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From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology

*Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity
and God*

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A Profane Book of Saints: *San La Muerte*

You are all powerful, so make me find what I am searching for . . .

From a popular prayer to *San La Muerte*

During the eighteenth century and as a result of the Christian *Conquista*, devotion to divine images of Jesus and Mary, and particularly to a multitude of statues of saints, became popular in South America. In the area that today is known as Paraguay and Chaco Argentino (the Guaraní region), indigenous people started the tradition of the *tallistas* or wood carvers, initiated during the period of the Jesuit missions. With the passing of the years, however, the representation of the statues and images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the Roman Catholic saints started to suffer problems of transmission or distortions in their identities. These distortions were in some cases the product of a desire to manifest artistically other beliefs which had been suppressed by Christianity, while in others they reflected contextual reinterpretations of the given official book of saints. Among the Tupí Guaraníes one important religious leader called the *Payé* was a priestly figure, combining the role of healer and miracle worker, who obtained special powers by acts of silent meditation and fasting. It is thought that the *Payé* was somehow identified with Jesus at some time and that it gave rise to small wood carvings of what is known today as *Señor La Muerte* or *San La Muerte*.

Nowadays this has become a popular form of worship among the urban poor in Buenos Aires, brought to the city by migrant workers from the north of the country, especially from Corrientes. There are many accounts of the origins of *San La Muerte*, but his genealogy changes from time to time and from community to community. A common biographical theme expresses a strong economic concern and offers a criticism of usury and the attempt to make profit from the poor. It says briefly that Jesus Christ came to earth and while walking about met a very poor man. He was so poor that he had not eaten for many days and had become very thin and weak. Jesus felt compassion for him and gave him a gift, the gift of healing. It is interesting that the story does not feature a man who had been healed. This would have

been the more traditional story of a man who worshipped Jesus because he was himself restored and liberated. No. The story has another logic. Jesus gave the starving and sick man the gift of healing others. Therefore this thin man (represented as a skeleton), started to heal poor people in his own neighbourhood. But soon he became greedy. He discovered that he could make a good living out of healing people. However, Jesus became angry at this entrepreneurial spirit. But once the man properly repented of his actions, he was condemned to wander the earth healing people for free. He became a nomadic divinity.

Healing is here an extended concept: it refers to economic healing (from the wounds of poverty and debt to the restitution of stolen goods by thieves); love (healing from solitude and the social vulnerability related to loneliness in poor people), as well as healing from illnesses. *San La Muerte* is represented by a skeleton with a scythe and belongs to the hidden worship life of the poor, for his image should not be seen by anybody, except worshippers. Moreover, it is traditional that a small carved bone bearing the image of *San La Muerte* should be inserted under the skin, to maintain a very concrete relationship between the saint and the person in need. If not this, then a piece of cheap jewellery such as a ring, an earring or a medal should be carried about the person, provided that it is not seen by others. The bone of *San La Muerte* inserted under the skin is part of a theological sign language used by the excluded. At the same time it presents an ironic commentary, contrasting the permanent element in the worshippers' contact with the sacred and the insecurity of their grasp on their own transitory world. The habitat of *San La Muerte* under the skin is therefore permanent and secure: no demolition squad or natural catastrophe can threaten the presence of the sacred in their lives.

The Queer elements of the *San La Muerte* popular worship can be organized around elements of provisionality, inversions, diglossia and different binary allocations. The interrelation between the religious symbolic activity of the excluded and their affective activity (as in family patterns) reinforces and recreates each other in a permanent dialectics of mutuality. For instance, provisionality is a key element in the life of the excluded: their habitat is provisional and so are their family relationships, subject as they are to economic migrations. The contrast between this provisionality in their affective social structures and governmental discourses on family and national identity could hardly be greater.¹ The Argentinian state has an official discourse on

¹ Michael Herzfeld suggests that 'images of domesticity' and family stereotypes are widely used by the state in order to build a symbolic system which could explain and reassure people against, for instance, cases of human rights abuses and anti-democratic measures. For instance, he quotes Hastings

national identity which relies heavily on Roman Catholic family idealizations. These are the discourses of *La Madre Patria* (The Mother Fatherland), a term which grammatically might look at first sight like a contradiction in gender, although in Spanish the term *Patria* (Fatherland) is feminine. Therefore 'The Mother Fatherland' takes the Argentinian people to be *los hijos de esta tierra* (the children of this land; 'this land' replaces here the term *Patria*). The 'honour of the land' is invoked when there are international difficulties with *paises hermanos* (brother countries), that is, Latin American or border countries. It is as if this was a family discourse concerning the rape of virgin daughters.

