American gender studies especially, and especially in how religion is depicted in the well-known *marianismo* thesis of Evelyn Stevens (Vuola 2006, 2009). Feminist theory, as all the quotations above make clear, has often been both blind and sometimes openly negative toward any positive synergy between feminism and religion as well as towards the experiences of religious women. Even theories of intersectionality, which explicitly pay (self)critical attention to the blind spots of feminist theory and the myriad of differences between women, have by and large not been able to see religion as an important factor in women's lives. Has religion remained the last way of "othering" women – especially those of a different culture or subculture – in feminist theory?

Obviously, this also reflects the selectivity of interdisciplinarity within feminist theory. Theology has rarely been a discipline to be dialogued with. Feminist theologians, for their part, have not widely used ethnographic methods

or included the insights of anthropologists of religion in the development of a feminist theology that is also attentive to women's lived religious practices and ways of understanding their religious identity. What do women do with their religion? Women's ways of being religious and interpreting their religious traditions (often in tension with the official religion or religious elites) have not been central either in feminist theory or in traditional theology.

Religion as difference?

If religion is analyzed as one "difference" between women or as an important social division and producer of power asymmetries, it is possible to take it into account also in intersectional analyses. This may be especially crucial in societies that are strongly marked by religion, and in the case of women, by religious traditions that explicitly foster women's subordination and wish to expand their constellations of gender and sexuality into national legislation. This is clearly the case of most Latin American societies. However, it is as important to analyze carefully how in fact religion – in the case of Latin America, principally Roman Catholicism – creates and sustains subordination and how people, especially women, interpret that influence. My own research has shown that the single most important female figure in Christianity, the Virgin Mary, can be used and interpreted both in obviously sexist ways and in ways that empower women, often the most disadvantaged women. Thus, no large generalizations about the power of religion in societies and individuals should be made without paying attention also to how women interpret their religious traditions.

It is central that scholars of religion pay attention to sexist interpretations and practices within religions, but this should be done in relation to women's religious agency. In intersectional analyses, this means not only seeing religion as a "difference" between women (of different cultures and religions but also within a given religious tradition and society) but also bringing gender as an intersectional category to the study of religion. This makes it possible to understand religion both as a structure of power (institution) and as a source of empowerment and positive identity (individual, community).

Of the three different methodological approaches of Leslie McCall which I presented earlier, the intracategorical approach may turn out to be useful in understanding religion as one of the differences or categories as object of analysis. If it is true that secular feminism has not been able to be attentive to religious women's agency and self-understanding, the intracategorical approach can, on the one hand, help in shedding light on the importance of religion. On the other hand, it focuses on power constellations within categories, such as religion. Thus, religion is not only mirrored with secularism and secular society,

but gender asymmetries legitimized by religion are analyzed also, and possibly primarily, inside different religious traditions. This comes close to what I have called patriarchal ecumenism (Vuola 2009), by which I mean the similarities and concrete cooperation between the most patriarchal sectors of different religions (for example, Christianity and Islam). The differences of interpretations, especially in issues concerning women, gender, family, and sexuality, may be and *de facto* often are greater within a given religious tradition than between them. The same, of course, is also true of feminist and other cooperation in inter-religious dialogue.

Next, I will briefly present one case study from the Latin American context which combines gender theorizing with Latin American studies and the study of religion, but which also takes the above-mentioned possibilities of perceiving religion as a category in intersectional analyses. What follows is based on my ethnographic research in Costa Rica (2006 and 2007), where I interviewed Catholic women on the meaning of the Virgin Mary for them.¹

