

## Performing Sermons *Latinamente*

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In January 1993, Mary B. W. Tabor with *The New York Times* interviewed Sandra Cisneros, a Mexican American writer whose work had already won her critical acclaim by the late 1980s. Although Cisneros represented just “one of only a handful of Latina writers to make it big on the American scene,” she refused to let her newfound celebrity lead to amnesia. She knew how much her *latinidad* (Latinx identity) shaped her, how her experiences as “a working-class Mexican-American girl from the South Side of Chicago” influenced the writer that she became.<sup>1</sup> “I am a woman and I am a Latina,” she said. “Those are the things that make my writing distinctive. Those are the things that give my writing power. They are the things that give it *sabor* [flavor], the things that give it *picante* [spice].”<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we dialogue at the intersection of performance and preaching in order to ask, What does it look like to perform a sermon *latinamente*? *Latinamente* (in the Latina way) can be in Spanish or English or Spanglish or through the embodied nonverbals that are very much a part of our language and way. We take our cues from Cisneros by maintaining a special interest in how shared experiences of *latinidad* shape the performed sermon. In taking such an approach, we realize that the word “performance” can be slippery in much the same way that “contextual” or “cultural” can be, not least because it does not have a precise equivalent in Spanish. We will return to this theme later when we distinguish between performative preaching and performance.

We also understand the need to hold difference and commonality in tension in our community. We appeal to shared experiences rather than a common experience because we know that universalizing *latinidad* can be inherently problematic. On the one hand, Fernando F. Segovia reminds us that we are a people shaped by “markers of differentiation” such as nationality, language, religion, education, gender, race, legal status, and power.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, important family resemblances bind us together. M. Daniel Carroll Rodas calls these “cultural commonalities or shared values . . . a broader ethos grounded in a collective *latinidad*.”<sup>4</sup> Our performed sermons have a particular *sabor*.

This article describes the *sabor* that infuses our performed sermons, the *picante* of our preaching on both the theoretical and the practical level. We start with descriptive language and work our way toward embodied practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary B. W. Tabor, “Sandra Cisneros: A Solo Traveler in Two Worlds,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 1993, C1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, C10.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, “Toward Latino/a American Biblical Criticism: Latin(o/a)ness as Problematic,” in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2009), 218–19.

<sup>4</sup> M. Daniel Carroll R., “Latino/Latina Biblical Interpretation,” in *Scripture and Its Interpretation*, ed. Michael J. Gorman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 312.

## Finding Descriptive Language

To find descriptive language for performative preaching *latinamente*, we could appeal to existing terms that help us interpret our experiences, such as *mestizaje-mulatez* (mixed) consciousness, *la lucha* (the struggle), *la vida cotidiana* (daily lived experience), theology *en conjunto* (in collaboration), or *misión integral* (integral mission).<sup>5</sup> These and other descriptors give us language for identity, experience, and community. However, rather than till the same soil, we have chosen to engage the language of performance and performativity.

For the purposes of this article, we define a sermon performed *latinamente* as an improvisational, interactive, and transformative event embodied in the Latinx community. First, sermons are improvisational. When sermons “go live,” many of the Latinx preachers we know riff on what they have prepared. Just as improvisational actors or jazz musicians embrace the spontaneity that exists on the other side of preparation, so improvisational preachers embrace the spontaneity that exists on the other side of preparation during the live sermon.

Second, sermons are interactive. Guided by the Holy Spirit, preachers read and respond actively to listeners. So also listeners, guided by the Holy Spirit, function as more than recipients; they are “spect-actors” (not spectators). Here, we borrow language from Augusto Boal (1931–2009), the renowned Brazilian theater director, theorist, and activist. Especially in oppressed communities, Boal argues, it is important for people to recognize that they are spect-actors who are enrolled in a story, who exercise agency, and whose embodied presence has the power to shape the performative event.

