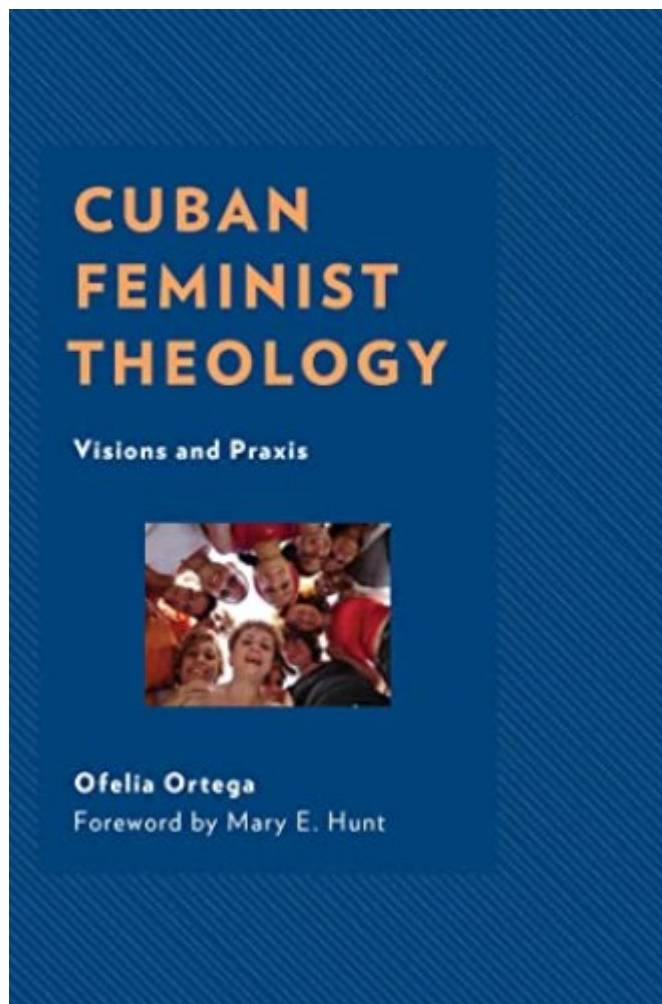


Ofelia Ortega does theology to empower women

And she does it in an unmistakable Caribbean accent that embraces, hugs, kisses, dances, cries, and rumbles out laughter.

by [Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Cuban Feminist Theology

Visions and Praxis

By Ofelia Ortega

Lexington Books/Fortress Academic

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This book—dedicated to Letty M. Russell and David C. White, with a foreword by Mary E. Hunt—is a “Cubacatesen” of 19 marinated essays that Ofelia Miriam Ortega Suárez distilled between 1979 and 2021. Ortega’s main goal is straightforward: to fill a lacuna in the theological world’s perception of Cuba by articulating a theology that is “inclusive, community-oriented and participative,” a theology attentive to the flourishing of women that is “contextual, ecumenical and focused on liberation.” Ada María Isasi-Díaz was not the only Cuban woman to engage in feminist theology, as substantiated by the rosary of other names Ortega uplifts: Beatriz Ferreiro García, Blanca Rosa Ojeda, Dora Valentín, Clara Rodés, Nerva Cot, Raquel Suárez, Izett Samá, Daylín Rufín, Gisela Pérez, Rhode González, Kirenía Criado, Dora Arce, and Clara Luz Ajo.

Cuban Feminist Theology is an affirmation that this theology exists as much as Ortega’s flesh and bones exist. Furthermore, the author demonstrates that her theology is neither an end in itself nor a means to impress the academy. She does theology for the sake of the empowerment of women, as is apparent from the book’s subtitle, “Visions and Praxis.”

This book reveals an unmistakable Caribbean accent that embraces, hugs, kisses, dances, cries, and rumbles out laughter—which masters prohibited for centuries, especially in women’s mouths—with the entire Pachamama (Mother Earth). Ortega overcomes Cartesian binaries, such as the dichotomy between the mind and body, which she calls “the beauty and the beast.” Little wonder that we see her preaching from the pulpit one day and creating laws in the Cuban parliament the next.