La Virgen de los Angeles alias La Negrita

The cult of the Virgin Mary was imbedded in Latin America at the very beginning of the conquest in the early sixteenth century. Often, she replaced pre-Columbian female deities, whose attributes were fused into a syncretistic Latin American Mary. Later, with the import of African slaves to American lands, the same happened in relation to African deities and beliefs. Thus, the various representations of Mary in Latin America are a fusion of European, African, and indigenous American elements. This is clearly discernible in the popular religiosity of the continent even today. The Virgin Mary is the most widespread single religious symbol and saint all over Latin America. Sometimes it is difficult to see the connection to the Biblical Mary of Nazareth or the official Catholic Mariology. The “official” and the “popular” – which should not be too sharply separated, either – live side by side, blended into each other. Popular practices and beliefs can live half-officially as part of the more recognized devotion, creating a distance sometimes between what is formally (doctrinally) accepted by the Church and what are seen as customs of the common people. This is also the case of the Virgin of Los Angeles, commonly referred to as *La Negrita* – “the little black one” – who was declared the patroness of Costa Rica in 1824.

The basilica dedicated to her is situated in the city of Cartago, the former capital of the country, about twenty-five kilometers from the present capital, San José. The statue placed at the main altar of the basilica is tiny, only about twenty centimeters high, somewhat clumsily carved of greenish black stone. Thus, it is one of many so-called Black Madonnas of the Americas. The figure is round and maternal, the Virgin holding the baby Jesus on her left arm.

According to the legend, written down in its contemporary and official form only in 1934, she appeared on August 2, 1635, to a young *pardo* (mixture of Spanish, Indian, and African) woman, Juana Pereira, on the outskirts of Cartago where she was collecting firewood. On a rock, she found a little stone image of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms, took it home, and placed it in a basket. The next day, she found the image again on the same rock. She thought it was another statue, but at home, she noticed that the basket was empty. This time, she locked the basket after placing the statue there again. On the third day, she found the statue on the same rock once again. Frightened, she ran home to check the basket and found it empty. She then went to the local priest, gave the image to him, and told the whole story.

According to the legend, the priest did not pay much attention to the young peasant girl and her story, but he did guard the statue. When he wanted to take a closer look at it, it had disappeared from the place he had put it. After some searching, he found it on a rock in the forest. This time he put clothes on the image and brought it to the church. The next day, when he was saying mass, he again noticed that the statue was gone. After the mass, he and another priest went to look for it at the same site as before. And there she was, standing on a rock, supposedly because she wanted a church dedicated to her to be built on that very place, which is what happened.

August 2nd is still today dedicated to *La Negrita*. On that day, each year, thousands of pilgrims from all over Costa Rica come to Cartago, many on foot, some walking for days from different parts of the country. According to what I read in the local media in 2007, more than half of Costa Rica's four million citizens participate in the *romería*, as the pilgrimage is called in Spanish. The highway from San José to Cartago is closed each August 2nd, filled with walking people whose journey ends in the basilica, in which they proceed on their knees to the altar where the statue is placed.

The cultural history of *La Negrita*, related to Costa Rican nationalism, class and racial conflicts, as well as to tensions between the state and the Catholic Church, has been the interest of some scholars, if not of many (for example, Zúñiga 1985; Sharman 2006). By and large, the cult has been given astonishingly little study by Costa Rican historians, anthropologists, or scholars of religion.

The history of *La Negrita's* cult is a story of how a marginal cult of marginalized people become a national(ist) symbol that supposedly unites the Costa Rican nation. One of the national myths of Costa Rica is that the country is both "whiter" (European) and more egalitarian than its neighboring nations. However, Costa Rican blacks – who live mostly on the Caribbean coast – as well as the indigenous people such as the *bribri* still suffer racism and marginalization. For them, the image of an egalitarian Costa Rica is a nationalist myth, created by governing elites to form a unified nation. The common interpretation of the

story is that *La Negrita*, being herself dark-skinned and having appeared to a person of despised race, had a clear message: that both “whites” (*blancos*) and “blacks” (*negros*) are God’s children and thus equal.

