



Qu(e)er(y)ing Mary

Popular Mariology as Visual Liberation Theology

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Resumen

Este artículo se centra en la mariología popular latinoamericana en su expresión visual y analiza el conflicto entre discursos teológicos populares y de elite que rodean a María en los siglos XX y XXI. Al seguir el paradigma de Michel Foucault sobre conocimiento local versus conocimiento erudito, este artículo postula la existencia de un conflicto entre las expresiones visuales populares y eruditas de las teologías de María en América Latina. Este conflicto revela el potencial que la Mariología popular, combinada con las tradiciones de la diosa indígena y creencias religiosas africanas importadas, ha ofrecido a aquellos que están marginados socialmente, incluyendo los pobres, las mujeres y personas queer.

Palabras claves: Mariología, América Latina, Teologías de la Liberación Queer, Michel Foucault, Marcella Althaus-Reid.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a Mariologia popular latino-americana expressada visualmente e discute o conflito entre discursos teológicos da elite e populares que rodeia Maria nos séculos XX e XXI. Seguindo o paradigma de Foucault de conhecimento locais versus conhecimento erudito, este artigo pressupõe um conflito entre teologias populares e eruditas de Maria promulgadas visualmente na América Latina. Este conflito revela o potencial que a Mariologia popular, combinada com as tradições da deusa indígena e crenças religiosas africanas importadas, ofereceu-se para aqueles que são socialmente marginalizados, incluindo os pobres, mulheres e indivíduos queer.

Palavras-chave: Mariologia, América Latina, Teologias da Libertação Queer, Michel Foucault, Marcella Althaus-Reid.



Abstract

This article looks at popular Latin American Mariology expressed visually and discusses the conflict between popular and elite theological discourses surrounding Mary in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following Michel Foucault's paradigm of local versus erudite knowledge, this article postulates a conflict between popular and erudite theologies of Mary enacted visually in Latin America. This conflict reveals the potential that popular Mariology, combined with indigenous goddess traditions and imported African religious beliefs, has offered to those who are socially marginalized, including the poor, women, and queer individuals.

Keywords: Mariology, Latin America, Queer Liberation Theologies, Michel Foucault, Marcella Althaus-Reid..

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Introduction

The tragedy is that liberation theology has not taken seriously the rich traditions of the sexually different in Latin America...We have in Latin America enough cultural and religious resources from the poor to enable us to reflect theologically, drinking, as Gutierrez would say, from our own wells, including our sexual wells. Not only that, but drinking from the wells of people's narratives of rebelliousness and troubling of the normality of church, theology, and society alike.

Marcella Althaus-Reid

Building upon Michel Foucault's notion in «Two Lectures» (1972) of a «local» versus an «erudite» knowledge, I posit this same conflict exists in theology. The theology of the religious professional differs from that of the marginalized believer. Moreover these two theologies are in conflict. Erudite theology looks to church hierarchies, orthodox belief, and professionalism. Erudite theology functions to maintain the social status quo. In Latin America in the twenty-first century this means hetero-patriarchy, global capitalism, extremes of social inequality, racism, and heteronormativity. In addition, this hegemonic theology also maintains the place of religious elites. Hegemonic theology is contrasted with local or popular theology that addresses the needs of the people and reflects the experience of those who are marginalized and oppressed (Espin, 1997).

The first generation of Liberation Theology in Latin America —such as Leonardo Boff & Boff (2013 [1986]), Jon Sobrino (1978 [1976]), Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973 [1971]), Juan Luis Segundo (1976 [1975]), and José Míguez Bonino (1975), among others— looked mostly at the poor and their economic oppression (Córdova Quero, 2010: 212). However,



that theology did not go far enough. It did not engage racism, gender bias, or the marginalization of those whose sexual expression did not fit the heterosexual norm. Contemporary Liberation Theology, such as the *Indecent Theology* of Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000), aims to remedy that lack while opening liberation theology to all of those who are marginalized and who suffer oppression. As Althaus-Reid (2000) states:

Not only did 'the poor' subsume women, it also subsumed lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual people... The poor, as in any old fashioned moralizing Victorian tale, were portrayed as the deserving and asexual poor. Very few studies were done on the life of the marginalized at that time, in spite of the well-known discourse which started with the claim that Liberation Theology used mediation sciences such as sociology, anthropology, psychology and economics in order to understand reality (30).

