



# Implicate and Transgress: Marcella Althaus-Reid, Writing, and a Transformation of Theological Knowledge

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**Implicate and Transgress:  
Marcella Althaus-Reid, Writing, and a Transformation of Theological Knowledge**

A dissertation presented  
By

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To

The Faculty of Harvard Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Implicate and Transgress: Marcella Althaus-Reid, Writing, and a Transformation of Theological Knowledge

Abstract

Marcella Althaus-Reid sought wherever language or meaning might shift or exceed their possibilities. To do so, she pushed theology from the light into the dark. In the spaces of political, economic, and sexual struggle, she proposed that we encounter the transformative embraces of God's indecent love. The intimacies of bodies matter in the illicit encounters of dark alleys. Caresses of flesh undress illusions; desires imagine alternatives; and bodies hunger for the unthinkable. Put differently: love and desire disregard boundaries, including the boundaries of knowledge, law, economy, and self. To write of God's love and our love—to write of God, humanity, and world—we must recognize, refute, and resist the ideological dependencies in dominant modes of doing and communicating theology, because these dependencies constrain the possibilities of bodies in love. We must interrupt academic complacency with (what she called) "Totalitarian" theological languages. We must transform the doing of theology itself.

This dissertation offers five studies of theological writing arising from Althaus-Reid's experiments with indecency. Each considers one of her provocations in conversation with her interlocutors, paying careful attention to both the substance and performance. Study one engages with Paul Ricoeur, Jorge Luis Borges, and Umberto Eco to imagine writing in the shape of a hermeneutical labyrinth. The second questions the temporality of theological writing in conversation with Gustavo Gutiérrez, José María Arguedas, and Michel Foucault. The third examines how Althaus-Reid holds Jean Paul Sartre's concept of obscenity together with Jean Baudrillard's idea of reversibility, in order to press against

illusions of writing that veil the materiality of lives lived in written pages. The fourth pursues the possibilities of writing bodies with Karl Marx, Jacques Derrida, Kathy Acker, and Lisa Isherwood. The fifth study extends Althaus-Reid's reading of Pierre Klossowski's meditation on radical hospitality as imperative for kenotic theological writing. Individually, the studies expand our imagination of what theological writing can or ought to be. Taken together, the studies provide a chronologically ordered view on Althaus-Reid's complex engagement with liberationist, feminist, and queer theoretical and theological traditions in the context of her ongoing dialogue with continental philosophy.

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## Acknowledgements

How does one adequately recognize the expansive communities of people and places that make writing possible? How does one mark a text so that the plurality of voices that shape its conversations remain heard and also remain visible? These questions, which begin here, weave throughout the following pages. So too does the work that they prompt. The people and places that brought this project to fruition are far more than can be meaningfully acknowledged by a naming of this sort. I give my work to them all, named and unnamed, known and unknown, now and into the future. Please let these words serve simply as a foretaste, a promissory preface, of the gratitude—but also responsibility—that I feel. All that I do, I do for God. All that I do, I do for God’s love in this world. It is a radical love to which we all belong.

This project represents a moment within a long sustained conversation with Mark D. Jordan and Mayra Rivera Rivera. They are my thesis directors and teachers, but also my mentors, guides, companions, and coaches. The products of these pedagogically inflected relationships occur in subtle and slow ways. In these pages, our dialogue—which finds its measure in years, not less—echoes and continues. I am grateful for their generosity and patience, as well as their compassion and commitment for me, as a learning theologian and for the promise and integrity of theology. I thank Stephanie Paulsell for joining our conversation with an abiding appreciation for the effects of beauty in prose. A richer committee is hard to imagine for centering the community of teachers, whose importance to this project should not be underestimated. Gary Dorrien rightly taught me that we write

because we have something to say, not in order to find agreement. He also helped plant a seed that grew into my curiosity about the theological significance of writing itself by teaching me to write complex theo-ethical stories of complex historical lives. Christopher Morse's insistent conviction that God loves us into freedom carries me into and through the dark places to which Marcella Althaus-Reid leads. I am deeply indebted to the remarkable strength of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza along with the reverberating call to accountability sounded by James Cone; yet neither her strength nor his accountability would have the importance that they do in my work, without the sometimes challenging presence that both theologians have gifted me over the years.

I thank Richard Davis and Jolyon Mitchell for inviting and hosting me beyond my participation in a conference at New College at the University of Edinburgh, and Marie Griffith and the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St Louis for funding the opportunity. This extended trip enabled connections with Althaus-Reid's friends, students, colleagues, and history in Scotland, as well as the United Kingdom more broadly—relationships that prove essential to the work of this dissertation. Key among these are Lisa Isherwood and Mario Aguilar, both of whom welcomed me, my research, and my ideas with grace that I cannot adequately articulate. From Lisa Isherwood, I learn about Althaus-Reid, and I learn about theology; I also witness the loving energy of a feminist liberationist whose indecency makes the world a better place.

I do not believe it is possible to walk with Althaus-Reid without walking the streets of this world; several other communities need to be brought forward. Shortly after this project began, I joined the communities of occupiers at Zuccotti Park, Dewey Square, and Harvard Yard. The practical, strategic, and conceptual debates about power, authority, and resistance that I share with these comrades surface in differing ways in each chapter. For years, I worked with Mark Jordan to help organize and lead the Seminar on Debates about



Religion and Sexuality. Each summer, a cohort of twelve beginning writers working on a first major project gathered for a writing workshop that focuses on the unique tensions, needs, and promise of writing in the area of religion and sexuality. Each participant taught me something about writing that appears somewhere in here; just as importantly the collective community of seminar participants continues to model the lasting relationships of support and critique that make transformative writing possible. I am grateful for this community. Lastly, I expressly thank the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics for hosting me, and by extension this work, for two difficult years.

To close, I will say thank you to a very few of the colleagues, friends, and family who, in their own ways, have particularly mattered to what exists here. Thank you, Derin Korman, Jacob Quiring, Filipe Maia, Brad Bannon, Clair Linzey, Pearl Barros, Farah Zeb, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, Nick Miller, Laura Patterson, George Gonzalez, Mara Block, Jeremy Kirk, Becky Johnson, Lisa Frenchik, Kimberly Kwedar, Nancy Wells, Dan Friedman, Paul Siemering, Grey Lee, Laura Resteghini, Laura Hopps, Samantha Wolfe, Mary Hansen, Cora McCold, Ricardo Gabriel-Monroy, Oscar Natividad, Yutaka Tamara, Debra Kennard, Darlene Slagle, Kathryn Kunkel, Portia Robertson, Sue and Bob Dyrenforth, Shay Dyrenforth, Nan Baker, Marybeth Hayes, Tommy Hofheinz, Kim Schlossberg, Walter C. Hofheinz, and Walter Wm. Hofheinz.

But the desire to see the desire of those who are not like others...is not a desire for power, but a desire to see things as they are.

—Hélène Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*

## **Introductory Notes**

Though we had met previously in class and conversation, I remember when *Indecent Theology* seduced me. It was on the lawn of the Cambridge Public Library, during the summer of 2009. A few liberationist friends and I had convened to read together over the course of a summer. We did not move beyond *Indecent Theology*. Our conversations were careful, but also carefree. We did not agree about the text, and I am confident that the text did not agree with us. We debated what it means to write theology with erotic intentionality. We wrestled with the ethics of textual seduction and theological sexuality. We experimented with the modes of representing bodies; we experimented with our own bodies. We discussed the capitalist desires that fuel the production of contemporary theology as text and discourse. We played with dogs—it was the library lawn after all—while enjoying picnic snacks.

I hope the image of a small set of Harvard students enjoying picnics during an academic summer by reading liberation theologies on the green grass of the public library seems curious. Really, I hope that it leaves you feeling uneasy or troubled. Frankly, I find it offensive. Contradictory privileges of leisure and labor underwrite all academic study, including the earnest critical pedagogy of liberationist students. Yet without this time, I would not be here. This dissertation would not exist. My education, like all American education, is deeply complicit with the patterns of power against which I struggle. Without exception, academic credentials denote the successful completion of a ritual of induction

into a complex system that regulates what counts as knowledge. What can be recognized as knowledge conditions what is possible. It also establishes what is justifiable. Lives of animals, plants, and humans – the planet itself – hang in the balance.<sup>1</sup>

Marcella Althaus-Reid's texts entice readers with many doors. She opens each far enough for a quick glimpse of a strange world across its threshold. Once we enter, if we choose to enter, further paths beckon for exploration. On the library lawn, it was the tangle of complicity and promise in academic theology that held my attention. *Indecent Theology* (and *The Queer God*) assume a broad academic vocabulary. The works draw on a range of figures with the ease of sustained familiarity. Both deploy sharp engagements with critical theory, philosophy, and theology of the 20th century to insist substantively and performatively that theology belongs especially where it has least liked to go.

Althaus-Reid argues that we are most likely to encounter God when we risk a nomadic journey within the indecent, illicit, and troubling spaces of political, economic, and sexual struggle. She challenges academic theologians to be honest about where and how we write, and where we will need to go to find God's revealing embrace. On the library lawn, our discussions with each other and the text called me to account for the necessary offense

<sup>1</sup> Harvard holds a special place in cosmology of American higher education. Here, the school appears as a synecdoche for academe and models of the hierarchies and ideologies of the academic imaginary. As a symbol, Harvard participates in the mythology of American exceptionalism and meritocracy that cannot be divorced from the androcentrism, racism, and colonialism upon which Harvard the institution, education in general, and knowledge itself continue to be built. As an institution, the school epitomizes the excesses of this system, which include the benefits and privileges it confers, as well as the exclusions and pain it enforces. For instance, as a financial institution that vastly exceeds the wealth of many global nation-states, Harvard's educational goals, practices, and effects tangle with its commitment to protecting and increasing its wealth through neoliberal financing. Wealth, politics, geography, gender, sexuality, race, and knowledge cannot be separated. Yet I must say that I not only belong to this school as its product and debtor, I am grateful for what it has given me and for the opportunities I have found within its walls. No matter how strong my critique, I want to be clear that I love this school. Likewise, no matter how strong my gratitude or attachment, the depth and sharpness of my critical consciousness must be allowed to challenge and transform what it is that I can know here. This space between love, belonging, and critique is an ambivalent and difficult place. It is the spacing in which most of the following pages move.

of the exclusions that made our study possible. For me, that summer and since, the critical questions concern the ambivalences of academic praxis, but this is only one way of looking at the problem.

From the tortured disappeared of her native Argentina to the lusty corners of Sadean boudoirs, Althaus-Reid pushed theology out of the light and into the dark. She sought wherever language or meaning might shift or exceed its possibilities. There, she proposed that we might find resources to interrupt academic complacency with (what she called) “Totalitarian” theological languages, or T-Theology for short. The intimacies of bodies matter in the illicit encounters of dark alleys. Caresses of flesh undress illusions; desires imagine alternatives; and bodies hunger for what should not be thinkable—much less doable. In Althaus-Reid’s language, sexuality and loving relationships unshape Totalitarian theology, while reshaping the theologian.<sup>2</sup> Love and desire, when allowed to flourish in their many forms, disregard boundaries. These include the boundaries of knowledge, law, economy, and self. Thus she argued that we must recognize, in order to refuse and resist, ideological dependencies in standard modes of doing and communicating theology that constrain the possibilities of bodies in love. We must transform the doing of theology itself.

In a world where so many continue to suffer, it is God’s refusal to abide the corruptions of human patterns of exclusion that calls theologians to praxis that risks indecency. Theology should travel within the dark spaces of illicit embraces whether these embraces are political, economic, or sexual. The journey led her from writing a dissertation

<sup>2</sup> “This is one of the most important challenges that Queer theologies bring to theology in the twenty-first century: the challenge of a theology where sexuality and loving relationships are not only important theological issues but experiences which un-shape Totalitarian Theology (T-Theology) while re-shaping the theologians.” Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

that analyzes the influence of Ricoeur's hermeneutics in Latin American liberation theology to a recasting of narrative technique in conversation with Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski. In her words, she moves from feminist theology to indecent theology—and she does so within, but not bounded by, academe: she wrote academic theology for theologians. Althaus-Reid wrote pedagogically to open space for different sorts of critical knowledges and ways of knowing. Her texts expose ideological exclusions in academic theology many times over and from many directions. The point as I understand it is not to deny the continuing importance of writing academic theology, but to challenge theologians—both individually and as a community—to do better. This was where I found my door into her theology. It opens into the world of indecent theological writing.

\* \*

Althaus-Reid's life history is complex; her intellectual history more so. Though I provide a brief sketch, I will not do justice to it in this dissertation. There are many stories whose continued vitality requires that they remain unwritten. Althaus-Reid told very selective and different versions of her life story to even her closest confidants. I respect her choice and will not knowingly transgress it. As a note of warning, I also will challenge anyone who seeks to do so both in the pages and the years to come.

Born in Rosario, Argentina in the early 1950s, Althaus-Reid's early life was marked by economic hardship and the struggle between political oppression and resistance. Her grandmother's Roman Catholicism encompassed the religious sensibilities of her youth, resonances of which persisted throughout her life. As a young woman, however, Althaus-Reid turned toward Methodism. When she discovered that the Methodist church ordained women, she matriculated at the Instituto Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos (ISEDET) in Buenos Aires. The degree strengthened Althaus-Reid's practiced commitment to popular education and Freirean pedagogy. As a student, Althaus-Reid attended a World

Student Christian Federation program for young religious leaders in Hardanger, Norway, modeled on the Hardanger Folk High School's democratic model of collective education. Gordon Reid, the man whom she would marry, was also in attendance. The two of them started what would be a life-long relationship that proved important in her departure from Argentina for Scotland.