The cult of *La Negrita* has elements similar to those of other personifications of Mary in Latin America, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, but is specifically local in some of its meanings. Like *La Negrita* and Guadalupe, other Marian apparitions in Latin America have often happened to lower-class people, racially and otherwise marginalized, Indians and slaves, in times of turmoil. Church authorities have not believed them at first, but the apparition and the symbol itself have finally convinced them. Marian apparitions have been explained both as the motivation for the evangelization and control of the Indians and the blacks and as a story of their empowerment and greater social and racial cohesion – in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, even as the core of the Mexican *mestizo* identity (Paz 1959). One of the unique elements of *La Negrita* is that she appeared as a concrete object made of stone and not “in person,” as is the case with most other apparitions of the Mother of God, in Europe and elsewhere. Nor did she have any specific message to impart.

In the basilica itself, the little image is surrounded by nationalist symbols of the Costa Rican state such as the flag, reflecting her contemporary meaning principally as an “invented” symbol of what it is to be Costa Rican, having changed (been made) into that from a marginalized local cult of segregated black people, over the centuries. The racial conflicts, including slavery and the prohibition until the 1930s of travel by blacks from the (“African”) Caribbean coast to the (“Hispanic”) central valley of Costa Rica, are not remembered and recounted in the current interpretation and official version of the legend. Instead, the nationalist myths of a “whiter” Costa Rica and racial and ethnic equality are somewhat contradictorily combined in the current interpretation. Even her popular name, *La Negrita*, which literally means black (*negro/a*), is emptied of its original meaning of a black Madonna appearing to a poor black woman, and given a more *mestizo* sort of meaning: that the Costa Rican people is one and the same, united, and with a commonly shared national identity.

Downstairs in the basilica is the more popular (not necessarily as opposed to nationalist or hegemonic) materialization of the devotion, mainly in the form of small *exvotos*, locally called *milagros* (miracles) or *promesas* (promises). They are tiny metal carvings given as signs of thanks or request to the Virgin. Most often they represent the human body, everything from a full-size human figure – child or adult, male or female – to lungs, eyes, breasts, or legs. Besides these, people have brought to her clothes, toys, and even trophies of soccer teams who supposedly won their matches due to *La Negrita*’s help. Behind the basilica, there is a built-in fountain believed to contain *agua bendita*, water blessed by the Mother of God.

Both men and women, young and old, participate in *La Negrita's* devotion. She is not the only personification of the Virgin Mary, even in Costa Rica. When my informants spoke of the Virgin Mary, they mostly did so in the broad sense (*La Virgen María* or *La Virgen*), as did I, since the object of my interest was not specifically *La Negrita* of Costa Rica but the meaning of the Virgin Mary in general. However, since I conducted my interviews in Costa Rica, my informants often spoke of *La Negrita*, not interchangeably with the Virgin, but mainly as a specific, local aspect of their devotion, which also takes specific forms such as the August 2nd pilgrimage or bringing *promesas* to the basilica. Most of my informants stated that among all the different personifications of the Virgin Mary, *La Negrita* is known as being especially miraculous.

Tensions between the official and the popular, between the elite and the common people, were visible at the mass of August 2nd in 2007 which I attended together with thousands of *ticos*, as Costa Ricans are called in popular parlance. The open-air mass was held in the plaza facing the church and was presided over by the Archbishop. Members of the local political and social elites had reserved seats to which they walked through a pathway demarcated by cords. The rest of the audience either watched them, reminding me of an Oscar gala, or were lining up to get blessed water from the fountain behind the church. The line was long under the heat of the sun. Young and old, women and men, entire families, had brought bottles to be filled with water and taken home.

Costa Rican women and *La Negrita*

All my informants in Costa Rica were Catholic and self-identified devotees of the Virgin Mary, which many of them expressed in terms of being *muuy marianas*, very Marian. They were both urban and rural, most of them of the lower middle class, some with very little formal schooling, but some of the younger ones with even a university degree. My main question for them was “What does the Virgin Mary mean to you?” With this simple question, I wanted to understand why the Virgin Mary has become the woman “feminists hate and women love,” as I once described it somewhat provocatively in the title of a conference paper.