Theology is usually the preserve of religious specialists. However, liberation theologies do not start with the insights or experience of elite specialists but the experiences of those on the edges of society and the church. These individuals may not express their theology in written form but may articulate it in a variety of other ways, some of which are visual. Particularly with regard to images of Mary, so central to the religion and culture of Latin America, we can see this visual theology at work.

In this article I look at the idea of a visual theology of liberation. Theology is a construction. Theology creatively groups metaphors and images of the divine that work together with religious beliefs and values. Theology is not only expressed in the form of texts but also visually. In this article I look at this phenomena in Latin America surrounding images and beliefs about Mary. The first section will discuss the so-called «traditional» views on Mary while



connecting and visibilizing them through the lens of popular liberation theology. The second part will engage examples of querying and queering Mary from the work of queer artists such as Alma López.

Visual Liberation Theology and Envisioning Mary in Latin America

In popular visual liberation theology there are two approaches or strategies. In artistic terms, there is the creation of alternative, nontraditional and non-orthodox images of Mary. These images may be created by minority artists who are professionally trained but whose consciousness is attuned to oppression within the culture. These images may also be created by indigenous or folk artists who are not formally trained yet express themselves visually, and in this instance, by creating images of Mary.

There is also the use of traditional Marian images in nontraditional contexts, functioning as a sort of popular installation art to use a term from the practice of visual arts in contemporary «high» art. In elite art, installation art creates an entire environment which in itself is the work of art. The work of art is not a single painting or sculpture, but it is an arrangement of items in a particular way that is meant to express a concept or idea. Again, professionally trained artists create installation art. However, so do those who are not trained as visual artists. Lay persons also love images and arrange them and give them contexts that are significant to their everyday lives. This is observed in household shrines, in personal displays of images of Mary, and in images of Mary included in processions and popular parades.



Many individuals who are also religious have a fondness for visual imagery of religious figures like Jesus and Mary in Christianity. To meet the needs of this «market,» a wide range of inexpensive images are created for sale. The aesthetic of these mass-marketed images is vastly different from that for images produced for elite artistic tastes. However, lay folks love these images. And they do not just consume them in «appropriate» ways that would be sanctioned by churches' leadership. They take these images into their own living spaces and create displays of these images that have meaning for them. They may alter the images themselves as well as «create» a particular environment for their sacred image.

In his work «Two Lectures» Foucault (1972) described subjugated knowledge and its importance. In the instance of popular Latin American Mariology, I believe that the descriptor of subjugated knowledge that is in conflict with hegemonic knowledge, that is, the knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy and their theologians, is relevant. Foucault (1972) writes:

I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else, something which in a sense is altogether different, namely, a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges (such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the nurse, of the doctor—parallel and marginal as they are to the knowledge of medicine—that of the delinquent etc.), and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge (*le savoir des gens*)



though it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it—that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (82-83).

When nontraditional images of Mary are created or traditional images of Mary are used in secular, «indecent» settings by either oppressed, minority artists or by oppressed, minority lay people, these nontraditional images—either created or contextually situated—are resisted by the orthodox religious establishment and at times are condemned as being «blasphemous.» The conflict between erudite religious leaders and popular engagement in subversive visual theology is similar to the conflict of theologians and their textual creations. However, theologians have tended to pay much less attention to the ways that the visual can contribute to constructing a theology, of either a hegemonic, dominant theology or a subversive, inclusive theology of liberation. This article traces a few examples from Latin America in the context of queer issues and theological constructions and argue that an inclusive liberation theology that represents queer individuals fully and completely needs to be visual as well as textual.

Although Liberation theologians have abundantly written about Mary (De Margerie, 1987), feminist theologians were some of the first to expand the scope of mariology within the theologies of liberation from a non-heteropatriarchal standpoint. While some feminist theologians are highly critical of Latin American Mariology (Daly, 1993 [1973]), others see the subversive side of this spirituality (Gebara and Lucchetti Bingemer, 1989 [1988]). Challenging traditional



Christianity by looking at the complicity of the church in economies of poverty and violence, these theologians have attempted,

to recover and embrace the Historical Jesus, applying the meaning of his humanity to women, as well as marshalling the biblical Mary through the historical Mary... They have been arguing against women's position in society and as well as their subordinate roles as women within the family. Consequently, it has resulted in a new theology, a theology developed from the perspective of women, a theology committed to freedom of gender, race, and class, with the vision of a more humane world that is more open to relationship, that echo women's perspectives on life (Nogueira, 2007:62).