And finally, the official discourse follows that of the church in comparing the life of the nation and the life of a family. A whole legal terminology of separations, domestic disputes, divorce and reconciliation are commonly employed in official explanations of social tensions, from general strikes to internal disagreements over government policy. Even the official emphasis on reconciliation after high-profile disagreements (the metaphorical *divorcios*) can be related to the anti-divorce policy of a state legally associated with Roman Catholicism.

To this gendered universe of family discourses of national identity we may add what Herzfeld calls the images of domesticity (Herzfeld, 1997, p. 4), conveyed by a multitude of images taken from the universe of bourgeois domesticity. In times of extreme crisis, such as the intense internal conflict of Argentina in the 1970s, the domestic discourse homologized the everyday virtues of a bourgeois home with patriotism. For instance, to speak about the country when abroad was considered an improper form of behaviour. The difficulties experienced by the country were officially explained as lack of confidence, lack of trust, not talking 'over the table' (as during a family meal) with frankness, lack of obedience (to God and to the government), and gender transgression attributed to the fact that in this 'home-country' women and men sometimes do not accept the roles assigned to them by God, that is, of homemaking (for women) and courage in public service (for men). Moreover, the political crisis of the country was equated with a crisis in the family structures of the country. Even the critics of the then military system used domestic metaphors such as Maria Elena Walsh's famous article 'Desventuras en el País-Jardín-de-Infantes' ('Misfortunes in the Land of the Kindergarten', Walsh, 1979).

These metaphors based on gender are also class metaphors, for the poor do not send their children to kindergartens. However, in con-

Banda, the former President of Malawi, referring to the good cause of 'Mother Malawi' in the midst of serious claims of human rights abuse (Herzfeld, 1997, p. 4).

trast to these, there is what we have called the excluded theodicy based on the experiences of other forms of family relations which have little to do with the official discourse already mentioned. Basically, they contravene the sense of domestic stability and permanency and the morality exuded by the bourgeois family's sense of security. In religious terms, popular proverbs such as *vergüenza es robar y no llevar nada a la madre* (it is a shame to steal and not take something to your own mother) can be related to the worship of the bandits, considered humble men who stole through necessity, but always shared what they got among people in their own communities. This is part of the belief that one can be an honest thief (*el ladrón honrado*). It is the political system which is declared to be corrupt, committing theft against ordinary people. The act of stealing from such criminality is now redeemed. Stealing becomes part of the accepted universe of things, but it can have an honest purpose too, for example in relation to solidarity with those who share the same fate of poverty and destitution.

Therefore, while the official Christian redemptive discourse is about identity by repetition of family metaphors applied to the community without distinctions, among the excluded, at least in this particular example, redemption comes from an appropriation of the state's sins of corruption but with a twist. In this spirit, we can read the following testimony of a person who lives under a bridge in Buenos Aires:

There are days that I go to the streets to check the garbage bins and I find bags full of clothes; it is shocking. Could you believe that I found a fridge and a TV discarded in the streets? . . . If people knew that we are living here, under the bridges . . . We live in a country where everything is thrown away. This country is so big and yet see the [small] space that I occupy [under a bridge].

Montes de Oca, 1995, p. 238

The perceived excessive consumerism and carelessness of some sections of the population is seen as sinful by destitute people who do not understand why things (in this case, discarded goods) are not shared with the community.