Third, sermons are transformative. When people are spect-actors, Boal claims, they “train for real-life action . . . . They learn the arsenal of the oppressors and the possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed.”<sup>6</sup> A sermon that is preached *latinamente* abides by a similar conviction and strives toward a similar result—that is, the training of a community’s transformation *in* the world for the sake of the transformation *of* the world.

The implication this telos of transformation has for the preacher lies in the hermeneutical process with its accompanying exegesis. While many teachers of preaching in Western theological education emphasize exegeting the biblical text and de-emphasize exegeting the community, most teachers of preaching in Latinx contexts emphasize the exegesis of the community to a

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<sup>5</sup> For discussions of *mestizaje-mulatez* consciousness, see Virgilio P. Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988); Néstor Medina, *Mestizaje: (Re)mapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latina/o Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); and Michelle A. Gonzalez, “What About Mulatez? An Afro-Cuban Contribution,” in *Futuring Our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition*, edited by Orlando O. Espín and Gary Macy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 180–203. For discussions of *la lucha* and *la vida cotidiana*, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004) and Carmen Nanko-Fernández, *Theologizing en Español: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010). For discussions of doing theology *en conjunto*, see José David Rodríguez and Loida Martell-Otero, eds., *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997). For discussions of *misión integral*, see C. René Padilla, *Misión Integral: Ensayos sobre el Reino de Dios y la Iglesia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Nueva Creación, Eerdmans), 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 244. Boal draws on the work of his mentor, Paulo Freire, also Brazilian, who wrote the first edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968. See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1993).

much greater extent.<sup>7</sup> This ongoing emphasis requires tools of observation and analysis that preachers cannot use without becoming embedded in the community to which they preach. The relational aspect is critical if there is to be a transformational dimension to preaching.

I (Elizabeth) learned to preach from lay preachers in my congregation when I was between nine and eleven years of age. One such leader my church assigned to mentor me was Hermano (Brother) Ramirez. He sold jewelry for a living in There was a local marketplace of stores known by the name of the street they were on—Graham. On Saturdays, whole families would walk along the blocks of stores, restaurants, and barber shops buying the things they needed for daily living. Most of these stores were affordable for the community, but they encompassed a range of prices that would set one store apart from another in price and quality.

Hermano Ramirez had a way of observing people—what they bought, what they could afford—to determine what sets of jewelry he would present to a family that wanted to make a purchase. He used these skills to help me observe families at Graham as they came and went. He would ask questions to sharpen my observation skills: What do the bags say? What type of store is that? How many children do you see in that family? If there are nine in the family and they shop at X store, what does that say about what they can afford and how they live? What expressions are on their faces? Are they looking up or down? Are they walking fast or slowly? Are they stopping to look in the windows but not going into the store? How are they addressing each other? Is there anger or bother among them? What are they saying?

The next set of questions Hermano Ramirez asked would help me make connections between the context and the Scriptures: What verses or biblical stories come to your mind as you listen to this family? What would God want them to know? Why do you think this? How would you begin to construct your argument so that they would want to listen? Can you imagine their faces as you speak with them? How can you imagine their lives changing if they hear these verses? How can you paint a picture of how their lives would change? If you pray here quietly, what is God telling you about these things? How is God helping you to answer these questions? Listen. Don't stop watching. See what God is saying to you.”

An exercise like this creates a deeper awareness of the real situations that impact people's lives, a stronger ability to discern God's voice in the connections between Scripture and everyday life, and fresh possibilities for transformation in the lives of listeners. It drives home the reality that preaching is not only for listening but also for bringing God to life in the lives of persons by means of the Scriptures. When this happens, there is transformation. Of course, the preacher does not make transformation happen. God does. But the preacher can create a moment, a series of connections with the Scriptures through which transformation can take place. Observing people in everyday life becomes an art of discernment; a sacred space opens up in that observation as we connect it to the Scriptures, as we attempt to set in motion what God would want.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on “exegeting the community” in Latinx contexts, see Orlando Costas, *Comunicación por Medio de la Predicación* (Miami, FL: Editorial Caribe, 1973), 21–31; Francisco Javier Goitia Padilla, *El Sermón como Creación Artesanal: Manual para la Práctica de la Predicación* (San Juan, PR: Publicaciones Palabra Viva, 2019), 25–37; Pablo A. Jiménez, *Principios de Predicación* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press & AETH, 2003), 39–49; Osvaldo Mottes, *Predicación y Misión: Una Perspectiva Pastoral, Un Texto Didáctico sobre la Predicación Pastoral* (Miami: LOGOI, 1989), 230.

