

Agustina Luvis Núñez

A Life of Wandering through the Horizons of God's Justice

*Tú te rizas el pelo y te pintas; yo no;
a mí me riza el viento, a mí me pinta el sol.
Tú eres dama casera, resignada, sumisa,
atada a los prejuicios de los hombres; yo no;
que yo soy Rocinante corriendo desbocado
olfateando horizontes de justicia de Dios.*

You curl your locks and paint yourself, not I;
I am curled by the wind; [I am painted] by the sun.
You are homebound, resigned, submissive,
Confined to the whims of men; not I;
I am Rocinante galloping recklessly
Wandering through the [horizons] of God's justice.

– Julia de Burgos, “A Julia de Burgos” [To Julia de Burgos], translated by Skyler Gomez (2019)

JULIANY GONZÁLEZ NIEVES

To be a woman, *caribeña, puertorriqueña y negra*, and the only female systematic theologian on the island of Puerto Rico is not a small feat. To do theology in a disaster zone—a country ravaged by 500 years of colonialism, savage capitalism, natural disasters, and a corrupt government that leaves its people to die—is a very different setting than that of nice offices in the metropolis. Moreover, to exist as a Black Puerto Rican woman in a field not only dominated by White Euro-American men in the broader scope but also by white *Latinidad* in our smaller communal scope is a borderline miracle. That is the story of Agustina Luvis Núñez, currently the

only female systematic theologian in Puerto Rico and who, in many ways, *ella misma fue su ruta* [she herself was her route], like Julia de Burgos. And in that journey, her life has become one of wandering through the horizons of God's justice.

The Woman

Agustina¹ was born on March 31, 1959, to Luz Belia Núñez González and Mario Luis Grey in Loíza, a town named in honor of Taína chief Yuisa and the very center of Afro-Puerto Rican culture. Born into a poor family and community, her parents' immovable commitment was to her and her sister's education. In spite of poverty, Agustina describes her childhood as a happy one where her needs were always covered, and the church provided a space of belonging (Luis Núñez 2020). Her faith community—a Pentecostal autochthonous church, Iglesia Defensores de la Fe—also played a crucial role in Agustina's formation and her future interest in theology. In her reflection "I was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me," published on the *Global Ministries* website of the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ, Luis Núñez recounts how her local church immediately mobilized to share what little they had with an influx of Dominican immigrants who started to arrive in the 1970s to their *barrio*, La Central. She writes, "My Pentecostal church never reflected theologically on the meaning of this work, but we never quit seeking to help those who had recently arrived" (Luis Núñez n.d.). Her community embodied for her what a life of wandering through the horizons of God's justice looks like. In many ways, Agustina's life is a legacy of that witness to the God of Life.

Agustina's formative years and her growth as a student took place within the context of the Black Puerto Rican communities of Loíza and Canóvanas. However, it was when she began her college career at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) in Río Piedras that her process of *concientización* about her identity as *una mujer negra* in a racialized society began. This allowed her to look back on her life and identify the ways in which she had been racialized since she was a little girl, even within the local church. Agustina says, "I was in the church but I was never cast as the Virgin Mary or one of the angels for our church's Christmas play. If there was even a role for me, it was as one of the shepherds, who represented the lower social strata"

(Luvis Núñez 2020). For Agustina, “to be a Black woman in Puerto Rico is a question mark, a constant questioning from society of her capabilities, moral values, integrity, and even her sexuality and libido. It means having to prove what is assumed of other people. To be a Black woman in Puerto Rico is to be always read through the stereotypes” (Luvis Núñez 2020).