In Scotland, Althaus-Reid did not easily settle into either the Church of Scotland or the Methodist Church. Instead, she began attending meetings of the Society of Friends. (Later, she expanded again and started also attending the Metropolitan Community Church.) She worked as an organizer with poor women in Dundee and Perth, and, before long, applied to write for a doctorate at the University of St Andrews. As Althaus-Reid worked on her thesis, New College faculty of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh invited her to lecture on the pedagogy of liberation, as did Dundee College of Education. Upon receiving her degree, Althaus-Reid received a fellowship from the Quakers to fund postdoctoral work, and New College agreed to host her. She stayed throughout her career, holding several positions. Most notably, in 2006, Althaus-Reid was the first woman to be appointed to a chair in theology at the school of Divinity.

This sketch leaves out stories of her activism, theater, rosaries, lipstick, and high heels. It skips over the complexity of the relationships that she shared with people near and far and the determined strength students witnessed in her fierce pedagogical style. It leaves unsaid the nights of tango and late afternoon of cocktail debriefs with friends after feeling the sharp edges of academic politics. It omits the memories shared by friends such as her sitting on the curb with homeless comrades in Edinburgh, refusing rides home in order to enjoy a bit more conversation and togetherness. Yet, for now, for here, it is sufficient.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> People do not tell the same history of Althaus-Reid's life. My short version does not adjudicate or note their differences. Instead, I add to a practice that was well-established by Althaus-



\* \*

Because experiments with writing, teaching, and interrelating saturate Althaus-Reid's life and scholarship, a study of her theology offers fertile ground from which to consider theological knowledge. In this project, I focus explicitly and only on her varied experiments with writing. For Althaus-Reid, postmodern and queer theory joins with feminist liberationist sensibilities to transgress the licit boundaries of theological knowing. This occurs in and through writing itself. Indecency pushes us toward alternative ways of writing that, at their most successful, stretch and multiply theological languages. In doing so, writing can change what it is possible to count as knowledge.

Althaus-Reid embraced the radicalism of the theoretical and theological questions that arise when one pushes theological writing to be efficaciously liberative in today's world. Her texts perform experiments with writing differently as part of the task of considering writing differently. Her theology relates in complex and close ways to the attention paid by continental philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jean Baudrillard, and Michel Foucault to writing as central to the dynamics of knowledge,

Reid: I give one version simply as if it were the case, though it might or might not sit uneasily next to another, were they to be brought together. The sketch represents a merging of a variety of sources including interviews and conversations with her colleagues and friends, obituaries and memorials, and essay remembrances. Leslie Orr, *Conversation with Author*, November 2012; Lisa Isherwood, *Conversation with Author*; November 2012; Mario Aguilar, *Conversations with Author*, November and December 2012. Cecelia Clegg, "Homily" (Memorial Service for Althaus-Reid, St George's West Church, Edinburgh, Scotland, March 7, 2009). Larry Hurtado, "Professor Marcella Althaus-Reid: In Memorium" (Memorial Service for Althaus-Reid, St George's West Church, Edinburgh, Scotland, March 7, 2009), [www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/divinity/News%20and%20events/News%20archive/Hurtado%20tribute%20to%20Althaus-Reid.pdf](http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/divinity/News%20and%20events/News%20archive/Hurtado%20tribute%20to%20Althaus-Reid.pdf). Remembrances saturate Mark Jordan and Lisa Isherwood, eds. *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots* (London: SCM Press, 2010). See also: *The Herald Scotland*, "Marcella Althaus-Reid" (Obituary), March 11, 2009, [www.heraldsotland.com/marcella-althaus-reid-1.904743](http://www.heraldsotland.com/marcella-althaus-reid-1.904743); Jay Johnson, "A 'Queer God'? Really? Remembering Marcella Althaus-Reid" *The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion Blog*, Pacific School of Religion, March 5, 2009, [www.clgs.org/blog/commentary/queer-god-really-remembering-marcella-althaus-reid](http://www.clgs.org/blog/commentary/queer-god-really-remembering-marcella-althaus-reid); Hugo Córdova Quero, "Marcella Althaus-Reid: Saint of a sexually embodied spirituality" *Jesus in Love Blog*, February 20, 2014, [jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2014/02/marcella-althaus-reid-saint-of-sexually.html](http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2014/02/marcella-althaus-reid-saint-of-sexually.html).

liberation, and power. It also belongs to the tradition of wicked women writers brought to mind with the name Mary Daly. By writing and thinking about writing differently, Althaus-Reid knows differently. Like Cixous and the others, she did not consider the dynamics, complicities, and implications of writing apart from the doing of writing. Indecent writing, not dissimilarly to feminine writing, transforms the patterns of power and knowledge as it occurs and through its occurrence. Because it has “no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, [it] has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project.”<sup>4</sup> For Althaus-Reid’s texts, this manifests as a dance between piercing modes of apophasis that slice at language’s limits and the intimacies of kataphasis that occur as one writes theology in the midst of illicit embraces.

In Marxist language, Althaus-Reid’s engagements with writing never begin in the heavens and move to earth. Writing and the concern for writing occur on the earth, in the materials of life. The struggles in and of history appear in the materiality of the text on the page. Althaus-Reid’s texts draw attention to the clothing worn by the writer through the geopolitical mapping of where she writes; they likewise emphasize the shaping of words on the page and the materials of the scholarly apparatus (citation, allusion, footnotes and so on). Simply stated: *writing never appears as an abstract consideration; the questions of writing concern a human activity contributing to or resisting the historical project of liberation.*

Writing has no transhistorical nature: it is of this world, in this world, and for this world. It is temporal. Texts persist; writing does not. Yet texts too never escape history and its strange ways of organizing space. Writing—like everything that is not God—moves from

<sup>4</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no.4 (Summer, 1976): 875.

what might be to what is and then from what is to what can be no longer. The interesting question is whether and how writing that seems to be no more might ever again be. Sometimes we need it to be. Sometimes we fear that it will be. Sometimes, though, God sends God's Word. Everything changes.

This is important to keep in mind. The various ideologies of academia invert the relationship between the materiality of writing and ideas of writing. The inversion effaces the historical, bodily, and planetary struggles that make writing possible and give it its very peculiar shapes. Part of the task of this dissertation is to interrupt this illusion, without losing the richness of either the materiality or the ideas. Althaus-Reid's engagements with theological writing occur with the contextual particularities of time and space. She, as a person and theologian, belongs to history as it continues to unfold both the past and future before us. So too do her ideas and her writing. Just as importantly—perhaps more importantly to insistently remind ourselves here—so do I and so too do my ideas and writing.

\* \*

What follows are five related, but (intentionally) disjunctive, studies on writing. Organized into parts representing chronological moments of her writing, these studies provide entrance into Althaus-Reid's theological texts to clarify central aspects of her theology. Yet, the studies do not narrate a sufficient 'story' of Althaus-Reid's writing or her theology. I do not offer 'proper' introductions or conclusions between studies, because I want to leave the question unresolved as to where any given experiment in writing is born or where it might die. I deny that writing has the authority to access beginnings or ends; it does not. Likewise, I forgo expository transitions between studies in order to disrupt the ease with which we elide the needed distinctiveness of different, excluded possibilities by building bridges, forging alliances, or mapping territories between and amongst them. In

Althaus-Reid's terms, we need a queerly nomadic theology that refuses to bring in the colonizer's lights to root indecency out from the dark spaces. We need a nomadic theology that dwells where others feel that it might not belong. This entails an unavoidable disorientation of illicit and incomplete textual movement.

What then do I desire for this dissertation? I hope that when brought together, these studies make evident the meaningfulness of Althaus-Reid's willingness to risk writing itself as a sort of theological praxis. I hope that the studies facilitate space in which we can think differently about theology, knowledge, and writing. I hope that in thinking differently, we expose ourselves to the plurality, complexity, contradictions, and ambivalence of dynamics that fuel and shape theological writing. Truly, I hope that one or another of the following chapters instigates feelings of responsibility and accountability for the use of words in textual form to disrupt the harms of our assumed complacency with the patterns of exclusion that structure academic theology.

**Part I:**  
**Early Writings**

## 1: Labyrinth

*Ts'ui Pên said once: I withdraw myself to write a book. And another time: I withdraw myself to build a labyrinth.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1993, Althaus-Reid submitted a dissertation under the title: “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation: The Hermeneutics of J. Severino Croatto, Juan Luis Segundo, and Clodovis Boff.” In form and content, the dissertation demonstrates Althaus-Reid’s proficiency in the technical exercises necessary to be awarded the degree of doctor of philosophy. Indeed, the thesis curates an exhibition of her education. She writes the intellectual questions of her native Argentina in the language of the British theological academy. Her official teachers appear as the primary interlocutors to develop ideas at the center of her organizing and educational work in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Dundee and Perth, Scotland. She proceeds with descriptive precision and respectful, yet properly critical, analysis. She argues her thesis with respect to central conversations in liberation theology and hermeneutics, and, when the time comes, makes her own contribution within the terms defined by this established discourse. In sum, her mapping of Ricoeur’s influence in liberationist hermeneutics marks a successful entry into the community of those afforded academic credentials. Yet, the interpretation she offers also whispers of her indecency to

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza Eméce, 1986), 110, as translated and quoted by Marcella Althaus-Reid in “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation: The Hermeneutics of J. Severino Croatto, Juan Luis Segundo, and Clodovis Boff” (PhD Thesis: University of St. Andrews, 1993), 1.

come. The writing of a hermeneutical labyrinth marks one of these foreshadowing whispers.

This was not Althaus-Reid's first attempt at a doctorate. She previously matriculated at the University of St Andrews under the guidance of the feminist theologian, Daphne Hampson. While it might have seemed from outward appearances that Hampson would be a good advisor for her, such was not the case. The two women shared strong convictions about the necessity of challenging the foundations of traditional Christian teachings for the liberation and flourishing of women, but their respective understanding of these challenges sharply diverged. The differences between them proved lasting. Hampson haunted Althaus-Reid as an important feminist interlocutor, and one ultimately to be refused and contested.<sup>2</sup>

Althaus-Reid undertook her second attempt at a doctorate with the guidance of Steven G. Mackie, a professor of practical theology at St Andrews. Mackie's long-standing interest in liberation theologies as material for study and as a model for praxis proved more resonant. At ISEDET, Althaus-Reid had been introduced to Ricoeur and hermeneutics by two of her lecturers, Beatrice Melano Couch and J. Severino Croatto. Couch, in particular, was influential in solidifying the importance of Ricoeur's hermeneutics in the Latin American context. As Althaus-Reid recalls, it was "a result of [Couch's] work..." that the four dimensions of Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics—the linguistic, philosophical, ontological, and sacramental—are "known in Latin America as the Ricoeurian 'Quadrilateral Method.'"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Across her writings, Althaus-Reid cites Daphne Hampson's feminist theology as an important critique of patriarchal dynamics. Yet, she strongly differed from Hampson's post-Christian conclusions. Althaus-Reid's critique will surface with more detail in the fourth chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 186. As a pioneering woman theologian in the male dominated context of Latin American theological education, Couch was a formative feminist and liberationist influence in Althaus-Reid's development not only in terms of her intellectual formation, but also her understanding of the task and role of the theologian. For more discussion of Althaus-Reid's relationship with Couch and Hampson see: Mary E. Hunt, "Surreal Feminist Liberation Theology: Marcella Althaus-Reid *Presente!*" in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots* ed. by Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan, (London: SCM Press, 2010), 19-21. For

With Mackie's guidance, Althaus-Reid formulated a thesis that united her education at ISEDET in Buenos Aires with that at St Andrews. Her dissertation would consider the appropriation of Ricoeur's hermeneutics by Latin American theologians, including Croatto.

Though glimmers of her creativity shimmer, Althaus-Reid's dissertation stands apart from what would become her unmistakable style. In this early work, Althaus-Reid fulfills a requisite technical template. The dissertation is linear: it progresses with demarcated steadfastness. The outline holds few surprises. The text opens with an overview and history of hermeneutics as a concept, centers the thesis on an exposition of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, and then reaches from this exegesis to analyze the appropriation of Ricoeur's hermeneutics in the hermeneutical arguments of the three chosen liberationists. Althaus-Reid's dominant approach is exegetic, with the evaluation and critique textured by comparison. Her constructive voice can faintly be heard, but it remains in the background—a resurfacing minor chord hinting at a counter melody through its periodic dissonance. She proceeds in this way until the fourth and concluding part, where she gestures briefly to the radical potential of appropriating Ricoeur's hermeneutics by extending the constructive thrust of his *imaginaire as rupture* with the depth of conviction that later motivates texts such as *Indecent Theology* or *The Queer God*.

The dissertation argues that the analysis and appropriation of Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle and criteriology by Croatto, Segundo, and Boff “has produced a better understanding of the possibilities of freedom and the responsibility of Christians in the process.”<sup>4</sup> Althaus-Reid explores what Croatto learned from Ricoeur's engagements of myth

Couch's interpretation of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, which informs Althaus-Reid's interpretation, see: Beatriz Melano Couch, *Hermenéutica Metódica: Teoría de la Interpretación según Paul Ricoeur* (Buenos Aires: CINA, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 342.



and ideology so that he could suggest a demythologization program that does not seek to de-symbolize the Scripture, but rather return to its original symbolic power and the production of new and liberative meanings. Althaus-Reid highlights Segundo's attentiveness to the place of Freud and Marx in Ricoeur's hermeneutical notion of suspicion, a link that Segundo put in conversation with Freire. These conversations led Segundo to represent the hermeneutical circle in terms of methodological suspicion (understood as ideology): the questions that interpreters ask matter more than the answers or exegesis that result. Turning to Clodovis Boff, Althaus-Reid pays particularly attention to how he appropriates Ricoeur's concepts of distanciation and appropriation and their role in opening space for the creative interpretation of communities. With each liberationist, Althaus-Reid's study of the hermeneutical elements emphasized by each given liberation theologian turns toward incisive critique. For instance, she argues that Boff's insistent embrace of hierarchy and the authority of tradition appears alongside an abiding fear of the anarchic potential of community interpretation. Boff desires a return to an original message from a 'text of traditions'—a position that she notes is in contradiction to Ricoeur's hermeneutics and incoherent with a liberationist epistemology rooted in the knowledge of the people.