## Theories of Performative Preaching

The way Hermano Ramirez trained Elizabeth in the world so that she would preach for the sake of the transformation of the world points to the performative nature of preaching. Hermano Ramirez equipped Elizabeth with a particular social norm for preaching that was different from dominant Western views of preaching. Through the performative nature inherent to preaching, this social norm for preaching comes alive every time a person performs a sermon *latinamente*.

The vision of performative preaching described here pushes back against performative preaching as it has traditionally been understood, namely, as a reference to animated sermons, to preaching that is theatrical, or to using performing arts in sermon delivery.<sup>8</sup> Such a Western perception corresponds to an Aristotelian understanding of theater—a performance with a beginning, middle, and end, with a clear division between actor(s) and spectators, and with an underlying understanding that to perform is to pretend or to put up an act. European empires brought these understandings to the Americas through colonization, beginning in the fifteenth century.

Instead, we draw from a Latin American perception of theater in which the spectators become spect-actors who turn the preaching event into a shared performance, a shared showing of human behavior. Still, it is important to remember that sermon delivery methods with minimal body movements, such as public speech-style preaching, are performative as well. Thus, to reserve the phrase performative preaching to indicate higher levels of bodily involvement or engagement in sermon delivery keeps invisible the Western gaze that produced the phrase, as well as the Western values embedded in prevalent notions of preaching-as-sermon-delivery that centuries of a particular preaching practice have kept hidden in plain view.

The admission that all preaching is performance and thus performative requires great effort since it emerges from Amerindian worldviews. Here, we borrow language from performance theorist Diana Taylor, who used “Amerindian” in reference to the inhabitants of the Americas prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus.<sup>9</sup> Accepting that playing the role of preacher is similar to performing a role in a theatrical play is as difficult as understanding and accepting that gender is performative. While it is easier to follow normative views and practices, we might instead admit the theatricality inherent in preaching as a live event; that is, preaching is human action

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<sup>8</sup> On animated preaching, see Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008) and Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, Revised edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008). On using performing arts for sermon delivery, see Todd Farley, Marilyn Farley, *The Mastery of Mimodrame: An In-Depth Study of Mime Techniques* (Pasadena, CA: Meriwether Pub., 1991); Todd Farley, “The Use of the Body in the Performance of Proclamation,” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, edited by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008, 117–38); Jerusha Matsen Neal, *Blessed: Monologues for Mary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); and Leah Schade, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> In her essay “Scenarios of Discovery,” Taylor shows that the Western fascination with and exoticization of Amerindian subjects is alive and well today. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 65–78. While she refers to non-Western worldviews throughout her book, I (Lis) prefer to use her term “Amerindian” to decenter Western worldviews. Although I recognize that Latin Americans are not technically Amerindians, I am convinced that in the United States, most people who perceive themselves as White look at people who they perceive as Latin Americans or Hispanic in way that is similar to, if not the same as, how the European colonizers looked at the Amerindians they encountered in the fifteenth century.

performed in front of other humans, a “showing doing,” as Richard Schechner writes.<sup>10</sup> After such an admission, we might be better equipped to perceive that all preaching is performative preaching, not only the way in which Latinx preachers deliver sermons. The typical presupposition is that the dominant understandings of sermon delivery do not represent performative preaching. Under the gaze of *mestizaje-mulatez*, which privileges Amerindian worldviews, I (Lis) argue that each instantiation of preaching is a performance and is performative, regardless of the preacher’s skin color, ethnicity, and ways of moving and being during the proclamation moment in Christian worship.