After graduating in 1980 with a bachelor’s degree in biology, Agustina went on to further her studies at the UPR’s Medical Sciences Campus to become a medical technologist. In her class of forty students, she was the only visibly Black person. Despite the challenges that structural racism poses for Black people in Puerto Rico and the economic limitations of her family, Agustina graduated in 1982. After twenty years of working in the healthcare field, she began studies at the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. The years of involvement in Christian education at her local church, and her many questions, which were often left unanswered by her pastor, were what led her there. She says, “My pastor would always begin his prayer saying, ‘God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,’ and I would always ask him afterwards, ‘Why don’t you mention Sarah, Hagar, Leah, and other women?’ To which he would say, ‘You ask too many questions’” (Luvis Núñez 2020). She believed formal theological studies could help her find answers to those unanswered questions, so she began by taking classes that interested her. From taking one course to a second one to a third one, Agustina completed a Master of Divinity degree in 2001. Towards the end of her program, a faculty member encouraged her to further her theological studies. This led her to the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where she earned a Master in Theology degree in 2003 and a PhD in systematic theology in 2009 (Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. n.d.).

In Chicago, her identity as a Black Puerto Rican woman from the island intersected with the USA’s reductionist perception of Latinas. Luvis Núñez was (and is) “too negra” to fit the USA’s imaginary of Latinas, yet “too Latin American” to escape the challenges faced by them. In her, the multiple oppressions of being a Black, Spanish-speaking, island-Puerto Rican woman in the USA compounded. The seminary context was not free of these dynamics. She recounts,

Many times, I felt that the knowledge that us Puerto Rican women or Latinas could bring to the table was invalidated. Sometimes, the academic nature of what one wanted to do was questioned. For instance, it meant that my academic advisor, a Puerto Rican man, didn’t under-

stand well the point of my dissertation, which was a proposal from the perspective of Puerto Rican and Caribbean women about what the church should be. (Luvis Núñez 2020)

Agustina's dissertation project was not just another "contextual" ecclesiological proposal grounded in pneumatology. Its subversive genius is found in her use of the annual Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol in Loíza, considered by some a syncretistic festival that merges Christianity and Yoruba religious elements, as a metaphor for the ecclesia. After various conversations with her advisor, they reached an agreement, and she finalized her project "Sewing a New Cloth: A Proposal for a Pentecostal Ecclesiology Fashioned as a Community Gifted by the Spirit with the Marks of the Church from a Latina Perspective." In it, she provides a mapping of Pentecostal ecclesiology that moves from a general scope to the particularity of Hispanic Pentecostalism and ultimately focuses on an Afro-Puerto Rican Pentecostal ecclesiology in a feminist key. Luvis Núñez's project is ambitious. It is also critical, not only of Euro-American theologies, including feminist ones, but also of Latino/a theologies that are silent about Afro-Latino/a and Afro-Caribbean culture. Her project is then a response to the deafening silences that have characterized these theological enterprises. This response comes through the storytelling of who she is, the town that saw her birth, and the voices of the island-Puerto Rican women Luvis Núñez interviewed. After positioning her readers concerning the history of Loíza and its socio-economic realities, the author introduces the reader to the town's annual festivity of Las Fiestas de Santiago Apóstol, which honors Santiago, considered by many "protector from enemies and invaders" (Luvis 2009, 150). Given the history of invasions and attacks on Loíza, for Luvis Núñez, "The devotion to the Saint Santiago got force among people who constantly had to defend themselves" (Luvis 2009, 150). She goes on to beautifully detail the different aspects of the festival, which is a space of *koinonía* where "There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane; it is one sole life" (Luvis 2009, 155). For her, "This lively experience comes as a metaphor to describe what it means to be church. The church is a Loíza's popular feast" (Luvis Núñez 2009, 157).

By taking the festival as a metaphor for the ecclesia and aspects of Pentecostal, Caribbean, and feminist theological frameworks, Luvis Núñez proposes an Afro-Puerto Rican Pentecostal ecclesiology that responds to the context, history, and realities of the island. This constructive project provides the theological coordinates for future

ecclesiological elaborations that take the Afro-Caribbean context seriously. In a time when Pentecostal theological elaborations on ecclesiology were lacking, Agustina crafted a multidisciplinary and intersectional proposal for “a Pentecostal ecclesiology from the perspective of Hispanic women” (Luvis Núñez 2009, 4). In it she laid the groundwork for her distinctive Caribbean, feminist, and Pentecostal approach to theology.