There is much to be studied in Althaus-Reid's readings of Croatto, Segundo, and Boff in conversation with Ricoeur and the hermeneutical tradition, writ large. Yet, I do not undertake the task. I am less interested here in the details of her theological analysis than I am in her theological innovation and the convictions that energize it. The creativity that she unleashes, and not her analysis, is Althaus-Reid's strength and enduring importance. This is especially true in this early text. Her dissertation, crafted within the narrow style appropriate to its genre, manifests her commitment to transforming theology, but does so quietly. What she does for, with, and to the ideas with which she works—not the analysis or evidence with which she surrounds them—mark her importance as theologian and the

importance of this text to contemporary theology. And so I break, and begin again in a different voice. By changing how we tell the story of a text, we change what can be known of it. We also change what knowledge arises in our engagement with it.

### Entering the Labyrinth

I begin again. This time, I begin *in media res*, as Ricoeur suggests that all interpretation must.<sup>5</sup> I begin inside a labyrinth that appears at the very outset of her text. Imagine hermeneutics as a labyrinth, Althaus-Reid proposes: a labyrinth that “describes with creative accuracy the task and challenges of the interpretation of literary texts.”<sup>6</sup>

It is curious that she began this way. Labyrinths are foreign to Ricoeur, and they do not enter the vocabulary of Croatto, Segundo, or Boff. But epigraphs serve a number of purposes, including framing a text with a needed constellation of references, and Althaus-Reid offers us two:

I withdraw myself to write a book. And another time: I withdraw myself to build a labyrinth.<sup>7</sup>

The universe of semiosis, that is, the universe of human culture, must be conceived as a labyrinth of the third type: a) It is structured according to a network of interpretants; b) It is virtually infinite...<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (London and New York: Continuum Press, 2008), 30. Ricoeur writes that when we arrive at a text, we encounter “a conversation which has already begun” in which “we try to orient ourselves.” Just as we do not begin the conversation, we will not end it. Here and elsewhere, I am interested in what happens in this middle space and time. The labyrinth that I draw is one without practical beginning or end, and I let the study remain agnostic as to whether they exist, transcendently speaking.

<sup>6</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 1.

<sup>7</sup> Borges, *Ficciones*, 110, quoted by Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 1.

<sup>8</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), 83.

In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Borges tells a tale of spies and surprises. Throughout, narrative events tangle with the act of writing, the spaces of writing, the spaces written about and those written into being. The story opens at the middle pages of a confession. (The first pages, we are told, have been lost.) It proceeds to recount a series of events that occurred when, during the Great War, a spy of Chinese descent named Yu Tsun desired to get a message to his German handler before being caught and killed. Althaus-Reid uses the myth upon which the story turns as her epigraph: Ts’ui Pên withdrew to write an infinite book and to build a labyrinth. Yu Tsun, we learn, is a descendent of Ts’ui Pên. Though Yu Tsun always knew of Ts’ui Pên’s tasks, only when he found himself inside the garden of forking paths, itself a shifting and dynamic labyrinth, did he encounter the possibility that Ts’ui Pên’s act of writing and act of building might be one and the same. Perhaps Ts’ui Pên wrote an infinite book to build a labyrinth. Maybe he built a labyrinth to create an infinite book, or perhaps the writing of the myth was itself sufficient to fuel the events. Of course, with Borges as its author, nothing in the story proceeds straightforwardly. Yet, the tale’s trajectory can be summarized simply. “The Garden of Forking Paths” tells a story of the desire to communicate effectively across a distance—that is, a desire for communication across both temporal and spatial distance. This desire leads Yu Tsun into a labyrinth of his ancestor’s making where acts of writing, the worlds that writing projects, and the world in which we dwell cannot be untangled.

Over the centuries, great (and not so great) thinkers have drawn endless variations on labyrinthine paths. When Althaus-Reid pairs Borges’ tangle of writing and labyrinth building with a typological definition from Umberto Eco, she solidifies a particular shape for the labyrinthine imagination. This labyrinth will be rhizomatic. She also sets the labyrinth into motion. Eco’s labyrinth dynamically reshapes itself; the labyrinth moves as anyone within its corridors moves. This means we can only have practical knowledge of the

labyrinth as it appears at momentary locations within its shifting paths. For these reasons, “no other allegory could have been more appropriate to start this chapter than the labyrinthine one. Its describes with creative accuracy the task and challenges of the interpretation of literary texts, through the images of complexity and options which it brings to our minds.”<sup>9</sup>

The labyrinth for Umberto Eco—as in Althaus-Reid’s dissertation and for myself—matters primarily not as an entity per se, but as an image for a shifting shape that is also the shape of a consequential dynamic of language and writing. In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco urges readers to accept that dictionaries are best understood as “pragmatic devices” with tree-like structures that express useful, but contextually-contingent, hierarchical representations. The regulative idea of an encyclopedia, on the other hand, with its unordered complex labyrinthine shape, models the universe of semiosis. To draw out the importance of the distinction, Eco traces a taxonomy of three types of labyrinths.

The first takes the shape of the classic labyrinth modeled in Crete. This simple labyrinth moves without confusion toward its goal. It unwinds itself like a skein, he explains. Though Ariadne helped to make the path more explicit, her thread was in some important sense redundant. Theseus’ path was given. His task and challenge was to complete it. Eco notes that “one cannot get lost” in this labyrinth, but there always lurks the possibility of being hurt or killed. Put differently, the simple labyrinth is ruled by necessity, yet its linearity hosts dangers: the minotaur. Eco allows that this threat makes the journey a bit more interesting.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 1.

<sup>10</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.

The second type, the maze, appeared with changing attitudes to knowledge and authority during the late Renaissance. Althaus-Reid reminds us in her dissertation that this type of labyrinth replaced the plain labyrinth in garden design during the Renaissance and that it shares a common origin with the hermeneutical circle. "It was the geometric representation of the eruption of a different model of knowledge, and a more subjective approach to authority, especially with reference to the role model of powerful institutions such as the Christian Church."<sup>11</sup> Unlike the simple labyrinth, the maze splits into many competing and alternative paths, at least some of which are dead ends. The person who enters the maze has the agency (and obligation!) to discern the path that will lead him out. The view within the maze's corridors may be partial, but its teleology beckons. This entails right and wrong choices to be made. Yet the goal is given and singular; the exit marked. A maze expects mastery of the whole from the partial vantages given at any point within it. The threat of the second type does not take the form of bodily agency, but a failure of knowledge and mastery. Conceivably, without the epistemological help of a thread like that which Ariadne offered Theseus, I could circle in various paths leading to dead ends for a lifetime. Here lies the danger of the maze. In Eco's words: "a maze does not need a Minotaur: it is its own Minotaur: in other words, *the Minotaur is the visitor's trial-and-error process*."<sup>12</sup>

Eco's third type, the complex labyrinth, stands apart from either the classic labyrinth or the maze. Rather than referencing an architectural formation (a structure into which one enters and exits), the complex labyrinth is described organically. Eco draws from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's visions of the rhizome.<sup>13</sup> Like a net, every point in the

<sup>11</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 2.

<sup>12</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 81-82. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 1-25. Some

complex labyrinth can connect with every other point. Even “where the connections are not yet designed, they are, however, conceivable and designable.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, a rhizome has neither an inside nor an outside. What appears to be ‘outside’ the rhizome, itself shapes a rhizome. Outside is an inside; inside is an outside. The connections and paths are infinite. The rhizomatic labyrinth does not ask us to trace a discreet path or to achieve a determined teleological goal. The rhizomatic labyrinth changes. The rhizome refigures over and across time, just as it can be refigured in all of its dimensions. In Eco’s words: “it is dismantlable, reversible, and susceptible to continual modifications.”<sup>15</sup>

While the simple labyrinth of the first sort spatializes the path of a singular duty and the second type pulls toward a singular teleology, they image different views on the human relationship to authority. Crafted by an architect with a god’s eye view on the whole, the maze represents a similar demand as the simple labyrinth: recognize the path and attain the singular goal. Yet, the point of the maze depends on the subjective autonomy of choosing correctly or incorrectly—discern the correct path; achieve success—while the difficulty of the simple labyrinth lies not in discernment but in overcoming obstacles. In the rhizomatic web of a complex labyrinth, however, the goal and challenge both shift. A rhizomatic labyrinth of the third type offers neither a singularly correct path nor goal to desire. Nor does it submit to an external authority.

qualities of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome that pertain to this study’s interest in a rhizomatic labyrinth include: 1) A rhizome can be and is connected at every point with any and all other points (the principle of connection). 2) A rhizome is essentially heterogeneous; it can always be decentered into other registers and possibilities. 3) It appears as a multiplicity, denying every pretense of an ultimate or original One, unity, or hierarchy: a rhizome is fundamentally “flat” (9). 4) When a rhizome is ruptured, it continues moving from elsewhere; one cannot cut off a rhizome. 5) A rhizome has no beginning or end, only a middle “from which it grows and which it overflows” (22). Likewise, a rhizome has no outside or inside.

<sup>14</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Consider Ariadne and her thread in Eco's typology of labyrinths. Her appearance and disappearance tell the story of shifting images of [ideal] epistemological conditions and their relation to authority. In the first type, Ariadne's thread is the labyrinth. Our possibilities of knowing are brought to fruition by overcoming any obstruction on the winding, but singular, path toward our object. We do not need to *choose* Ariadne's thread, or the proper epistemological orientation; we are necessarily immersed in it. In the second type, Ariadne and her thread become a choice, but still a necessary one. There is one correct orientation for the process of knowing, though we are aware of many options. In describing his third type of labyrinth, Ariadne disappears from Eco's description. What is at stake is not recognizing or fulfilling the necessary epistemological conditions for right or true knowledge. Ariadne, her thread, and a relation to determining authority no longer help us within the labyrinth. Not only can she no longer assist us in achieving our journey, we no longer love and desire her. Instead, we set out to wander the infinite and shifting interplay of signs through language that, in Eco's words, promise not only "truth" but also what has been said or believed to be true, false, imaginary, or legendary.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike both the maze and the simple labyrinth, the third type of labyrinth cannot be viewed from without. There is no external god's eye view of its distribution, whether desired or real; indeed, *there cannot be an external view*. If God moves with the third type of labyrinth, God must participate in the complex and evolving webbing that marks the very nature of the labyrinth itself. Neither can there be a human map. Only from within the labyrinth does description of the labyrinth become possible; even then the description will always be only local, partial, and contingent. Moreover, because the rhizomatic labyrinth shifts over time, we cannot aggregate multiple views from within. Always in process, the

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 83.

complex labyrinth never completes itself and never resolves the contradictions internal to it. The labyrinth never was an original whole, and it will not resolve itself into one. Though Eco's metaphor of blindness is problematic, it aptly characterizes his understanding of coming to know within a complex labyrinth. Here, he notes, "blindness is the only way of seeing (locally), and thinking means to grope one's way."<sup>17</sup>

Imagine Borges' story as an allegory of a hermeneutical labyrinth of this rhizomatic sort. Drawing on Eco's words, labyrinthine hermeneutics will "not register only 'truths' but, rather, what has been said about the truth or what has been believed to be true as well as what has been believed to be false or imaginary or legendary."<sup>18</sup> Labyrinthine corridors shift in surprising ways. Yu Tsun set out urgently to communicate his missive before being captured or killed, and surprisingly found himself within Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth contemplating history and philosophy. Labyrinths register the stories, desires, and acts that lead to truths, but also to belief, as shifting corridors shape and reshape labyrinthine paths. Perhaps Ts'ui Pên withdrew to write a book, perhaps to build a labyrinth, perhaps the book and the labyrinth are one and the same, but it was Yu Tsun's desire to send a message that led him to the place he needed to be in order to encounter his ancestor and the possible references and meaning of Ts'ui Pên's myth.

### Thinking with Ricoeur

Labyrinths are not Ricoeur's chosen geometry. He prefers the hermeneutical arcs that curve circles of interpretation. Nor do Croatto, Segundo, or Boff trace labyrinthine shapes for their liberationist methods of interpretation. I should also be clear that Althaus-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 83.



Reid frames the dissertation with the labyrinth and does not then return to it. She does not mention labyrinths at all after the opening pages. Yet, the directness of the first paragraphs of her dissertation are too welcoming and too intriguing of an invitation for me not to accept. If the labyrinthine metaphor accurately and creatively describes the task or the journey of interpreting texts—as Althaus-Reid writes in the opening section—can this metaphor teach us something meaningful with respect to Althaus-Reid’s hermeneutical commitments? For instance, might we find that labyrinthine corridors wind through and beyond the dissertation to her constructive writing in *Indecent Theology* or *The Queer God*? And if we do find labyrinthine paths to follow in Althaus-Reid’s writing or elsewhere, what might be our interpretive tasks along these paths?