The word “performative” has become popular in great measure due to the work of J. L. Austin and Judith Butler. The former developed a speech-act theory in which a performative speech is not considered descriptive, nor can it be evaluated as true or false, but instead is, or is part of, doing something.<sup>11</sup> Following Austin, Butler developed a theory of gender performativity and explained how everyday gender performances work in a similar way to theater performance.<sup>12</sup> The work of Austin and Butler has influenced popular culture to the point that the word “performative” has become a palatable alternative to “theatrical,” especially for those who believe that their public behavior or pulpit behavior is authentic and real, as opposed to being shaped into conformity through a socialization process. In other words, the work of Austin and Butler has popularized the term “performativity” in a way that reiterates dominant notions of theater as pretending, as make-believe, as putting up an act, and as fake.

Expanding our view beyond the work of Austin and Butler allows us to perceive that all kinds of sermon delivery are both performances (in the popular usage of theatricality) and performative (in the sense that they bring a social norm to life). In addition, the work of Taylor allows us to examine the impact of preaching as a live event and observe what social constructs are brought to life through performing the sermon *latinamente*.

Before the arrival of the conquistadors to what today we consider Central America and the Caribbean, bodily movement in imitation of nature, or the representation of roles, was not considered entertainment or theater. The conquistadors were the ones who introduced the Western suspicion of acting as being untruthful, judging as fake what we today know as theater, dramatic representation, or performance/performing/performative arts. Preconquest, bodily movement as reenactment or as “twice behaved behavior”<sup>13</sup> was considered worship to the Amerindian gods.<sup>14</sup> This positive embrace of performance as a way of being and worshipping still exists today. This approach expands interpretations of Austin’s speech-act theory, paying special attention to his emphasis on doing.

Performative preaching is preaching that does something, that accomplishes something, because preaching is human action. Austin notes that some speech utterances operate as actions. These utterances not only say, they also do. Austin himself explained that the term *performative* “is

<sup>10</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28.

<sup>11</sup> John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> See, in general, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29.

<sup>14</sup> See José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan, trans. Frances López-Morillas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 5:326–27, Kindle Edition, Locations 6543–6551; and Diana Taylor, “Scenes of Cognition: Performance and Conquest,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 3 (2004): 353–72.

derived, of course, from ‘perform’, the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”<sup>15</sup> In Austin’s work, performative is an adjective that denotes doing and constructing social reality. In a similar way, preaching not only says, it also does. And it does more than bring the sermon to life; it brings to life the many preachers who preceded us in performing sermons *latinamente*, and it brings to life the Living Word.<sup>16</sup>

Performative preaching brings social constructs to life through the repetition of a set of acts. In Butler’s work, performative is an adjective that denotes constructing social reality and bringing to life social constructs. Performativity is producing or manufacturing a social construct through a sustained set of acts. Butler also shows that performance is the mechanism that brings to life social constructs. In a similar way, preaching is a communal performance that brings to life social constructs such as gender, class, sexuality, and culture through expected aesthetics and behaviors. Most importantly, for the purposes of this essay, all preaching is performative because it brings to life the social constructs of prior preaching traditions, the ghosts of past preachers. Performative preaching with Latinx *sabor* brings to life our own social constructs and our own ghosts of prior Latinx preachers.

Moving beyond Western categories and interpretations, the scholarship of performance theorist Taylor becomes helpful in exploring cultural constructs and values that come to life through preaching as a live, social event. Taylor’s performance theory helps us to perceive that improvisation, interaction, and transformation are cultural constructs and values that come to life when we perform sermons *latinamente*. As a cultural anthropologist who examines life as theater, Taylor, with her Amerindian and decolonial perspectives, expands anthropological and phenomenological approaches to the study of all kinds of performances—theater and ritual included. She expands on Butler’s work by showing how the repetition of behaviors brings to life social constructs communally through the repetition of scenarios.