The ordinary as women's everyday (often primary) sphere in which they needed Mary's help was expressed by my informants in a variety of ways. For example,

If I lose something – something very common for us women, right? That we put a thing somewhere and then we forget about it – And me, more than once, I have told my female friends that at times when ‘Look, I lost such-and-such thing and cannot find it anymore,’ I tell them ‘Say to the Virgin (of Light, *Virgen de la Luz*) that she would search for it or give a little bit of light.’ And wow, it works for us. She gives it to us, if we ask with a lot of faith. (Olivia, interview February 9, 2006, San José)

Or,

The Virgin is like a telefax (laughs) which arrives to us just like that (snaps her fingers). It is she who intercedes in front of her son for us. As the woman that she is. As mother. As helper. She with her merciful heart, full of love, affection, and tenderness. As we women are. Tell me, don't we women always have more sensitive feelings than the men? We have a sixth sense that helps us see things that men do not see. (Olivia, interview February 9, 2006, San José)

The mundane, ordinary issues, which can vary between finding a parking spot or a spouse and having a difficult labor, are not too “lowly” to express to Mary. She is not judging; she wants to help and comfort. She is miraculous and has power. Above all, she understands.

It is really strange that, well, I always drive the car and my mother talks like crazy to her (Virgin Mary), really, ‘Ay, Little Virgin, I need a parking spot, but a big one,’ you know I am not that good a driver, well, ‘Find me a space,’ or if I am running late, my mother says, ‘I need a favor, why don't you ask the Virgin to do it.’ (Eugenia, interview February 8, 2006, Heredia)

And,

Because she (the Virgin) always has been on my side in the most difficult moments. I had a really, really difficult labor, in Germany, and I remember that I just surrendered myself, or, in fact, ‘If you did it, I can do it.’ (...) It has been very, very special, in the most difficult moments of my life, I have felt her tremendously by my side. (...) On another occasion, I lost my job, it was devastating for me, very, very impacting, and it turns out that it is the day of the Virgin of Fátima. And I remember that I went to mass like on any Sunday, and it happened to be the celebration of her, right? And I felt her hugging me, or, I felt her consolation, really, it wasn't like that all things would be resolved, but it really was like a consolation, her protection – that everything will be all right. (Eugenia, interview February 8, 2006, Heredia)

In a discussion with three middle-aged women from the popular education group of the Claretian Brothers in San José, the theme of giving birth and labor came up. One of them, Gisela, started to talk about her experience of a prayer

to the Virgin so intense that she did not feel any pain. Another woman, Laura, said, “She helps in labor when you ask her.” Gisela explained:

I feel that she helped me. Well, I can't say it was a miracle or what is a miracle, but I, for example, I have felt – well, her accompaniment, or, let's say, I am used to asking, ‘Little Virgin, help, so that Dad's operation will go fine,’ or that my baby would be fine, and so on, that her intercession has always worked. Well, is it faith or what is it, right? But I have never attended the *romería* [the pilgrimage for *La Negrita* on August 2nd each year], I never promised to do it, never, right? Well, I have crossed the church on my knees, but never the pilgrimage. I have bought the *milagritos*, though. (Gisela, interview February 8, 2006, San José)

Laura continued:

For me, (the Virgin) as mother, as the woman that she is, understands women well. Right? She understands us well because she is like us. Only that she is chosen among all the women to be a pure woman, a clean woman, to be the first sanctuary, in which Jesus was formed. (Laura, interview February 8, 2006, San José, continuing a story of her ectopic pregnancy and how the Virgin, *Mamita María*, helped her in her great pain and near death)

My informants' relationship to the Virgin Mary in general, and to *La Negrita* in particular, is that of intimacy, trust, love, and help. Women both internalize the teachings of the Church, including its official Mariology, and negotiate with them. In my informants' experience, Mary is primarily a channel between humanity and divinity.