I want to think not only about whether we might find a labyrinth in her texts, but also, more intriguingly, the reasons why Althaus-Reid might want to write a labyrinth. Ricoeur carefully distinguishes reading from writing, as he analyzes the processes and dynamics of interpretation. Though he acknowledges the question of writing, most of his energy focuses on reading.<sup>19</sup> How does her inflection of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics suggest that one might go about writing labyrinths? What might happen to our possibilities of understanding and knowledge if we do? Can a labyrinthine hermeneutical praxis of *writing* affect the world around us in the way that the circle of suspicion can transform the world through the interpretive praxis of communities of interpretation? To begin to think about these questions, I turn to the primary occupation of Althaus-Reid’s thesis: the exposition and analysis of Ricoeur’s interpretation theory both in itself and in its liberationist appropriations.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example: Paul Ricoeur, “What is a text? Explanation and Understanding” in *From Text to Action*, 101-120.

In her dissertation, Althaus-Reid's task centers at the junction of Ricoeur with Latin American liberation theology. Describing Althaus-Reid's interpretation in labyrinthine terms allows us to see the paths that she travels to arrive at the hermeneutical intersection of liberation theology and Ricoeur. Her thesis traces what has been said in the past about hermeneutics as well as what is currently believed. In this sense, the dissertation is true; its arguments represent enduring and meaningful interpretations of the subject material. Yet, because a labyrinth constantly shifts and reshapes, no one can return to find the same view that led her to write it. Even though the dissertation registers the desires and work that led to its formation, it is not possible for any reader to reclaim the special relationship between author and text. When we read, we only see the paths that Althaus-Reid travels from the vantage of *our* current positioning within the labyrinthine corridors. Indeed, even if I were to perfectly retrace my steps, I will not again encounter what I myself saw before in her interpretation.

Eco describes this inaccessibility in terms of blindness. Within a rhizomatic labyrinth, we are 'blind' to any vision of what will be or what was, just as we are 'blind' to the whole. The labyrinth's corridors shift to make connections that our presence enables. The desire that fuels our exploration, whatever that desire might be, shifts what is possible. When we read, we cannot see what the author saw, even when it seems that we stand at the same place (even when we really do stand at the same place). The labyrinth's rhizomatic corridors have shifted to allow for connections that our presence and our exploration enable. Their dynamism blinds us to the author's view, even as it opens the possibility of our own vantage. Here blindness is not something to be overcome, but embraced. For Eco, blindness of this sort preconditions the ability to see locally. Seeing locally is what matters.

Ricoeur does not disagree. Indeed, he provides Althaus-Reid with another language of hermeneutical blindness that he articulates through a reworking of the concept of

distanciation. Distanciation names the characteristic of writing that renders readers blind to the writer and to the context in which the text was written. Importantly, distanciation implies the same for the writer: an author is blind to her readers and the contexts in which her text will be read. The inaccessibility of the author grants readers the freedom to interpret a text without access or obligation to the author's intentions. Because of distanciation, communities of interpretation can appropriate the meaning of texts.

As Borges' story suggests, the challenge of communicating across distance offers opportunities for surprising and, at times transformative, meaning. Similarly, the epistemology of most liberation theologies stands on the claim that when oppressed communities enjoy the freedom to put themselves and their struggles into the text's world, however distant this world initially appears, these communities can produce creative interpretations. By creative interpretation, I mean interpretation that *creates* new liberative possibility by embodying knowledge as praxis within communities of struggle. In Ricoeur's terms, the creation of transformative knowledge through interpretive processes depends on the distance between text and author and text and readers. It will be helpful to take the space to work this through with care especially with respect to Ricoeur's notion of text, his interest in ontology, the presence of desire in interpretation, and the long route that he believes we must travel when interpreting.

Althaus-Reid begins her definition of hermeneutics with a touchstone from Schleiermacher that she chooses because of its resonance with an aspect of Ricoeur's position. Hermeneutics, she writes, is "the theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning."<sup>20</sup> She calls attention to the fact that 'written texts' do not delimit

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, "General Hermeneutics," in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Voller, (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 84, quoted in Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 5.

Schleiermacher's formulation, and that, likewise, Ricoeur's considerations move far beyond written words on paper. "A novel, a sculpture, a film, an archaeological site, could all be considered a text."<sup>21</sup> The drafting tables of city planners witness the creation of texts to be interpreted as assuredly as the novelist's favorite pad of paper. Likewise, the walks of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo can appear to us as a text to be deciphered, as can the scents of indigenous lemon vendors.<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur embraces the entire sensible and lived world as material for interpretation: "The entire sensible world and all beings with which we have dealings sometimes appear to us as a text to be deciphered."<sup>23</sup>

The breadth of potential texts for interpretation suggests that hermeneutics cannot be known in abstract—however vital or material the approach. Ricoeur draws upon Husserl and phenomenology as a way to integrate sensible experience and the dynamics of life with questions of language and interpretation. He cares about hermeneutics because it concerns being. In this Ricoeur harkens to Heidegger's proposal that understanding is a mode of being, rather than a mode of knowing. While hermeneuticians in the tradition of Kant and Schleiermacher locate interpretation as an epistemological problem, Heidegger flipped the question. Ricoeur summarizes Heidegger's reversal in this way: "Instead of asking: On what condition can a knowing subject understand a text or history? One asks: What kind of being is it whose being consists of understanding?"<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 5.

<sup>22</sup> Althaus, Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-4.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Nabert, *L'Expérience Intérieure de la Liberté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1924), 77, quoted in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* trans. by Don Ihde, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 222, quoted in Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 6. In "The Task of Hermeneutics," Ricoeur reviews Heidegger's role in shifting hermeneutics from epistemology to ontology. Heidegger inverted the object of study. Rather than accepting the problem of interpretation as a question about the

It is worth noting that Ricoeur admits not only his agreement that hermeneutics refers to ontology, but also his “*desire* for this ontology.”<sup>25</sup> In many ways, it is the desire that animates his interpretation theory. As Ricoeur remarks elsewhere, desire has two sides. On the one hand, desire is a motivational force, a dynamic that impels us toward understanding. On the other, desire is itself what can make that movement intelligible. That is, desire can be a reason for acting while also providing the meaning of that action. Or in Ricoeur’s words: “the motive is at one and the same time the motion of wanting and its justification.”<sup>26</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis provides a language by which Ricoeur contemplates desire in interpretation.<sup>27</sup> Here I want only to note the baseline notion: We interpret within the complex currents of desire—and these currents are indeed complex.

methodology of human sciences, Heidegger attempted “to dig beneath this methodology in order to lay bare its foundations” (62). Under Heidegger, hermeneutics becomes “an explication of the ontological ground upon which these sciences can be constructed” (63). This led to a second shift. Unlike Dilthey (for whom understanding connects with the problem of an other person), Heidegger depsychologized interpretation (63). The problem is not how we access the mind of the author across history and space. The central hermeneutical problem concerns the structures of being. What sort of being is it who can understand? To be is to be in the world, and we must find ourselves there as a condition for the possibility of interpretation (64). Ricoeur clarifies that his review of Heidegger and hermeneutics is not neutral, objective, or comprehensive (51-52); his purpose is to frame his contribution. That is, Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics does not appear as “a contrary solution.” Rather, Ricoeur positions himself within its trajectory, while reworking and extending its path. Ricoeur’s only doubt arises about “the possibility of making a direct ontology” (6). We need a long route to it, but we still aim for ontology. Paul Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 53-74.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 7. (emphasis mine)

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Explanation and Understanding” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> For example, in *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur considers desire within the Freudian economy of unconsciousness and consciousness. Desire interferes with intentionality: the act of knowing is rooted in the dynamics of existence, making it impossible that knowledge be autonomous (458). The motion of desire in analysis demonstrates the repetitive movement of the dispossession of consciousness that gives way to a movement of repossession, and back again. In this movement: “desire is both the nonspoken and the wish to speak, the unnamable and the potency to speak” (457). Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An essay on interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

The hermeneutical questions that Ricoeur asks—questions such as: “How can life objectify itself, and, in objectifying itself, how does it bring to light meanings capable of being taken up and understood by another...being?”<sup>28</sup>—arise from his desire to understand being. Hermeneutics in Ricoeur’s hands aims for ontology. In Althaus-Reid’s words, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics “aims to explore the self, which is shaped by its shaping of the world, by acts of decision, action, and consent.”<sup>29</sup> In this, hermeneutics addresses a central moment of being in the world together: How do the dynamics of life manifest in forms that we can potentially understand? How do we interpret these forms so as to actually understand them? That is, how do we read texts, broadly construed? As Althaus-Reid traces influences on Ricoeur’s theory and the evidence and arguments that he harnesses, critiques, and employs to achieve his exploration, she hints at a related question: how can we actively communicate the complexity of life? That is, alongside the question of how to read texts, broadly construed, persists the question of how to write them. How can we manifest the dynamics of life in order to communicate with one another? Hermeneutics seeks to understand how meaning is communicated and understood across time and space, because, in doing so, political and existential possibility can be made manifest.

With his reversal of the hermeneutical question, Heidegger sought to enter directly into the “ontology of the finite being in order to there recover *understanding*...as a mode of being.”<sup>30</sup> Resisting what he called Heidegger’s “short path,” Ricoeur counters that it is important that we reflect on the journey to ontology, and just as important that we not become trapped by its waypoints. He wants to achieve hermeneutical ontology in a way that

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 6.

does justice to the puzzles of language, psychology, and history. Methodology matters, he argues. Hermeneutics does not take us immediately to ontology; we must always be travelling through language and experience: “There is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts; in the last resort understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, interpretation will be a long and complex journey. If we seek meaning with Ricoeur—that is, if we share his interest in ontology and trust him as a guide on the long hermeneutical path—we will travel through linguistics and the phenomenology of language. We will also find ourselves wading through psychoanalytic waters and confronting the mirages of ideological illusion. Indeed, Ricoeur suggests that the more modes of transferring meaning into interpretation theory that we embrace—even those that overtly contradict—the richer our hermeneutics will be.<sup>32</sup>

Althaus-Reid took this lesson to heart. Over the years, she invests herself and her writing with many rich and often competing modes of investigation that, in their particularity, are not the point. Their cooperation in the larger task of finding ways to articulate the complexities of living, of life, and of Being is the point. As Althaus-Reid writes: “language needs to be considered not as an object, neither as a mediator between meanings, but as a way to ‘name the Being.’”<sup>33</sup> “I confess willingly,” Ricoeur writes, “that these analyses continually *presuppose* the conviction that discourse never exists *for its own sake* for its own glory, but that in all of its uses it seeks to bring into language an experience, a way of living

<sup>31</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “On Interpretation” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> This is how Althaus-Reid sums the move toward multiplicity in interpretation: “This is the Ricoeurian project in a nutshell, the organization of a general hermeneutic which could include a reflection on anthropology, psychoanalysis, symbolic logic and exegetical science....The multivocity of the symbols would not be reduced by one interpretation from metapsychology or phenomenology of religion, but it would be enriched by a diversity of hermeneutical methods... Ricoeur’s task is to liberate human discourse, from the absolutist claims of different methods of interpretation.” Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 174.

<sup>33</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 177.

in and of Being-in-the-world which precedes it and which demands to be said.”<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur admits the vehemence of his insistence that language must not be allowed to close in upon itself. Before any explanation or understanding, writing, or reading, “there is always a Being-demanding-to-be-said (un être-à-dire).”<sup>35</sup> Being demands to be said. Texts articulate worlds. Part of the task of hermeneutics is to restore the projection of worlds so that we, as communities of readers, can inhabit them.<sup>36</sup> Put differently, part of the task of hermeneutics is to illuminate a text’s many and different openings into possible paths of interpretation, so that we, as communities of readers, can let our desire lead us to explore labyrinthine corridors unknown even to author, architect (or God?).

#### A Labyrinth with which to Play

I am in the middle of recounting one of many possible explorations of Althaus-Reid’s dissertation. It is a particular and admittedly somewhat peculiar exploration, and one that is definitively mine. I hope that it is clear by now that these pages are labyrinthine in shape while substantively considering the possibilities of labyrinthine hermeneutics. In doing so, I do not suggest that my approach here captures the overarching truth of her dissertation’s thesis. I also do not imply that the labyrinthine metaphor appears as its most central aspect. It certainly is not, and I encourage you to read the dissertation to learn its lessons. It is thoroughly unlikely that Althaus-Reid would have written something similar to what I here write, even if she had set about to write on this topic—which she did not. If I perform my

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, “On Interpretation,” 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18. Ricoeur writes that the task of hermeneutics is two-fold: “to reconstruct the internal dynamic of the text, and to restore to the work its ability to project itself outside itself in the representation of a world that I could inhabit.”



task adequately, it should be evident that I am exploring a world of possibility projected by her text. My freedom to write this is the invitation of labyrinthine writing; it is a freedom afforded by distancing.

In order to explore the possibility of labyrinthine hermeneutical metaphor, I need to be inside of a labyrinth. The complex labyrinth offers multiple corridors to explore, but in order to see what any given corridor might offer, we must already be moving along its path. There can be no external view on a labyrinth, because it has no outside. Remember Eco's description of the rhizomatic labyrinth. The labyrinth of the third type offers neither a distinct outside or inside, nor does it expect us to trace a discreet path toward a pre-determined goal. Its connections and paths are not only infinite, but they change over and across time. In Eco's words: "it is dismountable, reversible, and susceptible to continual modifications."<sup>37</sup>

Pedagogically, this presents a difficulty. I have a hard time considering something that I can neither picture nor test directly. Yet, the only example I have yet offered is the one that I am in the midst of making. Yu Tsun needed to be inside a labyrinth to consider the labyrinth; perhaps the same is true of you. I want to suggest a labyrinthine puzzle for you to enjoy. Essentially, I want to place a labyrinth inside of this larger labyrinth that can serve as a case study or practice problem set. Though I will introduce it, I will not interpret it. I will, however, note that I chose this text because the author explicitly connects her writing of the puzzle with her understanding that writing itself is a critical feminist task. Moreover, the author's critical commitment to writing takes shape in conversation with Eco and Ricoeur, as well as with semiotic and hermeneutic discourses more generally. These reasons lead me

<sup>37</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.

to find it particularly germane to the current setting. That being said, the text is yours to explore.