With the addition of the experience of women to the voices that are reflected in Liberation Theology, it opens its heart to more and more of the members of society that experience oppression. By looking at gender, feminist liberation theologians bring to the fore issues that resonate with queer individuals and offer an opening for queer persons of faith to bring their experiences to the dialogue of Liberation Theology.

As indicated above, Mariology has had a mixed reception by feminist theologians. While many have criticized Latin American Mariology for having a deeply conservative bent, this is only one side of the picture. Mary has often been used to reinforce gender bias, submission to authority, and rejection of sexuality (Hampson, 1996; Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007). However, there is another side to Marian devotion. As with the life of Jesus told in the Gospels, there is something rather queer about Mary as well in the Christian narrative.



Some feminist religious scholars, like Rosemary Radford Reuther in her *Sexism and God Talk* (1983) and Mary Daly in *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (1993) find orthodox Mariology as espoused by the Roman Catholic Church as «inherently sexist.» Drawing from these works, Terry Rey (1999-2000) concludes that, «While this had led “many feminist theologians [to argue] that Mary is not salvageable,” others, meanwhile, keep the faith in the possibility of recasting Mary as a symbol propitious to the liberation of women» (961-962). Rey also notes the conflict between religious elites and the people in the area of the hybridity of Latin American Mariology with both indigenous and imported African religious traditions. Some of this religious hybridity empowers those who are economically subjugated as well as those who are marginalized because of the expression of their sexuality. Rey (1999-2000) writes:

In the African-based religion of Santería, homosexual men find acceptance by certain orishas (spirits) (namely Ochun, Yemaya, and Ogun) [orishas that are friendly to gay men] and rejection by others [...]. The Virgin Mary's assimilation in Cuban Santería with Ochun (as Caridad del Cobre) and Yemaya (as Our Lady of the Regla) opens a discursive locus of legitimacy for homosexual men in popular Cuban Mariology (969).

As Rey (1999-2000) further states, such popular hybridity in the Latin American Marian context can be empowering «on the political, ideological, and sexual level» (971).

The Dual Nature of Latin American Mariology

A simple rejection of Latin American Mariology as merely oppressive loses sight of the liberative aspects of Mariology. Looking at what actually happens in Latin America —the way



that images of Mary and hybrid understandings of Mary are portrayed— offers us a much more nuanced picture, one that underscores the conflict between elite and popular theology, often acted out in the visual medium. Elaine Marques Nogueira (2007) notes:

Women's spirituality in Latin America is a genuine expression of faith; their theological work is contemporary and a genuine contextualization of their reality. When one looks to Latin American history one sees centuries of humiliating colonial experience. Therefore, women's theological work is a voice, a freedom that only recently has been articulated and put in words (65).

Concurrently, Peruvian Roman Catholic Sister, Consuelo del Prado (2006 [1989]) states:

Mary becomes for us a companion on the road in following her Son. So it is that we taught the piety of Mary which is so deeply rooted in our continent. We can reclaim her name for our spirituality; in the best sense of the word, our spirituality is Marian (145).

Looking at this liberative dimension of Mary, María Pilar Aquino (1994) writes: «Among Latin American women this new approach to Mary and her femininity has inspired an ecumenical spirit. "Mary is the paradigm of faith, prayer, and solidarity with all the oppressed and all women on earth"» (159). By taking into account their own experiences Latin American women identify themselves with Mary because they share the same language and the same hope. In this context Mary is seen as a woman of the people, a believer as any other woman and a mother (Aquino, 1994: 159). In the same tone, Elizabeth Johnson (2004) finds that feminist liberation theologians «pioneered the insight that Maria was like them, a poor woman of the people [...]. A



villager who lived her trust in God in the midst of hard daily labour, she knows their struggle and their pain» (13).