All my informants emphasized Mary's role as *Mediatrice*, the mediator or intercessor, which is one of the most important roles of Mary in official Catholic Mariology as well. It is in this role of *Mediatrice* that Mary's both-and character becomes crystallized: Mary both as other women (human) and as different from them (divine). When praying to Mary, my informants emphasized her mediating role not only as something between divinity and humanity, but also as an active role: she is the *intercesora*, the intercessor, who has a power to act, to intercede. Since she is experienced as being closer to human beings, especially women and mothers, than God and Jesus, my informants felt that they could talk of anything to her without having to “control” themselves or ponder whether some mundane everyday worry is too small or insignificant to express. In this, they expressed Mary's womanhood, not just maternity, in the very same terms in which they defined themselves, in relation to men and children. My interest here is to stress the gendered, feminine, continuum between these women and Mary

as they experience it, not to judge their understanding of gender roles.

People turn to *La Negrita* either in order to participate in the national(ist) commonly shared fervor of certain days or at times of great anxiety and special need for miracles. Most often these had to do with health issues, relationships, family problems, unemployment, and poverty.

It seemed to me that people were well aware of the magical thinking related to the *promesas*, little artifacts in the form of a baby, a limb, or an eye, and that this kind of thinking is not encouraged either by the Church or by the secular society. However, it is obvious to anybody who visits the basilica how common it is to bring them to *La Negrita*. The most common business around the basilica, besides small restaurants, is the selling of the *promesas* and other religious artifacts. My informants were well aware that the Church does not accept Mary's divinity, she is not a goddess. At the same time, their lived religiosity blurs the line between her humanity and divinity. Mary is considered as (sometimes the ultimate) source of help. The devotion of *La Negrita*, in this sense, reflects the ambiguity of the official and the popular, institution and lived religion, doctrine and faith.

This uncertainty about the *promesas* and the blessed water are an example of another built-in tension in the cult. *La Negrita* is simultaneously a national(ist) symbol, the patroness of the nation-state, the highest symbol for formal Catholicism and its links to the Costa Rican state, and an object of people's greatest fears, hopes, and losses, which become visualized and materialized in the form of the *promesas* and the blessed water, on the one hand, and are experienced potentially as some kind of excess, magic, heresy, or backwardness, on the other.

Conclusion

It is important to analyze critically what kind of "difference" it is that religion makes in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and class. *La Negrita's* cult is one example of how these intersections are always local and should not be too easily universalized, either. At least the following tensions or differences can be traced in *La Negrita's* cult.

First, the tension between the "official" and the "popular" is particularly important in religious traditions in which these are divided according to gender, as is the case of Catholicism. Even though both men and women participate in *La Negrita's* cult, it seems that there are gender-specific elements in Marian piety. The main reason for this is that the Mother of God is herself a woman and, thus, also a strongly gendered religious symbol.

Second, from another angle, the line between the "secular" and the "religious" is practically impossible to draw in the devotion to *La Negrita*. She is simultaneously the main symbol of a secular state and the most important

religious symbol of Costa Rica. Third, the history of racial and ethnic conflicts is explicitly present in *La Negrita's* cult, even in the visual form of the statue itself. However, this tension has not been much analyzed. Fourth, the difficulties of including religion and religious identity in feminist theorizing about identity, intersectionality, and empowerment are another example of a tension present in *La Negrita*: feminism can draw a negative and one-sided picture of an important source of empowerment and selfhood for Catholic women.

And finally, the ideal of an equal Costa Rica is in clear tension with the class aspects in *La Negrita's* cult. Even when she is loved by both elites and lower classes, it is especially the poor and marginalized who turn to her in their concrete needs. The elite tends to see her as a symbol of Costa Rica; for ordinary people she is a source of help, understanding, and miracles, which give a horizon of hope for the ordinary life so often filled with real worries about income, health, and family relations. She is both the patroness of the nation-state, used for political ends, and the dark-skinned mother of the lower classes. It is also clear that *La Negrita* combines elements from both European Catholicism and more indigenous, possibly pre-Colombian, beliefs: she is American, African, and European, as are so many of her followers.

Notes

1 The following section of the article has been published in part in Vuola 2010.

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