In the worship of *San La Muerte*, it seems that the familiarity of the poor with death in the midst of everyday life – in more than one sense – identifies the provisionality of life as the only constant experience. The people who say *basta la salud* (health is enough) and *mientras hay vida hay esperanza* (where there is life, there is hope) worship Death. The provisionality of their experience of life is inverted; death is healthy. But health is more than absence of illness in this case and it is represented by good luck in such things as the arts of popular

gambling and finding affective and sexual company when one is alone, in order to better survive a difficult life. This is what is called the art of *el rebusque*, literally to search and search again for little things that can help in the emotional recycling of the life and love of the poor. *Rebusque* as a concept shares with *rejunte* the 're' of repetition and as such it is usually found in popular expressions which indicate the sense of struggle among the excluded. Things need to be tried again and again, from bureaucratic administrative procedures which ask people to wait and 'come tomorrow' (*vuelva mañana*), to provisional solutions in life which need to be continuously reworked. The worship of *San La Muerte* is a theological reflection on inversion by rejection: the rejection of the administrative procedures of an organized political life which is meaningless for the poor; of the institutionalized medicine and the poor health-care facilities, largely out of reach of those at the margins of society – especially at a time when medical provision is being privatized and international pharmaceutical companies are developing drugs which few can afford to buy. It is hardly surprising that statues of *San La Muerte* can be found in the *Santerías* of Buenos Aires alongside strange books promising miraculous cures for illnesses such as appendicitis, constipation or liver problems occasioned by excessive drinking. They are happily mixed on shelves displaying booklets offering advice on how to fix a TV or build your own radio. Alongside are the tarot cards of *San Cono*, the popular version of a (supposedly) Roman Catholic saint represented as a young smiling priest with a shining halo who, while praying the rosary, was told by the Virgin the secret of how to win the lottery. These are all part of the same system of theological *rebusques*, and a theology of *rejunte*.

The *Rejunte* Theology unveils the diglotic dialectic of the life of the excluded, exposed to an ecclesial theology and a state discourse which are untranslatable into their lives. The division between the public and private discourses of national identity is then relocated. The public worship of Jesus in the Christian churches is transformed into a bodily, private and hidden worship. The bone or statue representing *San La Muerte* receives a hidden blessing from the church, when according to specific instructions the believer takes it to seven different churches or is 'blessed' by seven different priests. (This is achieved by having the bone or statue in a pocket and touching it while the priest gives a general benediction.)² The church as well as the individual priests are oblivious to what has happened. Christianity is re-ordered as a different liturgy of open and private spaces. *San La Muerte* becomes an associate divinity, recognized and influential in

² For the worship to *San La Muerte*, see E. Noya, *Corrientes entre la Leyenda y la Tradición*. Special issue of 'Todo es Historia', vol. 7 (Buenos Aires, 1987).

the sacred Christian pantheon and able to obtain significant favours for the believer, as if heaven were ordered like a feudal court or a colonial administration in which it was necessary to have friends in high places.

Sometimes there are attempts to bring this worship within the control of the Roman Catholic Church. I have personally collected homemade street leaflets inviting people to pray the rosary in honour of *San La Muerte* in some new chapel dedicated to the saint. This might be part of a strategy towards the legitimization of the saint, but it includes a commercial element, since the people are frequently asked to give some money for the maintenance of the place of worship and its so-called administrator. Simply put, this is another economic *rebusque* of the poor. Yet all this is part of the worship of *San La Muerte* and the liturgy of his fiesta which takes place on 20 August. In honour of the saint people in the community try to bring and share food and drink. There is also singing and an atmosphere of happiness among those who believe in the saint. Sometimes, depending on the location of the worship, the celebration can be very elaborate, with clear mimetic resemblances to Roman Catholic processions and the liturgical gestures of the mass, including the central element of the sacred banquet in the presence of *San La Muerte*.

The gender dislocation of the worship can be seen in the way in which the traditional division of public and private spheres of worship is delineated. The private or the area of intimate female self-knowledge (Herzfeld, 1997, p. 20) takes prevalence over the public sphere of worship. It is also a bodily worship. In Argentina, the domestic space of worship is made by women decorating and looking after statues of the Virgin Mary, Jesus and the saints, by arranging their clothes, by bringing flowers or burning candles at their feet. The public space of worship belongs to male power represented by the male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church with its divine canon, to whom belong the power to forgive and decide issues of inclusion and exclusion in society. For instance male power decides if children of non-married people are bastards, if they may attend certain schools, if divorcees can go to church or not. In general male power establishes the canons of decency among the people. However, efficacy is attributed to the domestic sphere, that is, the prayers in the home in a world of novenas and rosaries. In the worship to *San La Muerte*, the public (male) sphere of the devotion simply does not exist. Everybody is their own priest. *San La Muerte* does not enquire into the legality of people's relationships but simply shows them favour. This is a divinity who acts as an intermediary between the life of gods such as Jesus on the one hand, who belongs to the life of people who are integrated into society, and, on the other, the excluded whose life is an exercise of diglotic meaning in Christian theology.

