

June 4, 1951-December 13, 2010



Artists often begin their works at the penultimate moment. The novel, play, painting, sculpture, hymn, or symphony bursts forth, as it were, from a moment of expectation into a crescendo. It is as if everything that before seemed precariously thrown together suddenly *becomes* a unified whole. The penultimate moment creates a critical mass, so that the ultimate moment of unity may dazzle us with wonder. As Alejandro (Alex) García-Rivera's former student and colleague, I know that his death came for him at that penultimate moment; he felt the crescendo of approaching unity, for he told me so. In the summer of 2009 when he asked me to teach the courses he would have taught during the summer Instituto Hispano at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, Alex was still enthusiastically developing new projects. Even as the devastation of cancer made him suddenly look much older than his fifty-nine years, he actively sought to direct his research toward what would serve the community of Creation he so dearly loved.

Alex and I shared many loves; among these was the land of our birth, a place of impossibly azure skies, crashing waves, fragrant foods, and irrepressible music. We often spoke of Havana as a concretization of beauty in suffering, and of the longing for home of the exile, experiences that Alex translated into his scholarship on theological aesthetics and Latino theology.

Alejandro García-Rivera was born in 1951 “near the blue-green waters that lap the coast of Cuba,” as he recounts in a disarmingly honest autobiographical essay.¹ His childhood was cut short by the volatile mix of Castro's revolution, forced exile, cultural dislocation, and the racism that he summarized in words he had heard directed at him in his childhood and again many years later as he ministered in inner-city housing projects: “Cuban, pig, crap.”

2

Between those two moments, Alex sought for a way to make sense of his ruptured world. Hastily sent from Cuba in 1960 by his parents (who followed soon after), Alex grew up in Ohio and Kentucky. His exile there resulted in several traumatic experiences leading him to conclude “That God was but a fiction of the imagination, that abandonment is the true reality, and I must do what I can not to let that reality get the better of me again. I chose science as my reality. I did not have to face God there.”

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With science as his focus (and being clearly gifted), Alex began to win academic awards and set his sights on studying biophysics, eventually completing a MS at Ohio State. At college, Alex met the woman with whom he shared the next thirty-seven years, two daughters, profound Christian faith, and a love of gardening and of all life. Those of us who have benefitted from Alex’s inquisitive intellect and mentoring know that it was Kathryn, with her keen mind and gentle grace, that supported him and also questioned him, depending on the needs of the occasion. After graduation, as a young physicist, Alex was hired by Boeing “to a project shrouded in secrecy.”⁴ Thirty years later he saw this as the single most defining moment of his life. When he realized that he was assigned to the Air Launch Cruise Missile project, Alex understood that his work could be contributing to the horror of a nuclear conflagration. He had gone into science because he loved nature and to hide from God. Now he had a choice to make. He chose life.

Alex left Boeing and began what he called “the labyrinth” of his “way back home.”⁵ He first went to work on skid row with the Lutheran Compass Center in Seattle, where his questions grew and deepened. As a result, his studies shifted to theology and his gifts now focused in this direction. He eventually earned a whole string of new degrees: MDiv, ThM, and PhD from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and he was ordained to the ministry in the Lutheran Church. During this period Alex also worked as a pastor in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he once again faced the dehumanizing power of racism. Except this time Alex, now grafted into the life of a very poor Puerto Rican community of faith, was ready to answer — not by withdrawing — but by finding his prophetic theological voice. It was shortly after that when Alex found his way back to what he called “the embracing arms of the fellowship of the Roman Catholic Church.”

⁶ He

eventually also earned a STL from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley.

The crescendo toward unity that Alex felt building last summer began in earnest in 1992. He was appointed to the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology, thus launching a prolific career of writing, including four monographs and two collaborations.⁷ As these works suggest, Alex’s explorations in the field of religion were wide-ranging. His methodology, which I dubbed

“interlacing,” brought together the study of semiotics, liturgy, science, and the arts as he pioneered the work of theological aesthetics. Alex’s commitment to radical multidisciplinary, interfaith dialogue, and ecumenism was not only apparent in his writings, but in the collaborations he sought and developed on research projects and in the production of conferences. For instance, in his explorations on theology and the sciences Alex worked with the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley and the European Molecular Biology Laboratory at Heidelberg. Simultaneously he began collaborating with notable pioneers in the field of art and religion like Jane Dagett Dillenberger and Doug Adams, and sitting on the boards of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies and the Center for the Arts, Religion, and Education. His interreligious work also proceeded as he developed and taught interfaith aesthetics with Buddhist colleagues. Alex’s Christian ecumenism was vibrant as he led the systematic theology area of the Graduate Theological Union, a program noted for bringing together diverse Christian traditions. As if all of this activity were not enough, Alex continued his role as a leading scholar in Latino theology, serving in leadership positions and publishing bilingually. But most importantly for him, he remained intricately connected to his beloved *comunidad* through his ministry at Saint Leander’s Catholic Church in San Leandro, and his teaching at the Instituto Hispano at the Jesuit School of Theology.