Scholars such as Maurice Hamington (1995) also point to the substrata of Mariology where spirituality and art as well as liturgy encompass a more closer provenance to daily-experiences of the believers rather than sophisticated theological discussions:

The development in the Church of Mariology is a prime example of a kind of intuitive, symbolic reflection, and it first took place not in the study of theologians but in the devotional life of the people and among the poets, musicians and artists who invented the liturgy and constructed the churches, as well as among the contemplatives. It is the fruit of meditation, prayer and human anguish and need (35).

Likewise, Sian Taylder (2004) emphasizes the contrast between popular Roman Catholicism and its appropriation of Marian devotion and elite theological discourse about Mary. Taylder also underscores the importance of popular devotion and the power that the Roman Catholic Church has had in many countries, including Latin America. For Taylder (2004), Marian devotion is the «principal example of popular faith» (354). She continues:

It is ironic that it took the [Roman] Catholic Church's great attempt to drag itself, kicking and screaming into the twentieth century to curb what it deemed to be the excesses of Mariolatry. Even more so when one considers that the Second Vatican Council took place against the background of the second wave of feminism and the first rumblings of sexual revolution. The Council was marked by Paul VI's famous speech announcing 'The Hour of Women' and a profound change in humanity. For a



fleeting moment the [Roman Catholic] Church seemed to be caught up on this wave of optimism. But a closer inspection of Paul VI's speech reveals the usual appeal to women's higher moral nature and his encyclical *humanae vitae* maintained the [Roman Catholic] Church's hard line on contraception and female sexuality. (Taylder, 2004: 354).

The Roman Catholic Church lost a great opportunity under Paul VI to open itself fully to the participation of women in the life of the Church. It also tried to eliminate the popular expressions of devotion to Mary, viewing this as a way to «modernize» the practice of the Roman Catholic Church. Taylder (2004) also looks at the way that colonialism is linked to Marian imagery and the frequent link between this imagery and the political right:

The Conquest of the 'New World' was executed under the banner of a Virgin who provided protection and religious legitimisation for the Spanish and Portuguese. The conquest was considered the work of Mary and, therefore, a crusade to which the explorers were religiously dedicated. The massacre and violation of indigenous women and their forced conversion to Christianity were dedicated to Our Lady. Five hundred years later Our Lady would be similarly invoked to support the bloody coups and repressive military regimes of Latin America's lost decade. But in both cases, and throughout the intervening centuries, the oppressed, the poor, the indigenous and women have found in their Marian devotions a liberating capacity characteristic of popular religion (355).

Taylder —along with a number of other authors such as Irene Lara (2008) and Rey (2000)— notes the way that Marian imagery and devotion developed in Latin America



and the way that this imagery was blended with indigenous, pre-colonial goddess traditions.

Elina Vuloa (2006) looks at the representation of Mary and indigenous goddess and ascertain that the lack of sexuality which hinders the attempt to construct an alternative spiritual vision is the key difference between Mary of the Christian tradition and goddesses found in traditional religions. Because of this, many feminists and queers do not find in Marian iconography a source of inspiration. Vuloa (2006) writes:

Without doubt the mythical and art historical connections between ancient goddesses and Mary do exist. Nevertheless, according to some interpretations, one central characteristic makes ‘the official’ Mary very different in the chain of great goddesses: she alone is completely disassociated from sexuality. Her fertility is not seen as opulent and optimistic. Her maternity is taken away from her: the birth of her child was unlike all other births. In her, fertility and maternity are not affirmations of natural life as in the pre-Christian goddesses. Even her virginity—her most precious gift, according to the tradition—is defined only in the narrowest physiological sense. Jesus was ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’ (without a sexual act) and ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ (the hymen did not rupture even at delivery—a violent, even sadistic image). In the (other) goddesses, virginal motherhood was understood as the mystical and powerful ability of women to create life from within themselves; in the case of Mary, this is reduced to a unilateral act, from above, by the Holy Spirit, for whom Mary is no more than a vessel, a recipient, instead of an active subject. All these are seen as reasons for the rejection of Mary as a usable goddess for contemporary feminists (152-153).