Drawing on the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, Taylor also develops a hauntology by showing how the reiteration of scenarios as social behaviors is the mechanism through which societies repeatedly bring to life social and cultural memory as well as ghosts from their communal pasts. Furthermore, Taylor’s theory of performance is permeated with an Amerindian sense of nonlinear time; it advances the notion that performance remains beyond a singular event with beginning, middle, and end, thanks to the repetition of the act.

In line with Taylor’s theory, when we examine preaching as theater, we perceive the cultural values (improvisation, interaction, and transformation), the social norms (exegesis of the community in the hermeneutics of marketplace, which continue during the preaching moment), and the cultural memory of the preachers who preceded us (such as Hermano Ramirez)—all of which come to life when we perform sermons *latinamente*. Each preaching moment moves preaching *latinamente* beyond a singular event with beginning, middle, and end, thanks to the repetition of the act.

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<sup>15</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 6–7.

<sup>16</sup> I use “Living Word” in contradistinction to the books contained in the Bible. The Bible gives witness to the Living Word, and so does the preacher.

## Preaching *Latinamente*

The questions that emerge from this alternative standpoint are: What is preaching doing? What social constructs does preaching bring to life? Who are preachers' bodies citing? What ghosts from our pasts are we reenacting? Preaching *latinamente* brings to life the savor of Latinx cultural values, social norms, and communal memories, through the picante of improvisation, interaction, and transformation. Improvisation includes illustrating concepts and stories with our own bodies because we are holistic beings rather than souls inside flesh vessels who pretend to have no bodies. Interaction brings to completion a communal connection because community is a strong value in Latinx cultures. Transformation is the very purpose of preaching *latinamente*, which pays more attention to bringing the Living Word to life than to bringing Scripture to life or the sermon to life.<sup>17</sup>

Preaching *latinamente* also brings to life Latin American memory through reenacting the performance of Latinx preachers who have gone before, showing listeners how to preach before they ever read a book on preaching. This became evident to us as we shared stories of preachers who left an impression on us. For example, Elizabeth remembers being mesmerized by the accessible language of homiletician Cecilio Arrastía, considered by many one of the best preachers of his generation. Elizabeth was a child then, and still remembers Arrastía's use of visual metaphors and intentionality, bringing people in, including the children. Arrastía used flowery language to open people's minds and imaginations. A person with high formal education who preached in a community hurt by poverty and wanting education, Arrastía never insulted his listeners or looked down on them. He did not try to indoctrinate them. Instead, he generated a lived-out moment in community.

Such a moment requires relationship and identification; it requires prior knowledge of the people gathered. Elizabeth learned to gain such knowledge by carefully observing people on a busy street downtown. Another preacher taught her to observe and interpret people's demeanor, to pay attention to where they were going or where they were coming from, to their faces, to their walking pace. Paying attention to nonverbal cues in the audience and generating moments together are ways in which Elizabeth brings to life the preachers that preceded and influenced her.

Another example is the way that I (Lis) bring to life both the pastor of the church where I grew up, José R. Colón-Rodríguez, and the street preacher around the corner from the church building. I remember our pastor portraying characters from Scripture in plays that he wrote. My whole family would be actors in these plays sometimes. Meanwhile, after the worship service, a person would be preaching with a megaphone in front of the bakery. These preachers taught me that preaching may happen in many places, take many shapes, and feature multiple preachers. These are the preachers that preceded and influenced me, and that I bring to life when I proclaim the Word in public spaces and through dramatic arts. Combining the two models, I have practiced preaching as theater in public spaces for decades.