Althaus-Reid suggests that the complex labyrinth is a living metaphor in Ricoeur's sense. Living metaphors have "the power to disclose reality due to the process of 'the metaphorical twist' where the reader is able to construct a 'novel' meaning."<sup>38</sup> The same can be said of the labyrinths themselves. The infinitely shifting paths can disclose reality; twists and turns allow readers to construct 'novel' meanings. Ricoeur's broad understanding of texts and his desire for ontology motivate his hermeneutics to consider the communication and interpretation of meaning within and for the complexity of lives as they are lived. Hermeneutics aims to explore the self—it seeks to name the Being—by engaging the manifold puzzles of language, experience, and history. Along the way, many different approaches are called for and many will be needed. In the process of figuring out how to explore this passage as a labyrinth, I hope that it will be possible to see in your own way what labyrinthine writing might be. I make one request: If and however you choose to engage with it, please return any insights about the writing of labyrinths back into your consideration not only of this chapter and her dissertation, but of Althaus-Reid's writings more broadly.

I quote the preface to *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* by Teresa de Lauretis in full:

<sup>38</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 112.

The essays collected in this book have been conceived and written over the past four years. On or very near my writing desk, in whatever city I happened to be during that time, there was always this sign:



I'd picked it up at a demonstration or a meeting—I don't remember exactly—and have kept it with me ever since. It seems appropriate to name the book after it, for not only is the book intended in the same sense as the placard, but both are signs of the same struggle, both are texts of the women's movement. The images or references suggested by the name "Alice" are many and will probably vary with each reader. Whether you think of Alice in Wonderland or Radio Alice in Bologna; of Alice B. Toklas, who "wrote" an autobiography as well as other things; or of Alice James, who produced an illness while her brothers did the writing; of Alice Sheldon, who wrote science fiction, but with a male pseudonym; or of any other Alice, is entirely up to you, reader. For me it is important to acknowledge, in this title, the unqualified opposition of feminism to existing social relations, its refusal of given definitions and cultural values; and at the same time to affirm the political and personal ties of shared experience that join women in the movement are the condition of feminist work, theory, and practice.<sup>39</sup>

On October 29, 1975, the National Organization for Women organized a one-day strike from work and designated the day "Alice Doesn't Day." The name of the protest referenced Martin Scorsese's first Hollywood film that had appeared in theaters the year before: "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore." The film remains Scorsese's only attempt to tell the story of a woman protagonist.<sup>40</sup> Though (as reviewers wrote at the time) it presents a sympathetic and complex view on the challenges the newly widowed Alice faces in re/starting her life with her son after her alienating husband's death, the plot turns on

<sup>39</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), vii.

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Burstyn tells the story of approaching Martin Scorsese about making this film as a movie that would capture the feminist zeitgeist of the time. She had found the script and needed a director, and—once he agreed—continued to work with him on all aspects of the film. Jane Levere, "Ellen Burstyn Dishes On Scorsese, Kristofferson And Making Of 'Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore,'" *Forbes*, May 31, 2014, [www.forbes.com/sites/janelevere/2014/05/31/ellyn-burstyn-dishes-on-scorsese-kristofferson-and-making-of-alice-doesnt-live-here-anymore/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/janelevere/2014/05/31/ellyn-burstyn-dishes-on-scorsese-kristofferson-and-making-of-alice-doesnt-live-here-anymore/)

Alice's habituated practice of seeking her own life in relation to the needs, wishes, or experiences of a man (lover or child). The symbol of her desired (if imaginary) and self-determined (if deceptively constructed) happiness (Monterey, California) lies miles down the road, never to be reached. By all reports, the film was both a critical and popular success. Women resonated with the portrayal of Alice's struggles, and Ellen Burstyn won an Academy Award for best actress (notably, in absentia).<sup>41</sup> In the context of this social moment, the National Organization for Women distributed flyers and signs advertising a strike from work: "Alice Doesn't."

De Lauretis wrote *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* under this sign.<sup>42</sup> She not only states this explicitly, but also reproduces the typographic banner for the NOW day of action, a banner that includes the date and name of the action. Yet when de Lauretis lists possible references for Alice—Alice in Wonderland, Alice James, Alice B. Toklas, Alice Sheldon, or "any other Alice," the choice of which "is entirely up to you, reader"<sup>43</sup>—she not only effaces *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, de Lauretis "forgets" the immediate reference of the sign under which she wrote. Some readers may have the contextual knowledge to see the reference, while others are utterly blind to its trail. Indeed, you might already be tracing other paths of in/visible references to which I am blind. This is good. Her list of Alices

<sup>41</sup> Scorsese accepted the award on Burstyn's behalf, as she was unable to attend the ceremony while performing in a play on the night of the Academy Awards. Scorsese's acceptance speech went as follows: "Thank you. Ellen is in a play tonight in New York; she can't be here. She asked me to thank everyone concerned with the voting, the Academy, who voted for her. Also the entire cast and crew of "Alice." And also especially John Calley and Robert Getchell. And she also asked me to thank myself. Thank you." Martin Scorsese, "Acceptance Speech on behalf of Ellen Burstyn," *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Archive*, April 8, 1975, <http://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/047-3/>.

<sup>42</sup> I emphasize the word play that intertwines the material object of the protest signage with the meanings of the sign. De Lauretis wrote the book under the material sign/age for a historical event as well as a sign that signifies a range of meanings. Yet, she effaces the signifying connections of all aspects.

<sup>43</sup> de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, vii.

suggests a further number of paths that can be followed, but there are still many others. As de Lauretis writes, the choice “is entirely up to you, reader.”

### Writing To Project Unknown Worlds

Ricoeur’s desire for knowledge of self, life, and world focuses his attention on texts and the readers who engage with them. He questions how readers can inhabit and explore worlds that texts project. He works to understand symbols, myth, and narratives so that they can orient his understanding of interpretation as he asks how readers can navigate language that attempts to articulate life and experience. His vision of the hermeneutical circle suggests how readers do enter into these textual worlds and, in doing so, can understand and appropriate the transformative possibilities that encounter them there. When the dynamics of writing help to clarify these possibilities, Ricoeur spends time theorizing them. Writing is an important part of his considerations, and he never marginalizes its complexity or importance. Yet when writing claims the attention of his pen, it is usually to strengthen his analysis of reading.<sup>44</sup>

Althaus-Reid’s dissertation manifests the same distribution of attention. She, like Ricoeur, dedicates a majority of her analysis to considering the processes by which readers interpret texts. In particular, she analyzes the strategies advocated by Croatto, Segundo, and Boff as readers and interpreters of Ricoeur. She studies their articulation of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, the ways in which they appropriate it into their own interpretation theory, and the challenges or supplements that they offer as part of their appropriation. Yet, the

<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur stands apart from others (such as Saussure, who places writing as fully subservient to speaking) in insisting that writing is an independently important activity for interpretive processes. All the activities of creating texts—including writing—are integral to the dynamics of communicating and sharing meaning. Ricoeur’s implicit hierarchy of attention reveals a ranking of his analytic interest, not an absolute positioning.

pointedness of her critiques hint that she has begun to think about flipping Ricoeur's pattern of interest. Rather than considering the dynamics of writing for the purpose of better articulating the task and role of readers, Althaus-Reid subtly gives space to wonder: perhaps liberation theologians ought to study the dynamics of reading in order to better grasp and perform the possibilities, responsibilities, and effects of liberative writing.

As a place to contemplate shifting the hermeneutical question toward writing, distanciation offers many advantages. First, distanciation is the reason why we can interpret texts; it is at the very center of Ricoeur's interpretation theory. Second, distanciation occurs in the activities of communication and manifests as a quality of texts as written. Third, Ricoeur's central exposition of distanciation in "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" is one of the places where he substantively considers writing in itself. The essay offers us the opportunity to consider hermeneutical writing in direct conversation with his text.

In this essay, Ricoeur tells us that his desire to overcome a central hermeneutical antinomy led him to think differently about distanciation. On the one hand, we stand apart from the object of our interpretation. For instance, the methodological attitude of the sciences relies on the distance between the interpreter and the material studied as a baseline for scientific objectivity. Yet, on the other hand, we belong to and participate in the historical reality that constitutes the object of study. We cannot separate ourselves from what we study or we risk losing the meaning and importance of it: its truth.<sup>45</sup> Whence the antinomy: "either we have the methodological attitude and lose the ontological density of

<sup>45</sup> Truth, here, has the character of a task: "Thereby, finally, is confirmed truth's character of being a task: truth remains an Idea, an infinite Idea, for a being who originates as desire and effort." Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 458.

the reality under study or we have the attitude of truth and must give up the objectivity of the human sciences.”<sup>46</sup>

Though the antinomy can be stated simply, the implications that follow are not simple at all—as the length and complexity of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* attest. Ricoeur’s response is to refuse the construction of the antinomy’s terms. He proposes instead a “productive” version of the concept. Because Ricoeur’s thinking about distanciation arises in conversation with and as an answer to Gadamer, it offers a good demonstration of their points of agreement and divergence. Althaus-Reid makes use of her first focused presentation of the concept to do just that (76-79). She then returns to further consider it with more detail in her exposition of Ricoeur’s biblical hermeneutics (98-100) and again in conversation with Bultmann (175-176), Croatto (215-219) and Boff (106-207; 316-317; 320).

Ricoeur tightly binds distanciation with texts. He places it at the center of a decisive problematic of hermeneutics: a text’s projection of a world for readers to inhabit. Distanciation, he argues, “is not the product of our methodology and therefore is not something added and parasitic, rather it is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as written.”<sup>47</sup> Because of distanciation, texts not only can project *a* world, a text can project *its own* world apart from that of its author, the author’s intentions, or the context in which it was written.

At the moment of communication, a distance already exists between what is said or written and the event of discourse that the saying or writing seeks to communicate.<sup>48</sup> Here

<sup>46</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation” in *From Text to Action*, 72.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-77.

lies the first and most basic moment of distancing: the intentional exteriorization of the event of discourse that separates the saying from the said. Writing, however, goes a step further. To write something reveals an intention to share meaning that will endure past the event of its saying. It introduces “fixation, which shelters the event of discourse from destruction.”<sup>49</sup>

The event of discourse has a time, a speaker, and a world—each of which the discourse references. Speaking allows speakers and hearers to engage directly with each of these elements. For instance, when we speak with one another, we share a common moment. Hearers witness the posture and gestures of the speaker and can ask for clarification or elaboration. The speaker, of course, can choose whether or not and how to respond, but in doing so she will continue to dialogue. Such is not the case with writing, Ricoeur notes. By putting meaning into a textual form that will endure past its saying, writing frees discourse from dialogical dynamics. With writing, communication does not occur in the shared interactions of speaker and hearer. Readers do not have recourse to the writer, and writers do not have recourse to their readers. Readers must find their own way in interpreting the text. This gives rise to the next aspect of distancing: “Writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant.”<sup>50</sup>

Ricoeur suggests that this emancipation might be the most significant effect writing has. In his words, “written discourse creates an audience that extends in principle to anyone who can read.”<sup>51</sup> A text must therefore be able to “decontextualize itself” in order to be

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



“recontextualized” in the act of reading wherever, whenever, and by whomever might choose to read it.<sup>52</sup> To echo de Lauretis’ words in a context strange to them: the choice is up to you reader. Or to echo Eco: texts are “susceptible to continual modifications.”<sup>53</sup> The contextualizations of text, like labyrinthine corridors, shift as readers from near and far interpret it.

Though readers must do the work of recontextualizing a text, writers work to create it. Ricoeur draws on Aristotle to emphasize that writing produces text through labor on the materials of language. An author is like an artist—her text, her art. She objectifies her practical activity in the work. In that sense the text that she writes reflects back to her as being uniquely hers, but the text is not the author. It is the product of her labor. Writers make choices about how best to use the materials of language to produce a text that will communicate an identifiable and repeatable meaning. Compositional qualities like the genre solidify in authorial choices as to how best to transverse the distance between the writer and her text, within the horizon of psychological, social, and historical conditions that inflect her possibilities. Because of this, the style of texts not only reminds us of the intimacy between author and text, but of the distance between the two. It does so by reminding us of the labor that it took for the writer to cross this distance by crafting the materials of language into a codified shape. This labor ought not be overlooked in the desire to read a text back on its author. A reader must do his own work to interpret. He does not have access to the author or her intentions; he can only access the product of her labor on the materials

<sup>52</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 78. In her words: “the text has been preserved by language, but at the same time it has become decontextualised. Such de-contextualisation requires a hermeneutic process, in order to understand the work; at the same time, it performs the function of keeping the ‘openness’ of the text.”

<sup>53</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.

of language. Because of distancing, the labor of writing matters, as do the choices that give these materials a particular shape.

Distancing's third dimension relates to the distance between the world of the author and the world of the text. As a text closes to the writer and becomes complete unto itself, the work opens outwards toward its readers. While it might happen that proximity of time, location, or context in reading and writing allows for a shared reference between the author and reader, the text itself does not. Ricoeur states this directly: "with writing...there is no longer a situation common to the writer and the reader."<sup>54</sup> The text stands between them, while also standing apart from both. The world of the text cannot be reduced to that of the writer, but neither does it become the world of the reader. The world that calls for our attention in reading is the world of the text—a world that writing created, but that is not the world of the author. Texts project a world of their own.