This liberation theologian’s argumentative style resembles the Cuban archipelago (or a rum tutti-frutti) in the way it embraces multiple performances and epistemologies. Like a fish in the Caribbean, Ortega surfs across realms, moving from the rigid and frigid academic essay to homily, poem, song, story, dream, testimony, anecdote, and legend.

Ortega's theology is well rooted in her own experience but not limited by it. It is no accident that just as "there is a different flavor to the soup depending on the water, so, too, is there a different flavor (*sabor*) to theology depending on where one is situated," writes Hunt in the foreword, playing on the Spanish words for *flavor* and *knowledge* (*saber*).

The Caribbean was the port of entry for colonization in 1492, and Cuba was the first place Columbus declared as part of Asia on June 14, 1494. It is surrounded by water borders with the United States, Mexico, the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Like Ortega's theology, it is an island but never insular. Named in the Taíno language Cubanacan ("where fertile land is abundant"), rebaptized as Isla Juana by Columbus, and reclaimed as Colba, Cuba is a land of resistance.

Ortega does theology from her city of Matanzas (whose name means "butchery"), where the Seminario Evangélico de Teología is rooted. Matanzas Bay was named for the 1510 slaughter of Columbus's soldiers there, which Bartolomé de las Casas describes as an act of self-defense. This book gives off the aroma of Cuban and US military victory over Spain in 1898, a victory sealed by the marriage of Bacardi rum and Coca-Cola to make a brand new cocktail, the Cuba Libre. They dance to the rhythms of the rumba, *yambú*, *columbia*, and Dámaso Pérez Prado's mambo—all born in the Matanzas province.

Ortega's political activism generates her theology, and vice versa. Like Frida Kahlo, she sees horizons where others see walls. The first woman to be ordained in the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba and a former regional president of the World Council of Churches, Ortega earned her doctorate a few years ago when she was in her early 80s. She has traveled through the world teaching and receiving various honorary degrees, but she always returns to Cuba, despite the six-decade-long US embargo. Matanzas declared her the Illustrious Daughter of the City in 2021.

This book is divided into five thematic sections, with the essays (most of which have been published in Spanish) connected by new introductions and other friendly transitions. Ortega articulates a rainbow of topics in a Global South feminist key: mutuality in mission, *sumak kausay* (Quechua for "good living") soteriology, heteropatriarchal Christendom, the church as the sacrament of the reign of God, the transformation from enemy (*hostis*) to guest (*hospes*), the Eucharist's relationship to broken bodies, grace as dignity, eco-kindness, the feminization of poverty, a

theology of relationships, gender equity, epistemology and justice, and a reflection on two kinds of biblical creditors: the compassionate (*malveh*) and the unscrupulous (*nosheh*).

More than half of the authors in the book's intercultural bibliography are women. Ortega practices intersectionality—not in a narcissistic fashion that emphasizes small differences but as solidarity with all just causes. Her sources reflect diversity in gender, race, class, geopolitics, culture, macro ecumenism, and an array of literary genres. While she favors Global South feminist voices, she is generous in including other interlocutors.

Although Ortega's port of departure is Cuban Protestantism, her port of arrival is the trans-religious, transcultural, trans-dimensional planet. When it comes to discerning the presence of God in daily life, Ortega casts her lot with those who practice what Christian imperialists regard as the sin of syncretism—Abaku, Yoruba, Regla Conga, Regla Ocha, Regla Arará, Yebbe, and Cruzao.

Her cosmo-vision is one of hope—mentioned 109 times in the book—for those who continue the struggle. Working against mass media portrayals of Cuba, Ortega lauds some distinctive achievements. At the time of writing, the life expectancy of Cuban women was 80.45 years. Women made up 49 percent of the members of Parliament and 48 percent of scientific researchers. Cuba has more physicians and teachers per capita than anywhere else in the world.

Ortega stays away from the encrypted, abstract, metaphysical language of the academy. Instead, her style is sharp and concrete in naming things for what they are. *Cuban Feminist Theology* tackles relevant themes with the Caribbean strong wind of its critical apparatus but also with the fresh breeze of its lively text. Unquestionably, Jesus fishes with Ortega in Cuban waters.