Agustina’s teaching career as a seminary professor began in 2003 when the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico (SEPR) invited the then-second-year doctoral student to teach a summer course. To make it possible for her to teach the class without adding more work to an already demanding doctoral program, her supervisor, Dr. José David Rodríguez, allowed the teaching experience to count as a 3-credit independent study. That summer, Agustina taught a course on feminist theologies. The following year, the seminary invited her back, but this time to teach a course on Pentecostalism. Her success in these positions prepared the way for a full-time job offer, which she took in 2005. During the job interview, the committee asked her about her ordination status in the church. She was a layperson. The committee noted that professors engage in significant pastoral work with their students. They advised her to seek ordination within her denomination. Agustina followed their advice and requested ordination within the Iglesia Defensores de la Fe. But from the beginning she made it clear she had no interest in pastoring a local congregation. Instead, her calling was teaching in the seminary context and the church. Given that nobody in Puerto Rico ordains for the vocation of theological education, she expected a negative response. However, to her surprise, the denomination ordained her. “It felt good,” she says, “to know that they see teaching [in seminary and beyond the traditional pastoral understanding] as an ordained ministry of the church” (Luvis Núñez, pers. comm., February 5, 2021).

From 2005 to 2009, Luvis Núñez devoted herself to work for the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico, and the completion of her doctoral studies. With her return to her homeland, Puerto Rico became the immediate context for her theological thought and doctoral project. In 2009, she successfully defended her dissertation, becoming Dr. Agustina Luvis Núñez, and, a year later, she was promoted to assistant professor of theology at the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. Eleven years later, she continues serving this theological community, but now as director of the doctoral program and as associate professor of theology. She has also continued to work in the healthcare field

as a medical technologist, overseeing operations for various laboratories in the east of the island (Luvis Núñez, pers. comm., February 5, 2021).

The Writer

In the Caribbean and Latin America, *la teología se hace a pulmón*. That literally translates as “theology is done with the lungs.” The Spanish phrase captures the idea of doing things in a context of incredible difficulty and impossibility, where the most basic resources and support are lacking. So, it is an “in spite of” theologizing. This is important when considering the track record of publications of our Caribbean and Latin American theologians and biblical scholars. Furthermore, location determines the nature of the questions a scholar asks as well as their approach. As an island-Puerto Rican, Dr. Luvis Núñez brings her embodied faith to prose from the colonial, socio-political, and economic context of an island that has not known freedom since 1508. First as a colony of Spain, and then of the USA, “Puerto Rico is one of the world’s oldest colonies” (Yale University n.d.). Hence, the concerns and questions Luvis Núñez engages in her writing are significantly different from those of people located outside the Caribbean. Her publications bear testimony to this.

In her book *Creada a su imagen: Una pastoral integral para la mujer* [Created in His Image: An Integral Pastoral Care for Women] (2012a), Luvis Núñez argues for the need of a pastoral ministry that serves women holistically and provides educational tools to that end. The book is divided into two sections. In the first section, the author guides the reader through a quick-paced trip through the Old and New Testaments, highlighting the key roles women play in the biblical narrative. Of particular importance to the author is Jesus’s treatment of women and how it should become a model for the church to affirm the dignity and equity of women within and beyond the faith community. Ultimately, Luvis Núñez aims to show the biblical and theological reasons that anchor her proposal. The author also provides a candid description of “the cruel reality” women face and the church’s responsibility in the face of patriarchal violence. She writes,

It is in the Church where the image of God in women and men is affirmed . . . It is in the Church that we learn about the praxis of Jesus as

one that dignifies the whole human race. It is in the Church where we live the Pentecost, where the Spirit pours over men and women, boys and girls, as a symbol of equality. Any practice that attempts against these affirmations goes against the very will of God, and therefore, it is sin. To hurt a woman is to hurt the very body of Christ. (Luvis 2012a)

For Luvis Núñez, the Church is then the ultimate space of transformation not only for victims but also for perpetrators.