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<sup>17</sup> On bringing the sermon to life, see Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) and Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit, eds., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

One example that shows how the beautiful, communal aspects of preaching that I learned from my pastor and the possibility of preaching in public spaces that I learned from the street preacher combine to captivate the spect-actors comes from my experiences with *Teatro Rodante Decisiones* (Decisions Rolling Theater). One day, we were preaching through theater in a parking lot in front of a small business. We were supposed to preach in front of the baseball field but could not perform there because it had rained and the ground was muddy. In the middle of the play, it started raining again. Without a roof to cover us, people ran away so as not to get wet. To my surprise, they all ran to their cars to get their umbrellas and came back to finish participating in this theatrical sermon. That day confirmed for me that playwrighting is more attractive than yelling through a megaphone. It allows us to be more effective, to set in motion what God would want, that is, to bring the Living Word to life. The stories of Hermano Ramirez, of Cecilio Arrastía, of Rev. Colón-Rodríguez—these are the ghosts, the preaching norms, the cultural values that are brought to life. These are the stories that our preaching bodies tell whenever we preach.

Preaching *latinamente* tells stories because Latinx communities have been telling stories in much the same way that African American communities have been doing for centuries before White homiletics “discovered” narrative preaching. To preach *latinamente* with bodily expressions is not to put on an act; it is not to deliver through performance art. Instead, it is to be Latinx by honoring our traditions. Preaching *latinamente* is to perform a sermon. Such an act is performative because through that performance, our own social and religious memory, our own preaching norms and cultural constructs, come to life.

Preaching does something besides create a space for sharing knowledge about God at the cognitive level. It brings God into the space. The one preaching is aware that God is moving in the room through the people—the way they engage with the preaching, their facial expressions, their social expressions, their gestures. These are indications of how God is moving and how persons are responding. God is also present through the preacher: the ideas, the images being created, the embodied expressions of the preacher as a servant of God in the room. A preacher may sense the Spirit moving her to stand in front of one person but address the words to all—making those words public while also offering a specific word to someone in particular.

A preacher may use a dramatic illustration that invites people to function as spect-actors with actions, to improvise dialogue as a part of the exposition of ideas, to give public expression to what took place within them when they participated in that moment: what they felt, what they learned, what insights they gained, why they did what they did. This too is a way for the preacher to generate knowledge in community, and it allows for the “aha” moments or insights that may surprise even the preacher. These insights are then incorporated into the preaching as the next movement of the sermon takes place. In the preaching moment, the understanding of God belongs to the community and is not transmitted only from preacher to congregation. This type of knowledge does not come through academic degrees but from pilgrimage, from walking with God. It is not until one walks in the Living Word, making it a living expression of practiced faith, that one comes to a fuller understanding of what is expressed in a Scripture passage. Everyone listens and performs together in this dynamic moment of knowledge sharing. Thoughts and hearts are awakened in such moments, prompted by the Spirit of God through an enacted, spoken word.

Similarly, the Spirit works as a flow between two or more persons when preaching includes the arts. Preachers and artists can work together using words, paintings, songs, or liturgical dance. It is the same Word being conveyed in a communal, embodied manner. It is understood that all must flow together in the fluid Holy Spirit who illuminates the Word in a variety of ways. Symbols used are also words that become a way for the congregation to capture and partake of the transformative power of the Living Word of God. Flow means that all participants listen to the Spirit and simultaneously express the Spirit through the way in which each is gifted. Each one knows how to enter into the moment in such a way that the previous expression is continued, enhanced, or expanded by the next, as each is drawn into deeper understanding by the Spirit herself. It is as if listening, understanding, and expression all take place simultaneously in and through each person.

All of this assumes that the preaching moment is a movement of the Spirit and that one comes to the moment anticipating transformation. Social constructs may shift or be reconstructed. One can be touched, enlightened, convicted, healed, or commissioned by the movement of the Spirit during this transformational preaching moment. This involves the emotions. Persons may also choose to resist the movement or become angry, refusing to enter into the moment; they may question it or accept it only as much as they are ready to handle it in that moment of life.