Brazilian theologian Mario Ribas (2006) looks at the subversive ways that images of Mary can be created by the oppressed. This is often done by the context in which the image is displayed, a type of popular «installation art» if we look to the terminology of the discipline of art history. Or we can view these displays as heartfelt displays of icons of Mary in setting and locations that reflect the often-harsh reality of the everyday life of those who are marginalized and oppressed. Ribas (2006) reflects that:

On the other hand, in Latin America the iconography of saints is not confined to churches or religious environments. Such icons are often found in public places, schools, government offices, courts of justice and homes. They can also be found in bars, cabarets and brothels as well as in garages, displayed alongside pictures of naked women. The icons, therefore, in popular religion are part of daily life, mixed with the profanity of every aspects of human life. There is also the syncretism of Latin American popular religiosity as the icons of the saints are often placed alongside Afro-Brazilian representations of spiritual entities. Sacred and profane are mixed up in popular expressions: the statue of the Virgin Mary or a crucifix can be placed on the wall above the same bed where sexual activities take place. But the statue of the Virgin can also be there as a reminder of the pure example of ideal womanhood (126).

Contrary to the «traditional» understanding of «purity» and «ideal womanhood,» Mary among the poor and the outcasts embraces and enfleshes the realities of «deviant» faithfuls. From an icon reclaimed by orthodoxy and repression, Mary liberates herself and foster liberation to those who suffer oppression. Argentinean queer theologian Hugo Córdova Quero (2006) has pointed out that this dynamic is inscribed in the «binary *saint/prostitute* still



present overtly and covertly in different technologies of discourse» (95, emphasis in the original) in Latin America. He further states in the case of another Mary, namely Mary of Magdala, whose imagery also moves in the same lines than the Virgin Mary:

These technologies of discourse set up polities that condition the very existence of human beings, whether through legal systems or through cultural/societal traditions. Theology is part of this process. [...] [I]n the case of Mary, the basic process was to deny her body and sexuality in order to co-opt her as an archetype for decency, an understanding that could be used as a model to keep women in *her place* – that is, subordinate to males. Nonetheless, the ideology behind those theological understandings has not been overcome, and it continues to affect the lives of human beings (Córdova Quero, 2006: 95, emphasis in the original).

The binary «saint/prostitute» —although fictitious— can also be subverted by dynamics of reappropriation of religious figures such as these Marys. Additionally, Ribas (2006) also states:

Placing icons of Mary in brothels is the way in which prostitutes tend to symbolise their re-claiming of their faith in God and in Mary. It is at the same time a way to undermine the current theological assumption that procreation is the only purpose of sex, rather than pleasure, or the result of economic exclusion. In this way, placing an icon of the Virgin in a brothel illustrates to some extent a theological contrast, as was pointed out by Ruth Adams, in her essay ‘Idol Curiosity—Andy Warhol and the Art of Secular Iconography’ [...]. She presents Marilyn Monroe as an antithesis of Mary. Mary in this case represents the one who reproduces without sex,



while Monroe is the one who has sex without reproducing. The same antithesis applies to prostitutes, who find in their job a way to survive. In their case, they cannot procreate, although some of them do, accidentally. So it is that the situation of the children of a prostitute can be even worse, as shown in the popular expression *filho da puta* (son of a whore). Such an expression, often used in moments of anger, is applied to anyone who has been a source of annoyance: it symbolizes one of the lowest categories of people within society. On the other hand, Jesus himself might have been called *filho da puta*, either by his contemporaries, or even perhaps unconsciously by the current theological tradition that denies to Joseph the biological fatherhood of Jesus and by the current iconography that routinely portrays Mary alone with a child in her arms (126).

Ribas addresses the issue of whether it is possible to reappropriate the iconography of Mary in such a way as to go beyond traditional representations that deny Mary a sexuality of any sorts. The re-imagining of Mary by lay people not only works to reverse oppression and the hegemonic use of Marian iconography to shore up dominant ideologies but it also can serve this to culturally subvert and liberate, particularly in terms of sexuality. For Ribas, the display of traditional images of Mary and other religious icons in secular areas associated with sexuality does just that. In addition, hybrid imaging, combining Roman Catholic traditions with those of African religions introduced into Latin America also aids in this process as does the introduction of elements of traditional indigenous goddess figures that embraced rather than shunned sexuality.

A final way that the oppressed can appropriate images of Mary is in processions and pilgrimages. These are popular in many countries when Roman Catholicism is the dominant Christian denomination. And Latin America is an excellent



example. Pilgrimages and processions have elements of carnival and rowdiness, such as in the case of Brazil (Soloway and Ellerbeck, 2014). They celebrate the joys and sensuality of everyday life and its pleasures. And it is often in the midst of these types of popular celebrations that we find icons of Mary. Again, the people take control of where the icons are displayed. They reject the formality and solemnity of the church and invite Mary to be at home with them, in the midst of their daily lives and struggles.