Here appears a radical moment in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Because it is not bound to the writer or to the reader, a text can project possibilities other than what is possible in everyday existence, action, language or thought. The world of the text stands apart; it operates with a different sort of reference to reality. Ricoeur terms this the "distancing of the real from itself."<sup>55</sup> Rather than an ordinary, descriptive, or didactic reference, the world of the text connects with reality on a deeper and more profound level. These connections can be world transforming. As he writes: "thanks to writing, the world of the *text* may explode the world of the *author*."<sup>56</sup> A written work invites readers to project their own possibilities into the text's expression of a *Lebenswelt* or *Being-in-the-world*. "What must be

<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distancing," 82.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities."<sup>57</sup>

I pause to sit with this. I invite you to do the same. The implications are unsettling. When we write—especially when we write fiction and poetry, but also more generally, when we write—we write our text into a different space, one that is distant from us. We write into the distance so that our text can fixate meaning, sheltering the event of discourse from destruction. We do this by laboring on the materials of language to let meaning endure apart from us—or, sometimes, to open possibilities of other meanings. We labor to create an object, our text, that constitutively invites an unbounded audience. Whoever we want to read this work, there will also be unwanted, unknown, and unknowable readers. Moreover, the work that we write will decontextualize itself for these unknown, unknowable, or unwanted readers, and we are blind to what—in being decontextualized and recontextualized in the interpretive process—our written text will signify. The reader's hermeneutical task to appropriate the text is a task of understanding at and through distance.<sup>58</sup> The writer's hermeneutical task is to write into and with this distance, to write into distanciation. It seems to me that how to do this deserves a great deal of attention.

To theorize the hermeneutic dynamics of writing, we cannot 'reverse' a path around the hermeneutic circle, nor can we overlay the reading process onto writing. A different figure is needed for writing. I wonder: if the hermeneutic circle images the processes of interpretive reading, perhaps we can find with the labyrinth an image for the dynamics of writing. The hermeneutic circle describes how readers can come to a critical understanding of themselves within the world of the text. It describes a process of moving from 'blindness'

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 83. (emphasis original)

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 84.

to 'sight.' In Ricoeur's terms, the distanciation that occurs in writing enables readers to appropriate the meaning of the text within and for their own lives. This is the interpretive process.

Writing poses a different problem. A text becomes a work when it becomes closed to its author. A text must be distant from its author (and the world in which it was created) in order to enable the interpretive freedom of reading communities. Likewise, readers must be absent to the writer. "The book introduces a shift between the act of writing and the act of reading, between which two acts there is no communication. The reader is absent from the writing of the book, the writer is absent from its reading. In this way the text produces a double effacement (occultation) of reader and writer."<sup>59</sup> To write *for* interpretive freedom means that we need to write into distanciation. I start writing with a vision for the meaning of the text. I cease writing 'blind' to the possibilities of its interpretation by readers unknown to me.

Ricoeur's language of occultation draws upon a celestial image, but it confronts us with an instance of spatially determined blindness not unlike that of a labyrinth. As when the moon blocks my view, rendering me blind to celestial bodies, the text blocks my view, rendering me blind to the writer when I am reading, or when writing rendering me blind to readers. Likewise within the complex labyrinth: wherever we stand with respect to the text, the corridors of the labyrinth block any perspective other than an immediate, local view on it. Indeed, distanciation—inclusive of the blindness that it effects—"is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as writing."<sup>60</sup> For Ricoeur—and for Althaus-Reid in conversation with Ricoeur—this blindness forms a condition of liberative knowledge through text.

<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur, "What is a text," 136.

<sup>60</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 82.

It is notable that Ricoeur does not consider the processes by which writers write with the attentiveness that he engages the processes by which a reader understands at and through distance. When he explicitly considers the writing process, he usually broaches the topic for the purposes of better understanding what is required of readers. Given that distanciation is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as written, this imbalance could be attributed to and justified by the fact that writers do not need to be intentional about writing into distanciation. One might suggest that we do not need to cultivate practices of writing into distanciation; it simply is the case. As Ricoeur presents it, distanciation occurs in the act of writing because of the nature of writing. What we need to cultivate are the reading practices that allow for understanding across this distance. I am not convinced. I turn to Althaus-Reid's critique of Clodovis Boff to articulate why not.

She writes: "the point is that Boff is afraid of the multiplicity of the discourse."<sup>61</sup> Boff returns to a Romantic hermeneutic in an effort to protect the authority of tradition against the anarchy of multiple readings.<sup>62</sup> In doing so, she continues, Boff misconstrues the distanciation of Christian writing and therewith the threat of relativistic or corrupt appropriation of it by reading communities. Because of this, his writing serves to protect oppressive church power from the liberationist critiques that occur in the process of community interpretation.

<sup>61</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 337.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 309. Althaus-Reid writes: "Boff has clearly taken a romantic position with regard to the restoration of Scriptural meaning as the task and object of a theological hermeneutic." Romantic hermeneutics names a range of approaches to interpretation that center in understanding the author's intentions in writing. Althaus-Reid suggests that Boff's fear of interpretive improvisation effectively leads him to seek to stabilize an original intention of "the text of tradition" to correspond with acceptable contemporary interpretation within his model of correspondences. See Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," especially p. 60; Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 328.

In *Theology and Praxis*, Boff defines hermeneutics as the “process of decoding that seeks to overcome this distance [in time between Sacred texts and us], and thus reappropriate the original sense of the written message.”<sup>63</sup> Althaus-Reid quickly notes that the Romantic inflection of Boff’s desire for an original sense of the written message stands in opposition to Ricoeur’s articulation of distanciation. With Ricoeur, readers have no access to an original project. In Althaus-Reid’s terms, “Boff has taken into consideration the hermeneutical arc, but not its consequences.”<sup>64</sup> He does not trust readers’ interpretative processes to produce meaning. He deeply fears “hermeneutical improvisation.” And indeed, he does. Using phrases such as “a teeming anarchy of every sort of reading,” Boff refuses Gadamer on grounds of interpretive relativism.<sup>65</sup> Two pages later, the threat of “a riotous carnival of meanings” likewise leads to a robust refusal of pragmatic reading strategies.<sup>66</sup>

According to Boff, hermeneutics illuminates the original truth of Christian texts in today’s form. That is, readers come to see the original meaning in its original context in an analogous relationship with the meaning in their contemporary situation. He names this a ‘relationship of relationships correspondence model.’ Across the many interpretations, one finds “a basic identity of significations” that aligns a relationship between the message and its context expressed in the Scripture with one in the contemporary world.<sup>67</sup> The dialectical movement between scripture and Word of God, creation and perception of meaning,

<sup>63</sup> Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 133.

<sup>64</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 206.

<sup>65</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 134.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. “An identity of senses, then, is not to be sought on the level of context, nor, consequently, on the level of the message as such—but rather on the level of the relationship between context and message on each side respectively.”

structure and meaning, past and present, and *techne hermeneutike* and *hermeneia* never stops making new interpretation possible, but in each motion Boff insists on the priority of the dominant term: scripture read through church tradition.<sup>68</sup>

“Instead of allowing the Bible to speak a new word, from people’s reading of the text and their own culture, Boff is using old materials of tradition, continuously re-arranged in a way related to mythical thought where the risk is non-critical perpetuation of dead meaning.”<sup>69</sup> In seeking to negotiate “a permanent tension between ‘anarchy’ (or freedom) of interpretation and ‘authority’ (or the role of traditions in the church),”<sup>70</sup> Boff not only fears the multiplicity of discourse, he writes to prevent it. In doing so, Boff undermines the liberationist praxis. Part of why hermeneutics matters, Boff writes, is because “hermeneutic technique has the capacity to fix the spatial limits of the appearance of meaning or sense. There are incompatibilities, impossibilities—in a word, thresholds impossible to cross.”<sup>71</sup> Antithetical to the shifting possibilities of a complex labyrinth—which offers corridors of meaningful interpretation to which the author is blind—Boff sees (and wants!) theology to instantiate and guard thresholds of meaning, so that they are impossible to cross.

Althaus-Reid’s criticism is blunt. “It is clear that while the production of meaning is submitted to traditions of interpretation in the church, we will be perpetuating illiteracy, or

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. “Scripture always throws us back to the Risen One, but it is scripture understood in the sense of canon of the tradition of church interpretation that matters as the *canonization of revelation*.” See also Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 140; Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 312.

<sup>69</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 330.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>71</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 138. Althaus-Reid’s impatience for Boff came full circle in his 2007 essay revisiting his liberation theology. What she raised as a concern about his hermeneutical prioritization of the Church over the people turned out to be a long-standing sticking point between him and liberation theologies. Clodovis Boff, “Teologia da Libertação e volta ao fundamento,” *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, 67, no. 268 (October 2007): 1001-1022.

the chronic inability to process information which opposes any practice for change in Latin America.”<sup>72</sup> Freire correctly suggested to the Brazilian Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church that for a liberation movement to erupt, a new reading must interrupt and break apart the domination of oppressive meaning. This requires literacy programs; it also requires openness to multiple interpretations arising from the struggles of oppressed communities. The hope for liberation walks with a faith that as yet unknown readings can and will disrupt hegemonic knowledge and the harms being caused by it. Freirean pedagogy teaches teachers how to facilitate open and liberative learning spaces in order to foster this transformation. Elsewhere, Althaus-Reid uses Freire’s metaphor to suggest that the liberationist writer, like the liberationist educator, must be willing to commit suicide.<sup>73</sup> Doing so clears space for the interpretations of communities of readers realized as praxis.

Practices of writing require the same degree of attention.<sup>74</sup> Liberative knowledge becomes possible when oppressed communities read with the interpretive freedom to produce meaning by placing their lives and their struggles into the world of the text. The distanciation constitutive of written texts makes interpretive freedom not only possible, but also necessary for the creative appropriation of meaning by communities of readers.<sup>75</sup> It is,

<sup>72</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 333.

<sup>73</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 57.

<sup>74</sup> There are a number of liberationists, especially feminist liberationist, who have worked long and hard to write differently. For instance: Mary Daly and Jane Caputo, *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemption and the Search for What Saves Us*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

<sup>75</sup> Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” 83-85. Ricoeur explains that appropriation stands in dialectical relationship with the distancing dynamics of distanciation. Appropriation expresses an intimacy between interpreters and texts, rather than an aspect of distance. Yet, this intimacy does not collapse the distance. Rather, appropriation “is understanding at and through distance” (84). We expose ourselves to texts. In doing so, the text enlarges our self (84). Distanciation, thus, works as a negative concept removing the text from the purview and control of



accordingly, at the heart of liberationist appropriations of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, and both readers and writers have a role to play. What is a critical praxis of writing into unknown and unknowable possibility? What techniques of writing foster the interpretive freedom of communities of readers? What shapes can writing take to do so? This study muses on a labyrinthine shape suggested by Althaus-Reid and written into her major texts. But there are others—indeed, better ones. How might we write into distanciation? How do we write an infinite book?

In *Feet-on-the-Ground-Theology*, Boff opens with an image of headlights. “What is said here is like headlights on a car: they light up the road ahead. But they light up only the space just ahead, not the whole road. Similarly, this theology is based on the journey a people is making, and seeks to serve that people. But it sheds light only on the next steps, not on the whole course of the journey.”<sup>76</sup> Christian theology continues to travel a road of interpretation, Boff suggests. The Bible—which is “in itself an interpretation of events and puts a distance between the reader and the ‘original event’ of Jesus”—marks the beginning of the long and twisting road.<sup>77</sup> While we do not know where the road will lead as it rounds the next turn or crests the next hill, we can be confident in its continuance. As long as we stay on it, the road paved by tradition will take us to God. Boff claims his task in writing (like the reader's work in interpreting) is to illuminate the piece of road directly ahead with the light of past wisdom known through tradition. “Meaning transpires, ‘comes to light,’ in

the author, while simultaneously serving as a positive concept that enables readers to appropriate texts.

<sup>76</sup> Clodovis Boff, *Feet-on-the-Ground-Theology: A Brazilian Journey* trans. by Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), xii.

<sup>77</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 320.

historical currency, through and beyond the letter of the text of the past.”<sup>78</sup> He wants his readers stay on this policed, single road and seeks to write a text that will facilitate this.

Althaus-Reid has no patience for Boff’s concern that hermeneutics prioritize the ‘authority’ of church tradition over and against a potential ‘anarchy’ of interpretive possibility. Doing so is counter to liberationist praxis, she complains. Within his metaphor, theology belongs in the shadows exploring pleasures and pains of life with the communities who walk labyrinthine paths where headlights cannot reach. Though we are blind to the possibility until it happens, this is where God is most likely to appear—not the well-lit, well-policed road of tradition.

<sup>78</sup> Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 148.