After providing a biblical and theological rationale for her project and a sociological description of the challenges women face in relation to patriarchal violence, Luvis Núñez ends the first section by providing practical steps churches should take as they move towards pastoral care that is effective for women. These include publicly denouncing all forms of violence as sin; educating our church communities about the diverse types of violence women face in their context; and creating spaces for reflection in which the faith community can discuss topics such as sexuality, reciprocity, human dignity, and biblical stories about women like Tamar and Bathsheba. The second section of the book provides liturgical materials that center the perspectives and experiences of women. These include communal prayers and liturgies for healing in cases of sexual abuse and miscarriages. As well, there are ceremonies for specific days, such as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Luvis Núñez has also contributed to multiple edited volumes such as *Otros Caminos: Propuestas para la crisis en Puerto Rico* (Isla Negra, 2012), for which she penned the chapter “La crisis, momento oportuno para afirmar las marcas de la iglesia” (Luvis 2012b) and *El sexo en la Iglesia* (Publicaciones Gaviota, 2015), for which she wrote “Liberación: Reflexiones teológicas sobre el abuso sexual y nuestro rol como Iglesia.” In “La crisis, momento oportuno para afirmar las marcas de la iglesia” (Luvis Núñez 2015), Dr. Luvis Núñez addresses the long economic crisis engulfing Puerto Rico since the early 2000s, which has only worsened with time. For her, this crisis emerged from a global and local economic system that neglects human dignity and hence human rights. Luvis Núñez considers this crisis an opportune moment for the Church to affirm its identity as one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in a way that is critical and relevant for the context. For instance, when discussing holiness, she acknowledges how this ecclesiological marker has historically been used to exclude that which is deemed unholy or profane. She then provides an alternative understanding for holiness as a mark of the Church that could allow

the community of the Spirit to speak and act into the crisis in ways that bring life. Luvis Núñez writes,

To affirm the mark of the holiness of the Church is to recognize that it is based on the fact that she is the body of Christ and is called to share in the kingdom of God. It is the connection with Christ that makes her holy. When the Church points to the kingdom of God, it finds many ways to face the crisis and show its holiness. It is holy because it lives governed by norms that are above the individualistic and private values of our society. Its holiness is found in its intention to embrace those whom society marginalizes, abandons, and sets apart. It is holy when it recognizes the human dignity of those whom society qualifies as the other. [The Church] is holy when it relinquishes power to empower those who have had neither space nor voice. (Luvis Núñez 2012b)

This critical reading of the marks of the ecclesia provides a new space to rethink the nature and mission of the church in more robust, expansive, and creative terms.

In “Liberación: Reflexiones teológicas sobre el abuso sexual y nuestro rol como Iglesia,” Luvis Núñez continues her critical discussion of the crisis of sexual violence in Puerto Rico and the responsibility of the Church to address it. She identifies and challenges the simplistic and reductionist definitions of sin that often harm victims of sexual abuse within our communities and expounds on how sin operates and manifests in the context of sexual violence. Furthermore, she addresses “the myths about forgiveness” and its close friend “forgetting.” Luvis Núñez draws deeply from the work of Dan Allender and Mary Potter Engels and contextualizes it to the realities of the island. It is important to note that, in all these publications, Luvis Núñez’s focus is ecclesiology (Luvis Núñez 2015).

She also wrote the entry “Caribbean Theology” (Luvis Núñez 2008) for the *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church* (IVP Academic, 2008). This is a significant contribution, as Caribbean theologies have yet to receive the attention that other so-called contextual theologies have. Her entry serves as an excellent starting point for people unfamiliar with the field’s history, features, sources, methods, challenges, themes, and tasks.