The transformation may also be a more public one where, in the congregation, the work of reconciling different factions may begin—reconciliation, for example, between the first and second generations or perhaps between citizens and noncitizens. Central to this possibility is not so much psychology as it is the Word of God: an understanding, belief, and faith that something beyond human strength and ability takes place when a community is engaged by the Word of God as a Living Word and as a work of the Holy Spirit.

In a congregation in Chicago whose members were about equally divided between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, there were tensions about citizenship. Tensions ran so high that everyone decided never to mention the issue, to continue united under common matters of faith. However, since tensions involve relationships and spirituality is about relationships, the congregation's spiritual growth remained at a standstill while the tensions went unresolved. An outside preacher came and preached on the passages in Ruth and Leviticus that pertain to how one treats immigrants. The preacher began by littering the sanctuary with paper and asking all of the citizens to pick it up. Once the task was complete, the preacher once again littered the sanctuary and nastily asked the citizens to pick it up again. This scene was repeated at least four times until one of the men picking up the trash blurted out, "¡O Dios mio (Oh my God), now I understand!" He went up to a Mexican brother and asked his forgiveness. He hugged him and went to each of the Mexican families, doing the same. Midway through this process, he invited other citizen church members to understand and ask for forgiveness. He urged them to get up and do as he was doing. The Spirit began to move, and as the people moved about the sanctuary, they spoke to one another, thus breaking the silent tensions and addressing their causes. Relationships were remade. Transformation took place because of the experience of the Word alongside an understanding of it.

## A New *Sabor* During a Pandemic

What about today, now that we find ourselves worshipping and preaching online during a pandemic? Given that most of us are not able to be in one another's physical presence, can we still preach *latinamente* in ways that are improvisational, interactive, and transformative? At first, many preachers who traditionally preached this way felt disoriented and out of their element. Looking at a screen, not able to sense the spirit of the people, made us feel so distant. However, we also knew that the center of this type of preaching is the presence of the Holy Spirit. We found ourselves asking how we might sense the Holy Spirit in new ways.

Many of the Latinx pastors that I (Jared) regularly interact with have needed to make a major pivot as pastors and preachers at various points during the coronavirus pandemic. In instances where Latinx congregations shared a worship space with White congregations, some pastors had to navigate a challenging power dynamic that existed between the congregations. For example, a Latinx pastor said he wanted to hold a drive-in service but was not permitted to do so by the leaders of the White church that rents worship space to his congregation.

When it came to preaching, pastors usually fell into one of four categories: those who had to close their doors until they could get technological assistance, those who set up drive-in worship services, those who preached to small groups of people outdoors, and those who moved their services to Facebook Live or to a YouTube channel. Some pastors had to close their doors until they could receive technological assistance from church or parachurch organizations. So often, the things that are taken for granted in majority culture—such as broadband speed, audiovisual equipment, and mobile technology—connect in some way to socioeconomic privilege, class, access to resources, and power. Other pastors tried drive-in worship services or preaching to small groups outdoors, but the logistics were challenging, there were too many moving parts, and they encountered resistance.

The majority reported that they immediately began streaming worship services. With the online streaming option, all they needed was one person in the congregation (usually someone younger) with a newer mobile phone. This solution worked despite challenges with audiovisual equipment or broadband. They reported that many of the pastors they knew in Latin America made similar choices if they had access to a new mobile phone.

Sadly, many of the improvisational and interactive pieces of the sermon have been lost during this time of transition. However, the new space has also introduced new possibilities. People who could not attend worship services in person because of illness or disability have been able to participate online. Those who participated online, whether members or visitors, would send prayer requests during the service, and sometimes pastors would mention those prayer requests during the sermon or later in the service. Family members in Latin America have been able to participate. One Latinx pastor said that a ministry partner in Sri Lanka attended worship at his church via livestream. Even after some churches reopened, many pastors continued to livestream on Facebook or YouTube, both because of new relationships that were forged in this space and because some members still needed to remain home for health reasons.