## 2: Walking

*The most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world, this walking that wanders so readily into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory, and heartbreak.<sup>1</sup>*

*No! For I have loved strangers, and after them I will walk.<sup>2</sup>*

There are few better ways to set out for a leg of a journey than by taking the first few steps with a good friend. In this case, I begin with a story from Lesley Orr, a confidant of Althaus-Reid. Orr takes us to the Scottish Churches House in Edinburgh, late during Althaus-Reid's doctoral program at the University of St. Andrews. At the time, Orr was herself a doctoral student at the University of Edinburgh. She remembers being intrigued by reports of an unknown 'warm-up act' for a seminar to be held at the Scottish Churches House. She had heard that a doctoral student from St. Andrews had been recruited to fill a hole in the conference schedule. The name of the speaker, of course, was Marcella Althaus-Reid, and the title of her presentation read, "Walking with Women Serpents." At Althaus-Reid's memorial service, Orr recalled the experience:

Marcella looked very Argentinean that day, wearing a heavy poncho and a cross-brooch which I think she made herself. Her appearance, her voice, and especially what she said was utterly new and different as a performance of embodied feminist

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Keep your feet from being unshod and your throat from thirst; But you said, 'It is hopeless! No! For I have loved strangers, and after them I will walk.'" Jeremiah 2:25, New American Standard.

theology. She wove a story rooted in Latin American context and symbolism with consummate creative skill...It was like a hurricane blowing in from Latin America...<sup>3</sup>

From her dark curly hair to the poncho that encircled her, the petite woman vested the British space with the female body and accoutrements of a Latin American *Other*. It was a performance that dislocated the room. Indeed, it was a style of performance that Althaus-Reid would perfect over the years to come. The words she spoke welcomed still more *Others* into the room. That day at the Scottish Churches House, Althaus-Reid introduced herself as she introduced her communities. Borrowing Orr's words, "it was like a hurricane blowing in" with winds that brought bodies, experiences, and desires, while baring those already in the room. Together, this newly forming community would go on a journey. Indeed, it was a public welcome to a journey that spanned Althaus-Reid's career.

However we hope to write theology, we need to consider how knowledge comes to be. While her dissertation established the credentials that opened the door to academe, Althaus-Reid *walked in* as a petite woman with dark hair as she spoke powerful words in rooms full of (sometimes liberationist, sometimes feminist, sometimes none of the above) British academicians. Fittingly her "coming out presentation"—as Orr fondly remembers it—begins with the question of how knowledge arises.<sup>4</sup> Because it was published in textual form in *Ministerial Formation*, we have a text with which to imagine ourselves into that room. Althaus-Reid begins: "any attempt to produce a liberating theology needs to consider how knowledge is invented, and why and how certain ideas become authoritative paradigms, while others do not."<sup>5</sup> The rhizomatic labyrinth offers a spatial metaphor for

<sup>3</sup> Lesley Orr quoted in Cecelia Clegg, "Homily" (Memorial Service for Althaus-Reid, St George's West Church, Edinburgh, Scotland) March 7, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Orr, Conversation with Author, November 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Walking with Women Serpents" *Ministerial Formation* 62 (July 1993): 31.

writing. An author writes a text that dynamically extends its possibilities beyond her reach, beyond her authority, and beyond her knowledge. Paths of interpretation open in ever-shifting patterns for readers known and unknown. The labyrinth forms an infinitely flexible network. Its surprises extend beyond the view of any given moment; they escape the awareness of any particular reader. Corridors connect and reconnect in the processes of reading by whomever reads, whenever and wherever they read. In other words, there is always more to be explored. Explore we must.

If the previous study imagined a space created in, by, and for liberative writing—a labyrinthine space, this study approaches a closely related question: how might we think about writing from within labyrinthine corridors? In “Walking with Women Serpents,” Althaus-Reid suggests that we walk. The activity of walking across time and across space produces labyrinthine knowledges. We walk labyrinths to explore a shifting, surprising, and never completed network of possibilities. At times we walk alone, delighting in (or stumbling over) the steps that came before and opened our path. Other times, we walk together in community. Walk together, transformative knowledge comes to be. We walk in protest. We walk in solidarity. We walk as praxis. Walking ensures that knowledge never settles. Like steps, knowledge stays multiple and fleeting, in and of the patterns of creation and destruction.

“Walking with Women Serpents” arises from the same constellation of commitment and scholarship that shapes her dissertation. Indeed, many of her thesis’ ideas move through the presentation’s argument. For instance, Althaus-Reid clarifies at the outset that she is “concerned with the interpretation of texts” and that her definition of texts is very broad. “A text is not only a written discourse... the arts, architecture and social structures of

our society work as texts which can be interpreted.”<sup>6</sup> Theology in the shadow of the *conquista* needs a critical approach to hermeneutics in order to read the texts of history, she continues. We need to question the legitimizing structures of power in society, but also *especially* in theology. We need liberationist hermeneutics, but we also need to think carefully and critically about how liberationists have appropriated and shaped interpretation theory.

While her dissertation focuses on central [male] figures such as Segundo, Croatto, and Boff, “Walking with Women Serpents” embraces women of Latin America as her primary community of discourse. Her perspective is *mujerista*, she explains: “the space located in the periphery of theology that we are going to consider today is women and women from Latin America.”<sup>7</sup> Liberation theology “can only find its most radical option” when it centers on poor women—women who “are the third world of the third world.”<sup>8</sup> The work she begins in her dissertation expands toward the excluded amongst the excluded. With Ricoeur continuing as her companion, she seeks a “reading of rupture” that troubles the exclusions of theology’s dominant *imaginaire*. To find this reading, Althaus-Reid steps toward the peripheries of the periphery to walk publicly with Latin American women from long ago, as well those living today and into the future.

Walking and knowledge enjoy the intimacy of an age-old relationship that has taken as many forms as years have passed. The rhythms of knowledge give way to walking; the rhythms of walking to knowing. Rebecca Solnit writes: “A new thought often seems like a

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Althaus-Reid defines *mujerista* as follows: “*Mujerista* is a word related to *mujer*, which is the Spanish for woman. It is a theological dialogue between theology of liberation, feminist theology and theology of culture. In this way we make sure that we bring to the discussion all the spaces of women in Latin America: their economic oppression, their invisibility in church and society, and their cultural space.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were traveling rather than making. And so one aspect of the history of walking is the history of thinking made concrete—for the motions of the mind, cannot be traced, but those of the feet can.”<sup>9</sup>

Drawing on Luke 10:26, Gustavo Gutiérrez suggests that the neighbor you love is the one whose path you walk, not the one you encounter as you walk your own route.<sup>10</sup> Praxis as knowledge and action occurs in the relationships made possible by walking together.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus walks. “Come walk with me,” Jesus called to the fishermen: leave your nets and walk with me; learn of God, yourselves, and the world (Matt 4:18-22).

Diogenes, it is said, answered Zeno’s challenge to the idea of motion by walking across the room. *Solvitur ambulando*.<sup>11</sup>

Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking” advises us to walk like camels. He writes: “Moreover, you must walk like a camel which is said to be the only beast which ruminates when walking.”<sup>12</sup> Coincidentally, Althaus-Reid esteems the walking of camels. *Indecent Theology* opens with a passage from the book of Jeremiah and a dedication that reads: “This Book is Dedicated to Young Camels who Love the Different.”<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah condemned Jerusalem for wandering away from a monogamous love of God. The deviating paths reveal sinful hearts and minds: “Look at your way in the valley! Know what you have done! You are

<sup>9</sup> Solnit, *Wanderlust*.

<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* trans. by Robert R. Barr, (London: SCM Press, 1983), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Long offers a nice meditation on various ways of accompanying the motion of this saying. Thomas Long, *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2011), 115-118.

<sup>12</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” *The Atlantic* (May 1, 1862), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>, ¶11.

<sup>13</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, epigraph.

a swift young camel entangling her ways.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of condemnation, Althaus-Reid asks: “Jeremiah has been heard so often as a condemnation of the camels...But, aren’t we all foreigners and strangers in this world, depending on where or with whom we are? Who defines what is to be a stranger?”<sup>15</sup> A camel—so Thoreau says—thinks while walking. A camel—so Althaus-Reid says—loves with abandon. “Jesus was a young camel, who couldn’t be domesticated and loved what he shouldn’t have loved.”<sup>16</sup> He travelled with the poor, sick, and sinful. He walked with men and women alike. As they walked together, they knew God, humanity, and God and humanity together. Walking made Jesus messiah, or so Althaus-Reid suggests. “Jesus *became* a messiah walking with poor women.”<sup>17</sup>

In these pages, I explore the ways in which walking provides a metaphor by which to think with bodily concreteness about what Althaus-Reid suggests about how we can write inside of the complex labyrinth of possibilities. This is a temporal question. Walking occurs over time. It unites past and present in the movement of bodies. I begin by clarifying what is at stake in walking (and why it matters) for Althaus-Reid. To better understand the dynamics of the *caminata* she proposes, I explore how Althaus-Reid’s walking relates to Ricoeur’s *imaginaire*, and how walking enables Althaus-Reid to form an interpretive community (a ‘we’). From this, I pursue ways that labyrinthine walking discovers that which exceeds narrative orderings of history. I suggest that Althaus-Reid’s use of the metaphor of walking disrupts assumptions that order past, present and future. Walking reshapes the writing of time as a heterotopian liberative praxis. The importance and

<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 2:23-25.

<sup>15</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, personal correspondence with Lesley Orr, undated.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 37. (emphasis original)



innovation of this becomes clear in conversation with two fathers of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez and José María Arguedas.

### Walking in Community

In 1981, Ricoeur sat with Richard Kearney to discuss broad trajectories within Ricoeur's work. During their conversation, Ricoeur explained that "there is no lived reality...which is not already *represented* in some sense."<sup>18</sup> Cultures create and maintain their cultural identities with an "ensemble of symbolic discourses."<sup>19</sup> Everything that is sayable takes shape within an *imaginaire*—or socio-political imagination shared by the community. Yet, he continues insistently, language is not closed. Despite the discursive determinations that structure linguistic possibility, human language stretches toward new articulations that better recognize life and experience. Narrativity, for example, "constructs and deconstructs paradigms of storytelling" as "a perpetual search for new ways of expressing human time."<sup>20</sup> Narrativity and other processes of creativity hold open the pluralities of human discourse. This matters for the being and identity of people and of communities. When an *imaginaire* becomes pathological and alienating, people lose themselves.

According to Ricoeur, when a culture loses its *imaginaire*, it loses its self-understanding. Cultural identity depends on the ability to narrate a shared and cogent story of ourselves and our history. All communities tell stories of the inaugural events around

<sup>18</sup> Richard Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth" in *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

which the community coalesced. These stories install a social memory that legitimates the founding and the continuance of their organizing social structures. These narratives tell us where we fit—as well as where we do not fit. They tell us why we are included—and why we are excluded. In other words, cultures create themselves, while creating their borders, by telling stories of their past.<sup>21</sup>

When Althaus-Reid explains in her dissertation that the *conquista* and the establishment of neo-colonialist structures in the 19th century have “broken the identity of the continent,” she draws on this notion of the *imaginaire* from Ricoeur and blends it with Gutiérrez’s negative definition of identity.<sup>22</sup> Identity here means the opposite of alienation.<sup>23</sup> The conquistadors “brought to our lands a discourse of legitimization of power, and as such, a univocal interpretation of Christianity, and the scriptures.”<sup>24</sup> By aligning the Christian faith with the peculiar forms of culture and civilization comprising European colonialism, the *conquista* alienated and excluded Latin American people from the telling of their own history. “The ego of Europe acted as the centre of interpretation; everything needed to become as it was in Europe, in a process of permanent assimilation or submission.”<sup>25</sup> Latin America and its diverse indigenous communities became discursively invisible, alienated, and subjected. The *conquista* “produced a state of ‘disproportion’ in which the Latin

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 111. “After all, cultures create themselves by telling stories of their own past.”

<sup>22</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation”, 341.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 339. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Entre las Calandrias,” *Páginas* 100 (December 1989): 103.

<sup>24</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 44.

American people live, because, as Ricoeur might say, they do not correspond with themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

Althaus-Reid agrees with Ricoeur about the need to distinguish between the content of a socio-political imagination (the *imaginaire*) and its function. Because an *imaginaire* encompasses all aspects of a culture and its knowledge, it is the condition of possibility for socio-symbolic representation. The content of an *imaginaire* coheres the group and establishes its identity.<sup>27</sup> Yet, this same content either reaffirms or ruptures dominant narratives, which arise from the *imaginaire*. “As reaffirmation, the *imaginaire* operates as an ideology which can positively repeat and represent the founding discourse of a society,” Ricoeur explains.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the *imaginaire* maintains the identity of the culture by representing its foundational symbols. Sometimes, however, these stories become perverted (“usually by monopolistic elites”<sup>29</sup>) and abet the formations of power and particular interests that benefit certain members of the community. In these cases the *imaginaire* becomes “a mystificatory discourse.” Its foundational symbols “serve as lies.”<sup>30</sup>

Over and against this, Ricoeur maintains the possibility of an *imaginaire* of rupture, which he defines as “a discourse of utopia which remains critical of the powers that be out of fidelity to an ‘elsewhere,’ to a society that is ‘not yet.’”<sup>31</sup> A reading of rupture is “produced by the positive role of the imagination of a community, in an ongoing process of

<sup>26</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” 341.

<sup>27</sup> Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth,” 110.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

interpretation of their own faith and everyday reality.”<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur emphasizes that the utopian discourse also easily slides toward pathological forms of mystification. When it does, utopia—like ideology—alienates rather than provides identity. Yet, language constantly shifts. If we allow the manifold possibilities of language to be foreclosed, we limit the possibilities of future action. Likewise, by expanding narrative possibilities, we expand the possibilities of liberative praxis. Ricoeur suggests that if we can “return to the multilayered sedimentations of language,” we can salvage in language what has been left for us “as a deposit of a trace, a thesaurus.”<sup>33</sup>

The *conquista* broke the identity of a continent by narrating the mystifications of an alienating *imaginaire*. What we need, Althaus-Reid argues, are subversive methods of reading that reopen discursive options. We need to discover the plurality of discourse again. In this she repeats a central liberationist claim: “Our answer is: It is a reading *with* our poor (and not *for* them).”<sup>34</sup> We need to read from the illegitimate perspectives of those who are excluded from *conquista* Christianity, especially poor and marginalized indigenous women. In these readings the oppressed will re-find identities for themselves individually and as communities.