Alex joined the AAR in 1992 — two years before finishing his PhD — and remained involved ever since, making a special effort to guide his students into active involvement in the collegial work of the Academy. In 2007 he supported a group of his doctoral students, myself included, in our proposal to begin a Consultation in systematizing the theological aesthetics method he had been using and teaching at the Graduate Theological Union. He joined us on the dais with his colleague Frank Burch Brown as a group of us enthusiastically wrestled with the complexity of theological discourse in tandem with aesthetics (Rethinking the Field Consultation, Annual Meeting, San Diego, 2007). Alex’s support of his students was as constant as it was demanding, resulting in an overwhelming number of dissertations and masters theses directed, with the distinction of being the scholar to guide to graduation the largest number of Latina scholars in the United States.

I hold that we lost Alex at the penultimate moment because the force of all he had carefully prepared has suddenly become apparent. During the last month of his life, his colleagues at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University shepherded through his final book collaboration to completion, a development that delighted him exceedingly. His small home, fronted by an edible garden, became a pilgrimage site as notable scholars, university presidents, tearful students, and his beloved parish community all came to share time with him. His bed was moved to the dining room, so he could receive guests and also participate in the liturgies that his Jesuit colleagues came regularly to celebrate with the family. After his funeral mass, which filled Saint Leander’s with Alex’s “community of the beautiful,” we gathered in the same room where he had died just days before to share a bountiful meal. There was a sacred quality to it all.

That afternoon conversations flowered among different groups: Who would continue Alex's work on science and religion? What about theological aesthetics? His interfaith work? Who could carry on his work in Latino theology? It was clear that it would take many of us to continue the efforts begun by this single, exceedingly gifted, and inquisitive scholar. The tragedy of Alex's premature death exhibits the kind of complexity he so reveled in pondering. Several weeks before his passing, he had confided in me that he had purchased a new digital camera in the hopes he "might get a chance to use it." Alex wanted very much to live, to continue his work which he saw as a celebration of life. We had begun conversations with a publisher for his next book, which he envisioned as a theological aesthetics of suffering. His recent work on the art of John August Swanson (*Arts 21:2*, 2010), and especially Swanson's image of the *Star Clown* had prompted new thoughts in him about a theology of the Cosmic Christ. He had begun and nurtured groups nationally and internationally with multiple conferences and a new journal of theological aesthetics to be housed at Santa Clara University, which were all in various stages of development. "I am dying," he told the tearful parish members gathered by his bed in Spanish as the end neared. With them, there was no varnishing the truth. "But," he added playfully, "you must continue your Bible studies or I will have to come back and knock you on the head." They would, they pledged. They will. Alex empowered them to do so.

As a theologian Alex did not write about theology; rather, he was a most active practitioner of its task, in its fullest sense, grappling with the mystery of the faith he had regained and which now filled his heart with overwhelming beauty. He had found that "The sacramental imagination changed the terms under which we exist, bringing innocence to a dangerous world, fellowship to places of abandonment, healing to the sick, and the way back for those who get lost in the complex and confusing world of the human condition."⁸

"Beautiful," he muttered softly, as his daughter Sophia cared for him the last week of his life. "What's beautiful, Dad?" she asked him. "Jesus, Jesus beautiful." The beautiful also breaks our heart. *Alex, gracias por tu hermosa vida y por compartirla con tanto amor.*

This In Memoriam piece was written by Cecilia González-Andrieu, Loyola Marymount University. Personal note from the contributor: I am grateful to Alex's colleagues for their assistance, Ana Maria Pineda for her biographical research, Eduardo Fernandez and Bruce Lescher for documents, Peter Doeblér, SARTS, and the AAR's Art, Religion, and Literature Section for their help in continuing the conversations begun by Alex.

Please see below for information about upcoming events honoring Alejandro García-Rivera.

Endnotes

¹ García-Rivera, Alejandro. "Sacraments: Enter the World of God's Imagination," *U.S. Catholic* 59, no. 1 (1994): 10.

² Ibid: 11.

³ Ibid.

⁴ García-Rivera, Alejandro. *The Garden of God : A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), vii.