Beyond the academic publishing sphere, Luvis Núñez also writes for one of Puerto Rico’s major newspapers, *El Nuevo Día*. She is very much a public theologian and embraces her role as an educator for

and of the community. In one of her columns, “Ante la corrupción, urge una Iglesia que tome en serio el Evangelio,” she calls the church to take the gospel seriously and denounce in word and practice the government’s corruption (January 21, 2020). Previous to that, she wrote on the killing of Alexa Negrón Luciano, a transgender homeless Black Puerto Rican woman murdered at the hands of transphobic men. Her other columns include “La iglesia y el proceso político en Puerto Rico,” (October 26, 2020) and “Esta es la historia de Cuca” (October 30, 2017).

The Theologian

Dr. Agustina Luvis Núñez is a Caribbean theologian doing theology from and within the Caribbean context. However, given the history and socio-political reality of Puerto Rico, her theology is both Caribbean and Latin American, and, to a certain extent, connected to some USA Latino/a theologies, particularly in their feminist streams. Her work is then in continuity with these traditions yet distinctive, most especially in regard to its race and socio-political priorities (Luvis Núñez, pers. comm., September 7, 2020). Although Latin American feminist theologies have acknowledged the need for an intersectional approach; in their praxis, they have often been a “*teología incolora*” or one that acknowledges mestiza and Indigenous Latin American women but rarely includes Black Latin American women. Argentinean theologian Nancy Bedford writes about her own *concientización* as a White Latin American woman and what that means for her theologizing,

Maybe because from the perspective of the dominant culture in Argentina, the African heritage of the Río de la Plata tends to be forgotten or devalued; as a theologian that lived and worked in Argentina, I never thought too much about the relevance of this cultural and philosophical heritage for my theology. I used to include the writings of James Cone . . . in the contemporary theologies program, but it didn’t occur to me to reflect too much about my own privileges as a person with white skin. Racism seemed wrong to me but I didn’t understand that it was a structural reality that benefited me just for being white, regardless of my personal attitudes. In fact, I hadn’t thought too much about the theological ramifications of the topic nor I had I

sat—as a feminist theologian—at the feet of womanist theologians. Racism seemed to me as a secondary problem in our [Latin American] context. (Bedford 2017)

This tendency of seeing racism as a secondary problem in the Latin American context seems to be pervasive, particularly in relation to issues of anti-Blackness. One reason is that those doing Latin American theology in academia are mainly White and light-skinned Latin Americans. This is also true for USA Latino/a theologies, which have almost exclusively been constructed around the notion of *mestizaje*—an identity that centers Spanish heritage and identity, limitedly acknowledges Indigeneity, and excludes African heritage. In the USA, the latter has been translated in the racial imaginary as “brown,” and is often applied to and reclaimed by almost everyone with some Latin American ancestry regardless of their phenotype. This has resulted in what Bedford (2017) calls “una teología ‘incolora’” or “monocromática.” The second term seems to be more precise. Although Caribbean theology is not completely exempt from this danger, particularly when done by White and light-skinned Caribbean theologians, the context itself demands a prioritization of Blackness and African heritage. Furthermore, it requires the inclusion of voices and contexts such as Haiti, Jamaica, and the Afro populations of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, as well as those from Central and South American coasts bathed by the Caribbean Sea, which are often neglected by both Latin American and USA Latino/a theologians. This prioritization is evident in Luvis Núñez’s teaching and work as a public theologian.