Once again we encounter in *San La Muerte* a popular religiosity which is deeply rooted in the subversion of a family order: it is therefore Queer. The subversion is partial and it is not to be seen as a model which might confound binary systems of thought, but rather in the use of such binarisms. Herzfeld is very perceptive when he claims that somehow only social usage makes a difference to binarisms. This is true in this case, as in the cases of certain Andean cultures.³ Both in the city as in the Andean culture, heterosexuality seems sometimes to get close to leaving the closet, although it falls short of actually doing so. Yet, the different configurations of patterns of family life and the different solutions which the excluded present to a political system sustained by a Christian family discourse on identity give us further clues to add to the search for a Queer God (or the face of the Queer God), coming from people at the margins of society through a combination of class, gender, sexuality and race.

Insights: outside heterosexuality

Adding sexuality to exclusion changes the situation of people's lives considerably. Recent studies on poverty and exclusion in the city of Buenos Aires show that transvestites tend to live in community in order to receive more support and protection. In this way transvestite 'families' are to be found in poor hotels (the run down boarding houses of the poor, where rooms can be rented by the day) and even in poor houses rented with the economic effort of the whole group living there. Curiously, they claim that their best experiences of integration into society, in terms of receiving respect in spite of their obviously different sexual orientation, have been in the *villas miserias* (slums) of the city. So, one poor transvestite declares that '[the slums] are the only place to live with some respect and without being persecuted, because everybody is marginalized there' (Montes de Oca, 1995, p. 223). Prostitution is the main economic option of the sexually different poor and this is the case with transvestites. Some transvestites claim that they have a better life than gays, in terms of avoiding persecution and marginalization. But in this we are confronting the exclusion of identity, based on a theological argument which is particularly strong in Argentina, namely, that bodies are created by God and belong to God along with a kind of given naturalization of civil identities. Of course, some bodies seem to suffer more than

³ I am referring here to the case of the bisexual religiosity in some Peruvian towns, and to the family structure of the Canela indigenous people from Ecuador. See for instance M. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), especially ch. 7, 'Popular Anti-Theologies of Love'.

others from this interdiction of creative thinking about a person's own body (as in the case of transvestism). This theological elaboration has been legalized and therefore no rights remain for a poor transvestite. The formation of community flats, or the strategies of living in the same location, provide them with a family of affinity. It is common to hear them say that they have learnt from the mistakes of others in all senses, from issues related to self-defence and protection to the selection of hormones to grow breasts. For this, in some sense, is what a family needs to be, a place of nurturing of people and sharing experiences of life: an economic unit in itself. As they experience so little protection in society, money is an important goal: economic independence is the only guarantee to any claim of rights they might have. I have personally found some forms of secular theology among them. Many hold a special reverence for Argentina's famous former first lady, Eva Duarte de Perón, 'Evita'. Evita is much revered, almost worshipped and some even claim to have some kind of spiritual contact with her, receiving guidance from heaven. Others might claim, whether seriously or not, that they are the very reincarnation of Evita. There are some who worship the Virgin Mary, but Evita, the prototype of the intelligent Argentinian woman, beautiful while at the same time a political genius of action and reflection, sadly has no theological equivalent. It is curious though that those who transgress the politics of sexuality as transvestites draw spiritual inspiration from one who also transgressed many gender borders in such a radical way.

From the life of the excluded and their affective, family ways, Christian theology has much to learn – but in order to change and not simply to adapt. First of all, the lessons of critical realism among the poor dismantle the good intentions of the theologies whose aim is to normalize the life of people into a discourse on family middle-class ideals. There are lessons on recognizing plurality and theological insights in the face of the Queer God of the poor: generous but unpredictable as life; honest in its own way, with the final aim of solidarity for survival. This is a god who rejects the economy of the market, its public worship and the exchange of money. But it is also a god who announces that Godself can represent collectively the world of people's unruly affections by re-locating the discourse of the family into a wealth of relationships of love in transition, impermanence and reciprocity.