⁵ García-Rivera, Alejandro. "Sacraments: Enter the World of God's Imagination," *U.S. Catholic* 59, no. 1 (1994): 12.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Monographs: *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (Orvis Books, 1995),

The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics (Liturgical Press, 1999),

A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art (Liturgical Press, 2003), and

The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology (Fortress Press, 2009). Collaborations:

Living Beauty: The Art of Liturgy

(Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007) and

Encounters of Faith: Art and Devotion in Latin America

⁸ García-Rivera, Alejandro. "Sacraments: Enter the World of God's Imagination," *U.S. Catholic* 59, no. 1 (1994): 12.

Resources

García-Rivera, Alejandro. "Sacraments: Enter the World of God's Imagination," *U.S. Catholic* 59, no. 1 (1994): 6–12.

García-Rivera, Alejandro. *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009.

Join us for a session on Alejandro García-Rivera at the upcoming 2011 AAR Annual Meeting in San Francisco:

New Frontiers in Theological Aesthetics: Taking Stock and

Charting Courses via the Sketches of Alejandro García-Rivera

Session of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies (SARTS) and cosponsored by the AAR Arts, Literature, and Religion Section

Friday, November 18, 2011, 3:00 PM–5:00 PM

In recent years there has been a blossoming of interest in the relationship of aesthetics to religious and theological studies. Its synthetic nature makes it an important concept for reflecting on the relationship of the arts to religion. but more significantly it opens religion and theological studies towards other disciplines and critical contemporary issues. The dynamic work of the late Alejandro García-Rivera was one of the key voices in cultivating the budding field of theological aesthetics, and his death offers an opportunity both to reflect on his unique contributions and to consider where the field positioned and how it can be fruitfully carried on. The session, then, is by turns explanatory and exploratory, considering key nodes of García-Rivera's thought including the relationship of aesthetics to theological method, science, interfaith dialogue, ethics, and liturgy, but then critically reflecting on fresh ways these can be grown. The session, chaired by Mia Mochizuki, will be led by close collaborators of García-Rivera's and the respondents were students of his. The respective presenters and their topics are as follows:

Oleg Bychkov explores the connections between theological aesthetics and science that García-Rivera made, showing how for García-Rivera the ground that unifies science and theological phenomenology must be aesthetic. He retrieves the ancient idea of "formal causality" and points out how the concept of form as cause can serve as the uniting ground of science and theology. Beauty serves as the marker — via the aesthetic experience of joy — of formal causality, giving the whole project of science and theology an aesthetic undertone. Response by Mark Graves.

Cecilia González-Andrieu lays out the method of García-Rivera's theological aesthetics, arguing it is a new paradigm that appreciates the distinctness and multiplicity of sources and inquiry while seeing these as intricately connected and mutually enriching. The method arises out of a deep commitment to live with and know the Christian community, especially Latino/a Christians, and García-Rivera's work suggests an intricately interlaced theological discourse arising out of practice, expressed in wonder and committed to transformation. Response by April Lynch and Jenny Patten.

Ronald Nakasone considers the relationship between theological aesthetics and interfaith dialogue by wondering if interfaith conversation might also include the experience of "beauty"

and “notions of the beautiful” — and how through this we can learn to appreciate and commune with other faiths. The possibility that such a mutual sharing could expand our individual and collective aesthetic and moral imaginations, in the manner creative artists have always incorporated, and thereby transcending ideological divides, is then traced out. Response by Trung Pham and Larry Taylor.

William O’Neill elaborates on the relationship between ethics and theological aesthetics, considering the complex “interlacing” of these seemingly disparate disciplines from the perspective of suffering — suffering understood as beauty under the sign of its negation. Drawing upon García-Rivera’s work, he explores the implications of such a pedagogy of seeing for either discipline. Response by Elaine Belz and Peter Doebler.

Thomas Scirghi discusses the relationship between theological aesthetics and liturgy, considering how the disciples did not ask for instruction on prayer, but to deepen their experience of the presence of God. It is aesthetics applied to liturgy that provides a means to encounter the divine mystery as we become people of prayer. Response by Larry Fraher and Patricia McKee.

Other Upcoming Alejandro García-Rivera–related Events:

**Science and Religion Conference: “Bridges to Infinity:
Humankind, God, and the Scientific Enterprise”**
May 6–7, 2011
Santa Clara University

One of the three sessions will be on Beauty

**Pacific Coast Theological Society’s Semiannual Meeting:
“Theological Aesthetics”**
November 4–5, 2011

Graduate Theological Union