Caribbean theology also centers a comprehensive de-colonial agenda. This is in response to the region’s shared history of colonialism and neo-colonialism, which significantly differs from that of Latin American countries. The colonial history in the Caribbean is marked by the genocide of the Indigenous people, the kidnapping and exploitation of enslaved Africans, and deculturization. For Luvis Núñez (2018), “[d]ecolonization has to go as deep as colonization has. There needs to be a conversion of the heart, a reorientation of the mind, a re-evaluation of values, a deconstruction of oppressive structures, and a construction of proper structures.” By bringing these Caribbean priorities and engagement with race to the forefront while continuing to locate her work in relation to Latin American and USA Latino/a theologies, Luvis Núñez provides a relevant intersectional feminist theological perspective.

The Teacher

Dr. Luvis Núñez currently serves as associate professor of theology as well as director of the DMin program at the Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. There, she teaches courses on theology and history, Christian ethics, Pentecostal theologies, feminist theologies, and Caribbean theology. Luvis Núñez has also taught theology courses at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón in Puerto Rico and at institutions in the United States and Cuba (Luvis, pers. comm., September 7, 2020). As it is for many Latin American and Caribbean theologians, the classroom is the main stage for Dr. Luvis Núñez's work. This should not be undervalued. Her impact in the theological formation of ministers, laypeople, and others is significant for local churches on the island.

The Activist

Luvis Núñez has actively participated in the Colectivo Interreligioso de Mujeres as well as in La Mesa de Diálogo Martin Luther King, Jr. The Colectivo Interreligioso is a non-profit organization constituted by women from different religious and spiritual backgrounds. It aims to support and affirm other women in their journeys while proposing alternative ways of life framed by tolerance, love, and respect. Meanwhile, La Mesa de Diálogo, another non-profit organization, seeks to promote the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a life of non-violent active resistance that should be embodied as we seek to abolish all forms of exploitation, discrimination, exclusion, inequality, and oppression. La Mesa promotes collaboration and solidarity in Puerto Rican society. Additionally, Luvis Núñez participates in La Pastoral de Mujeres y Justicia de Género (PMJG) in Puerto Rico, a group founded under her leadership in 2010 and associated with the Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI). The PMJG coordinates and facilitates initiatives and dialogues that affirm the dignity of women within and outside the church. For instance, when cases of femicide in the island started to rise, La Pastoral met with the current governor of Puerto Rico, Wanda Vázquez Garced, and other sectors, requesting them to declare a national state of emergency (Santiago and Zijlstra 2020).

More recently, Luvis Núñez was featured in the photographic exhibition “Feminismos en Puerto Rico,” inaugurated in the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico on November 25, 2020. This project featured 247 feminist activists from the island with the goal of acknowledging and honoring women’s fight for equality (Coordinadora Paz para las Mujeres 2020).

Beyond her role as theologian, professor, and practitioner, Luvis Núñez continues her work in the healthcare field. Currently, she serves as supervisor of various clinical laboratories in the east of the island. As a healthcare worker, she also engages in the work of justice through education, particularly during the COVID-19 global health crisis (Luvis Núñez, pers. comm., September 7, 2020). As reported, the testing rate for COVID-19 in Puerto Rico during the pandemic was far lower than anywhere else in the United States (Mazzei 2020). This left the people on the island extremely vulnerable. Hence, access to education is key to ensure the safety of the people. Luvis Núñez is focused on this type of education in different spaces, providing scientific knowledge and theological insight into how faith communities can do church during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Dr. Agustina Luvis Núñez has lived and continues to live a life “galloping recklessly wandering through the [horizons] of God’s justice” (Julia de Burgos quoted by Gomez 2019). Her faith continues to be the foundation of her convictions on human dignity. This very faith in the God of life has led her to a theologizing that the walls of academia cannot contain. Luvis Núñez’s life and work is ultimately a letter to Caribbean and Latin American girls and women, reminding them that *Dios es el Dios que las ve*.

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Notes

- 1 In this essay, Agustina Luvis Núñez is referred to as “Agustina” when discussing her childhood and years as a student and otherwise as “Dr. Luvis Núñez” or “Luvis Núñez” in line with conventions for referencing professors and theologians of distinguished stature.