Accordingly, images of Mary have the potential —through the popular re-contextualization of traditional religious imagery— to subvert traditional understandings and offer images of Mary that allows her the fullness of her humanity by introducing and celebrating sexuality along with religious devotion. The quotations above from Ribas indicate another way to create an alternative iconography: by displaying images of Mary, often inexpensive reproductions, in a variety of secular sites such as a brothels and bars as well as schools, offices and government offices. These displays link devotion to Mary to people's everyday life. Often life is gritty and difficult. And that is when Mary and her icon is most needed.

Queering Mary

Mary can be viewed as «queer» in a number of ways. Asian American theologian Patrick S. Cheng (2011) notes that the life of Mary as portrayed in the gospels did not conform to the norm of family patterns found in first century Palestine. He writes that:

As a pregnant woman who was not yet married, Mary deeply challenged the social norms of her time [...]. Mary's status as an unwed mother makes her a sexual outcast. As such, Mary is the ideal person to intercede for those of us who are her "special



children” – “all us queers, fags, dykes, fems, fairies, fruits, transvestites, transsexuals, and all sexual exiles” (Cheng, 2011: 89).

As a «virgin mother,» Cheng (2011) finds that, «Mary deconstructs the heterosexist theologies of male-female complementariness that views the husband-wife marital bond as “natural” or heavenly ordained» (90). Jesus was not the product of a typical male-female family and Mary, as both virgin and mother, does not adopt the role of heterosexual mother. The relationship between Mary and Jesus can be seen as queer, tugging at the boundaries of «normal» sexuality in first century Palestine.

As presented by Roman Catholic theology, Mary is removed from the day-to-day world of human sexuality. Looking at Roman Catholic imagery depicting Mary, Althaus-Reid (2000) writes:

The Virgin imaginary in Latin America is the permanent dichotomy of lust and love: this is why poor people are presented in the Theology of Liberation as decent, that is, asexual or monogamous heterosexual spouses united in the holy sacrament of marriage, people of faith who do not masturbate, have lustful thoughts at prayer times, cross-dress, or enjoy leather practices. However, if we keep falsifying human relationships in the name not only of God (a habit to which we have grown accustomed) we must remember that we do it also in our love for justice (65-66).

Traditional Latin American Liberation Theology focuses on the poor while at the same time ignoring the fact that the poor have bodies, express themselves sexually, and if that sexual expression is cisgender or queer, sexuality and spirituality are intimately linked for everyone, including the



poor and those who are otherwise socially marginalized. With poverty, often sexual orientation and sexual expression is oppressed and violence frequently accompanies and shapes the experience of sexuality:

The greatest paradox in this transcendental quest comes also from the fact that poverty and virginity do not fit together in the lives of women. Poor women are seldom virgins, because poverty in Latin America means crowded conditions of violence and promiscuity, where girls get raped before puberty or married as adolescents as part of the few available economic transactions on offer, except for several forms of prostitution and sexual bondage. Women thus get pregnant before they know what their own sexuality is, before they can discover the divinity of lust in their own lives (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 49).

One way that people relate to the spirituality of Mary in a way that embraces sexuality is by means of art. As I indicated above, while some individuals display traditional images of Mary in environments that celebrate everyday sexuality, those trained in the fine arts at times offer competing visions of Mary. Representations of Mary can take many forms (Agren, 2013), thus queering Mary is a vital and pivotal element to recover the radical inclusiveness of her role in Christianity. When these representations vary from the norm—that is the accepted representations in environments that the hierarchy can control such as churches—ecclesiastical officials get nervous. These alternative representations can be created by traditional artists who are often members of repressed groups.