Just as the pandemic has forced theater organizations to switch to video performances, so preaching as theater has shifted from public spaces or church buildings to video. Acting on

camera is not the same as acting before a live audience, as trained actors know and preachers have discovered. While I (Lis) became excited to explore the possibilities that the camera and prerecorded video offer for preaching that live theater does not, soon enough I discovered that video gets in the way of communal improvisation and interaction between preacher(s) and spect-actors. The transformation that comes from live interaction is too important to leave to the fate of online chat interactions while we watch ourselves worship in a prerecorded video. While watch parties are fun and do generate a sense of community, I found myself yearning for live improvisation and interaction. Consequently, I turned to live conversation. Even when we play a prerecorded sermon, we gain a lot by having a live conversation about it.

Conversation using my fingers to type rather than my body to speak was not enough for me (Lis). Thus, I went into full, embodied enactment of collaborative, improvised sermons. I facilitated a process to collaboratively construct a sermon in conversation. The most recent time I did this was with a congregation in Aguada, Puerto Rico. We gathered using a videoconferencing platform. I had done the exegesis of the biblical text and of the community before the worship service. I continued to examine the body language of the congregation during the preaching moment, and I invited them to increase their level of participation as spect-actors by posing questions and prompts. We preached on 1 Corinthians 12, about spiritual gifts and the unity and diversity of the body. I asked: What is a spiritual gift that you have? And with what part of the body do you identify? Then I invited them to examine the relationship between those two.

I had no idea what was going to come forth, nor had I answered the questions myself ahead of time. We truly improvised together and communally testified to the Living Word, to which 1 Corinthians also testifies. It was not on me to bring the congregation to life. Rather, we brought one another to life. We resurrected together as we all gained new insights into the text and into our own lives. “I had never realized the connection between my passion for service and my actual hands,” said one participant. “I am like skin,” said another. “I am all over the place and I am porous; that is why I like connecting those in the church with those outside the church,” said another. And the theme continued, connecting spiritual gifts and the sense of call with our actual flesh-and-blood bodies. We re-membered. We gained new strength and appreciation for one another together. We brought 1 Corinthians 12 to life—a true performance and true performativity, a real-time performing of the sermon *latinamente*. We blessed one another with this sermon *con sabor Boricua!*

In a normal week in the Latinx community, we bless our children and, when we get to church, we greet each other with a blessing. This practice could become a mindless routine, but for those who understand an oral culture, it is the intent of the heart accompanying those words that vivifies the blessing so that they are not just words. The words become a happening once they are released from our lips with the intent of the heart. Even in online spaces, we can find ways to do something similar in our preaching, ways to discern the place from which the preaching cultivates connection through words and transformative actions of the Spirit. Recognizing the intention of our hearts as a mixture of belief, connection to God, and discernment, we can see what before was visible only by sensing one another’s presence in a room together. Illustrations—words that bring ideas to life—make the words themselves perform alongside the intent of our hearts. We can still ask people to respond to certain questions as we go along, and we can solicit participation. We can also set up performative dialogue, prerecord songs and liturgical dances, and prepare people’s hearts and minds to receive these items in a particular way that connects with the Word of God to them that day.

For instance, in my own preaching, I (Elizabeth) continue to be as animated as I have always been, making sure that this energy can be seen on camera. I may call someone and set up a dramatic dialogue of the Word, or perhaps an illustration, and we both speak about the “intent of our hearts” as a way of invoking the Holy Spirit as we do this together. The flow continues between us and the Holy Spirit.

## **Conclusion**

In 2020, Latinx preachers and listeners have learned new ways to preach and hear sermons, but we have also found our way to a new sense of “presence” with one another and with the Holy Spirit through the preached Word as we interact in virtual spaces. In this setting, we can experiment with new sabores (flavors) and picantes (spices), with new ways to be improvisational, interactive, and transformative in community.

Those who preach latinamente must learn to engage the hearts and minds of the people to receive the Word differently. Cyberspace has become, in effect, a teaching space where slowly the lostness and awkwardness have challenged us to find the presence and transformation of God in the preaching moment anew.