One such artist is Alma López (Gaspar de Alba and López, 2011) whose images of Mary included in an art exhibition entitled «Our Lady and Other Queer *Santas* [Saints],» in Santa Fe, New Mexico, brought out the wrath of the local



Roman Catholic hierarchy.¹ Accusations of blasphemy were made against López because her art subverted the traditional Mariological iconography and the dominant religious understanding of that symbolism and its accompanying anti-sexual and anti-queer theology. As a Chicana artist, López has already created a wide variety of alternative images of Mary that have a queer, sensual aspect that is front and center in her work paired with cultural and ethnic elements from her own background. As with the other artists who offer a non-traditional iconography of Mary, political and religious authorities have reacted with cries of blasphemy and often censorship. The uproar indicates clearly the impossibility for orthodox positions to recognize that the spiritual experience of believers may or may not be in accordance with the dicta of ecclesiastical bodies and their dogmas. Nonetheless, the appropriation of the figures of faith and the subversion of rigid doctrinal positions becomes a liberative path embraced by both lay believers and artists.

López and her work enliven the Chicana/o context. Thus, Clara Roman-Odio (2011), in an essay entitled *Queering the Sacred*, describes the theological politics involved in López's artshow:

Lopez's images are disturbing because they redirect Chicano/a community's psychic energy associated with sexual desire in surprisingly anomalous directions, which is unsettling because within the Chicano/a imaginary the Virgin of Guadalupe has represented everything from patriotism to unconditional love except for sexuality and desire (123).

¹ To view some of the works featured in «Our Lady and Other Queer *Santas* [Saints],» see Kittredge Cherry (2011).



Looking at the symbolic language used in this image, we see the power that symbolism carries as well as the challenge to entrenched authority that alternative religious symbol systems offer. Lay people as well as trained visual artists have the ability to create their own representations of Mary, ignoring and transforming the systems of symbolic meaning that hegemonic religion demands:

In Lopez's image, Our Lady does not wear the maternity band that marks the original icon. This new turn in meaning points to a body that goes beyond the cultural mandate of sexual reproduction to become a site of beauty and truth, meanings that are encoded by both the Aztec and the Christian symbols of the rose. As Lopez has stated, for her, the rose signals that which is real or the evidence of being real. Hence, in *Our Lady* the roses covering the body can be interpreted as a synecdochic expression of the *real* beauty and truth of Latina bodies. Also important, the bare-breasted young Latina angel emerging from a Viceroy butterfly serves as a synecdoche for queer identity (141).

Unpacking the symbolism of López's image «Our Lady,» Roman-Odio (2011) finds that the use of monarch butterfly imagery is present in this work:

contests canonical [Roman] Catholic spirituality in two ways: first, it uncovers the female body, while [Roman] Catholicism dictates that the naked female body is sinful; and second, as a synecdoche for queerness, it makes queer identity a type of pedestal for *Our Lady*, thus underscoring the queer message, that is, the message of loving difference, represented by the entire image [...]. In that very sense, the Chicana butterfly in *Our Lady* points to the technologies of resistance we saw in [another work of Lopez entitled] *December 12* as we as to the notion of



mestizaje that is embodied in [López image captioned] *Diego*, for it speaks on behalf of those in the community who suffer similar oppression but who are, in the words of the artist, “a little different” (141-142).

Given this context, it is fair to wonder what does López’ work do. By using both traditional religious iconography and contrasting these images with images from popular culture, disjuncture is emphasized as López explores the connection between queer sexual desire and the love of the divine (Latorre, 2008). This is one example of a visual artist taking traditional Marian symbols, combining them with symbols from indigenous and African religious systems, as well as from contemporary culture, and creating a visual theology of Mary that celebrates sexual, queerness, and ethnicity and rejects hegemonic power relations embedded in the symbol system of orthodox representations of Mary.

Another Latina/o example includes the works of Argentine artists Marianela Perelli and Emiliano «Pool» Paolini (Simon, 2014) who use Barbie dolls to make representations of sacred figures including Mary, Jesus, and other saints. In their exhibition entitled «Barbie, The Plastic Religion» Perelli and Paslino aim to not only queer the images of Mary but also to point towards the linking of Mary and daily life. Reflecting on the thirty-three figurines that compound the exhibition, Howard G. Chua-Eoan (2015), News Director for *Time* magazine in Europe, states:

If each of the countless saints in heaven is just a face in the huge kaleidoscope we call divinity, then the only face of divinity which can act as every saint is the face of Barbie—at least in our modern consumerist world. No other entity has represented so many contemporary roles. She has been a doctor, a lawyer, a president, a nurse, a fashion icon, an object



of feminist fury but also the empowerment of women. Her clothes and accessories embody the iconography of several models of our existence. Similarly, the statues of the saints were Barbies of pre-consumerist era. Our ancestors struggled especially to ensure that the various materializations of the Mother of God dressed the right clothes, with her hair and her halo perfectly represented, so they could be paraded in all their corresponding glory for the people. Tailors and painters were assigned the work to ensure that the clothing and skin of the holy statues would always look fresh, clean, and beautiful. Attention to detail is an obsession not only of [Roman] Catholic Christians, it also extends to Buddhists and Hindus as well as all religions who choose to express the idea of the divine through images and the visual arts. Isn't this similar to the nowadays attention paid by girls and boys to Barbie and her court?

By using the «plastic» in the title of their exhibition, Pirelli and Paolini not only refer to the material used to carve the Barbies, but also to the commodification of religion in a consumerist age. As they state:

We chose Barbie (and Ken) for several concepts. They're both considered pop icons worldwide, and we wanted to experiment with mixing the most popular toy in the world (Barbie) with something imposed on us from birth (our name and religion). The other concept is because undeniably Barbie is the most popular and well known image for unattainable beauty and perfection (whether or not we agree ha!) and all religion's always seek the ideal of maximum beauty to represent their entities (Kawalik, 2016).



This queers and query the role that the religious figures play in daily life as well as demystifies their character, thus revealing the liberating potential of alternative and non-conformist images of Mary.

Concurrently, the examples of López as well as Pirelli and Paolini parallels examples also occurring in non-Latina/o contexts in the United States. I am referring for examples to the work of the political artist Chris Ofili, who in 1996 created the work «The Holy Virgin Mary,» an image of Mary made of paper, oil paints, glitter, map pins, and elephant dung. Ofili was born of Nigerian parents in Manchester, England.² Writing of the uproar that the painting created — the then Mayor of New York Rudy Guliani attempted to close the art show—, Allison Young (2015) writes that Ofili «by incorporating high and low art forms, historical narratives, religion and pop culture, [his painting] The Holy Virgin Mary represents a deeper inquiry than the spectacle [of the art show Sensation] would imply» (3). Ofili's work de-centers the rigid views on Marian iconoclasm by bringing quotidian elements that en flesh the intersection of divine and creatureliness in the image of Mary. Future research would benefit from investigating how Marian devotions are enacted and performed in non-Latina/o contexts.

Conclusion

Marian imagery and devotion is a significant feature of religion in Latin America. I have discussed the ways in which lay or non-erudite visual imagery and theology is contrasted with formal theological representations of Mariology. As queer theologians we need to not only consider texts and elite discourses but also the way that lay people, particularly

² Examples of his work can be found on the Saatchi Gallery (2015) website, including the controversial image «The Holy Virgin Mary.»



those who are oppressed and marginalized, craft their own theology, taking into account their own life experiences and the elements of religion that speak most eloquently to them. This theology is often presented in a visual format.

In the case of Marian devotion, visual imagery is particularly important. As we construct our theologies, we need to take into account visual representations that are central to the religious experience of the marginalized. Visual images are often capable of containing multiple meanings. These meanings often conflict with the meanings assigned by ecclesiastical hierarchies. Religion and religious imagery can be potent sources of inspiration. They give meanings to our everyday life by taking into account the actual lives of the marginalized: their terrors and their sorrows are important.

In this popular visual theology there are two approaches: In artistic terms, there is the creation of alternative, nontraditional and non-orthodox images of Mary. There is also the use of traditional Marian images in nontraditional contexts, functioning as a sort of popular installation art. These nontraditional images, either created or contextually situated, are resisted by the dominant religious establishment and at times are condemned as being «blasphemous.» The conflict between erudite religious leaders and popular engagement in subversive visual theology is similar to the conflict of theologians and their textual creations. However, theologians have tended to pay less attention to the ways that the visual can contribute to constructing a theology, of either a hegemonic, dominant theology or a subversive, inclusive theology of liberation.

As demonstrated by the examples in this article from the Latin American context, icons of Mary can express queer issues and theological constructions and work to create an inclusive liberation theology that represents queer individuals fully and completely. The visual as well as textual



can play an important role in creating a queer theology of liberation that is inclusive of all oppressed people and allows for queer individuals to claim both their spirituality and their sexuality.

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