Althaus-Reid does not end the statement here. She steps beyond her work with Ricoeur and describes what this sort of subversion feels like. In doing so, she changes the register of knowledge with which to consider the task of reading with the poor. “It must feel like walking alongside the poor on the same road, sharing the same life experiences, observing, judging, acting, and celebrating together. I will call it ‘walking with women-

<sup>32</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 32.

<sup>33</sup> Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth,” 110.

<sup>34</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 32.

serpents’.”<sup>35</sup> We will know if we are succeeding in reading with women serpents not by the structure of knowledge, quality of argument, or evidence presented. Rather, we know in the experience of shared activity. It ought to *feel* like ‘walking alongside the poor on the same road.’ To walk with another suggests that we “at least have a path in common.” It does not, however, collapse our differences. Those with whom we walk are not in our image. For Althaus-Reid in “Walking with Women Serpents” these companions are “women from another culture, [who] have another vision of the world, and a different reality.” When we walk together, we experience meeting across of our differences. “We can then say that to walk together is an expression of solidarity, a sharing experience of the ‘everyday nature of otherness.’”<sup>36</sup>

Shortly before her presentation at the Scottish Churches House, Althaus-Reid had published a critical review of Alistair Kee’s *Marx and the Failure of the Theology of Liberation*. She favored special bonds with those whom she shared life, and Kee was no exception. While he became a lifelong companion, at the time of the review, Kee was her teacher. Given their relationship, the strength of her critique is noteworthy. Althaus-Reid sharply challenges his accounting of Latin American theology of liberation. The book, she says, is inattentive to complex historical and living communities at the heart of liberation theologies. “The beggars of Buenos Aires who developed their own pass-over liturgy, the leader of the dialogical Bible class, the cooks who feed the children of the street, the bishop who goes to a demonstration, the books of Miguez Bonino, the human rights groups, and the student who writes an exegesis about Jeremiah’s political mistakes” represent liberation

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

theology's possibilities.<sup>37</sup> They are the authors of liberation theology. These and other historical communities constitute its purpose; their dialogues with experience, scripture and tradition constitute its substance; their practices of resistance, its spiritual praxis. "To ignore then the communitarian process of theological development, and to confine it to a handful of important people, is a contradiction in itself."<sup>38</sup>

Althaus-Reid argues that Kee misses the true texts of liberation theology by focusing on foundational texts from leaders such as Gutiérrez or Segundo, while excluding the historical praxis of Latin American communities. The *raison d'être* of liberation theologies is to return voice to the voiceless and identity to the alienated. Drawing on the broad sense of text that she shares with Ricoeur, Althaus-Reid insists that the texts of liberation theology span beyond the words that make it into any genre of print. The communities that author the texts of liberation theologies may not be able to read or write at all, much less in academically recognizable languages.<sup>39</sup> Yet, it is their lives and actions that produce liberationist theological texts. It is *with them* that we must walk. Rather than rendering the complex work of communities silently invisible by focusing exclusively on the texts of Gutiérrez or Bonino, we need a diachronic engagement with the complex and historical 'we' that comprises liberation theology. This 'we' includes scholars, but also the "rich community that nurtures, criticizes or even ignores them when irrelevant."<sup>40</sup> The dialogical engagement

<sup>37</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "A Theology of Liberation and the Conflict of Criticism," *International Review of Mission* 80, no. 319-320 (1991): 441.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

of oppressed communities with the text of the Bible opens the possibility of “an originally de-constructive theology.”<sup>41</sup> Althaus-Reid looks to Jesus to support her argument.

“How do you read?” is a permanent question that Jesus brings to the people,” Althaus-Reid writes.<sup>42</sup> His inquiry provokes a range of responses and catalyzes a wealth of dialogue. Notably, irrespective of whether those Jesus encounters accept or oppose his word, they converse with him. In other words, Jesus and the people dialogue. They call on their own experiences, emotions, and desires to engage with his stories and ideas. Jesus “challenges traditional interpretations which are dead, that is immobile, and that do not allow the production of meaning between the scriptures and the readers.”<sup>43</sup> Through their dialogue, Jesus’s teachings gain meaning. The mutuality of the encounter ensures that this meaning shifts and varies depending on the context and person, but the experience is the same: the interaction of the people with the word of God transforms how they see themselves, each other, society, God, and politics. This, Althaus-Reid proposes, is the dialogic role of the messiah.<sup>44</sup> With Jesus, the world changes. “Jesus *became* a messiah walking with poor women, in a dialogical process of popular conscientization.”<sup>45</sup>

The mutuality of the encounter with Jesus contrasts sharply with the monological demands placed by Herod, she continues. While Jesus calls forth a ‘we’, Herod demands (and enforces) respect for his ‘I’. Herod represents colonizing patriarchy and its reach into

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 440. Althaus-Reid is in conversation with Derrida. Her attentiveness to the dynamics of deconstruction persists across her writing, though she experiments in varying ways with how to write these dynamics.

<sup>42</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents”, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 37. (emphasis original)

gender, racial, economic, and political oppression. "His discourse was univocal, fixed."<sup>46</sup> While people encounter themselves in dialogue with Jesus, in Herod they find only alienation and violence. This appears as a contrast in types of interpellation. In their encounter, Jesus gains his identity as messiah and the people come to recognize themselves as God sees them. Jesus hails them (and us) in the particular and unique ways that we are created to be. This is the "interpellative nature of the word of God, which...permanently opens a project of being in the world, according to our historical circumstances."<sup>47</sup>

Althaus-Reid largely follows Althusser in her understanding of interpellation as the process by which social formations create the identities that serve their purposes.<sup>48</sup> Though socially necessary, the identities created are neither natural nor neutral. Oppressive systems (re)produce the identities and relationships that they need.<sup>49</sup> These identities, with their patterns of relating, alienate us from ourselves. Colonialism, for instance, interpellates the indigenous not with their historical identity, but as colonized in relationship to the colonizer. We live under Herod's rule, and we almost always are hailed with identities crafted for the purposes of power and legitimacy. These are illusions of identities, lies and misrepresentations. Rather than calling us to ourselves, interpellation of this sort alienates us.

Yet, it is also the case that interpellation also can be transformative in the best sense of the word. The interpellative nature of the word of God reveals us as we are created to be,

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>48</sup> Althaus-Reid emphasizes this danger in a later summary of Althusser's position: "Althusser has argued that ideologies are imaginary constructions which give identity to an individual at the same time as they produce a mechanism of false recognition of the individual in her social position (Althusser 1971: 163)." Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> They also reproduce the roles that these identities and relationships fill.



rather than as we are. The people interpret Jesus. In the process, Jesus interprets the people. Althaus-Reid marks this as the life-giving gospel for hermeneutics. Put simply: “the text that we interpret, also works interpreting ourselves.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus became messiah in dialogue with the people. The people became the people of God with Jesus. Only through the mutual encounter of their dialogue – the calling forth of a ‘we’ – did either come to be.

It is important to recognize the diverse community that ‘we’ comprises, as well as how it continues to occur. This is what Kee fails to do. By focusing only on the texts of liberationist ‘leaders,’ his writing cannot join with the ‘we’ that Jesus calls forth as liberationist communities. Without being part of that ‘we,’ Kee’s text cannot access the liberative substance of the dialogue. As he walked, Jesus dialogued with ordinary people doing the ordinary work of living against the odds. Jesus is one that embraces those whose voices are excluded and silenced by the world. Liberation theology occurs as we walk with those whose voices are excluded and silenced by the world. To understand it, we must likewise enter into dialogue with the homeless of our cities, the cooks who feed children who need food, the human rights groups, and the students who expose the corruptions of power in the bible.<sup>51</sup> Walking together makes liberative knowledge possible.

Althaus-Reid is clear in the book review of Kee, as she is in “Walking with Women Serpents,” that the embrace of a liberationist ‘we’ is a historical activity. In this, she makes a quintessentially liberationist claim. According to Gutiérrez’s classic formulation: liberation theologies reflect critically on historical praxis in order to effect transformation in the world. To refuse today’s oppressions, all of us, but especially the oppressed, must recognize the dynamics of history that got us here. We also must recognize our agency to shape where

<sup>50</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 32.

<sup>51</sup> Althaus-Reid, “A Theology of Liberation and the Conflict of Criticism,” 441.

we go next. Althaus-Reid follows with another dimension. We must disrupt the assumed linearity of time. We need to walk with those whose lives are past, yet whose suffering continues, as well as those whose lives are not yet, but whose suffering has already begun. She forms a hermeneutical 'we' across time: a proposal that appears as a praxis of historical solidarity.

By walking together, Althaus-Reid dialogues "with women who are alive and with women who are long dead."<sup>52</sup> This cross-temporal 'we' makes visible persistent oppressions at the peripheries of history. The excluded, oppressed, indigenous, indecent women from across Latin America are still here and still excluded from theology—but not from dialogue with Jesus. These women carry with them different societies, religions, experiences and languages from each other, as well as from Althaus-Reid, you, or me. Some of these women oppressed, killed, or sought to erase the memories of those with whom they now walk—a shameful violence that we certainly continue today. Walking together does not flatten the complexity of different lives, places, or times. Nor does it make us 'belong' together according to the structures of the world or history. Yet we who walk together, worship; we who walk together, do theology. Walking together recognizes that 'we' are *all still here*. It makes critical knowledge arising from our interactions possible, and takes seriously that we have something to learn from one another. As Althaus-Reid insists, the women serpents have something important to say to theology, and we need to listen. We need to be in solidarity with the excluded of and across history.

We have arrived at a key moment in the understanding of walking, as I develop it here in conversation with Althaus-Reid. Walking names a temporal, as well as a spatial, activity. Solidarity is most commonly thought in spatial terms. Well-rehearsed languages of

<sup>52</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Walking with Women Serpents," 33.

margins and borders spatialize topographies of oppressions and give us images of standing with others in the midst of suffering. For instance, as we place ourselves and others on these maps, those of us in privileged places recognize our social location in order to learn to read in solidarity with those of us who live in the margins, “from” a position of marginality. The metaphor of doing theology from the “undersides” of history similarly emphasizes the spatial context of historical experience and activity. Yet, the continuing suffering within the peripheries of past, present, and future is as hermeneutically important to liberative praxis as the geopolitical and economic margins of today. Indeed, one cannot be separated from the other. We need to attend to the praxis of marginalized communities in history, as we refuse the territorializations of oppression today.

We likewise need to recognize that resistance occurs at various times in various places. Pointing to Dussel and Galeano, Althaus-Reid notes that though key events such as the Guerrilla movement and the Second Vatican Council are pivotal for their role as “accelerators of a new historical moment for our continent,” liberation theologies have taken shape throughout history. “Popular history, reflected by drama, myths and dances (the language of the oppressed) shows the resistance of the people to being assimilated into a dehumanizing structure.”<sup>53</sup> By moving through the peripheries of time, we can enter into the processes of liberative knowledge that saturate the silenced peripheries of history throughout time.

Diverse communities of women still walk theological roads that need traversing. We can refuse to acquiesce to the determinism of linear time. The women who were conquered in the colonization of Latin America exist in the peripheries of the past, but also the peripheries of the future. They remain excluded from dominant languages of history. In

<sup>53</sup> Althaus-Reid, “A Theology of Liberation and the Conflict of Criticism,” 439-440.

“Walking with Women Serpents,” Althaus-Reid proposes that although “no one ever gave them a voice in our theology,”<sup>54</sup> it is not too late to do so. If these women find opportunity to speak, they can return to time and reorder liberative knowledge (meaning reflection + action) of historical *and* contemporary struggles. Like a camel who deviates from the proper path for her love for strangers, Althaus-Reid treks to walk with these women of Latin America. She joins them in the hope that their speech will dialogue and critique the theology of those of us who remain on the authorized and authorizing road of colonial Christianity.

### Excesses of History

“We need to have a sense of the meaningfulness of our past, if our projections into the future are not to be empty utopias,” Ricoeur muses at the beginning of one of his conversations with Kearney.<sup>55</sup> The narratives with which we order the activities of passed times preserve past meaning as a horizon of possibilities for future meaning and action. By telling and retelling stories of the past in terms of a certain ordering, we acquire (and maintain) an identity in the present and future. When Kearney raises the displacements of Joyce and Beckett as potential counter-examples, Ricoeur responds unequivocally: “the question of narrativity, no matter how modernist or avant-garde, cannot be separated from the problem of order.”<sup>56</sup> Those writers who seek to displace the authorial power to order cannot but still invite readers into the very certain, if peculiar, ordering that binds their writing. Order is constitutive of narrative, and because of this order, the narratives bond communities and unite time.

<sup>54</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 32.

<sup>55</sup> Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth,” 103.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

Yet, the stories that we tell are far more ordered than our lives or experience. Lives exceed narrative. Always. Always. This is as true of lives lived in years gone by, as it is of lives today—and it will be so with lives still to come. In Ricoeur’s terms, there always is and always will be an excess of order in our narratives; he finds both good and bad in this disjunction between narrative order and life’s complexities. The problems arise when narrative in any form is taken for sufficient and complete truth. But, the excesses that necessarily overflow narrative’s ordering energize its creativity. The excesses ensure that we must constantly write new narratives with different ways of telling to try to capture a bit of what could not otherwise be said. The excesses insistently remind us to seek discourse that is plural and open. They challenge us to find new ways of writing and new modes of narration in relationship with people across time and space. Ricoeur’s discussion of ideology picks up on these dynamics.

Ricoeur presents a complex view on ideology that characterizes it as intrinsically neither good nor bad. At its core, Ricoeur writes, “ideology has one fundamental function: to pattern, to consolidate, to provide order to the course of action.”<sup>57</sup> Ideology establishes a narrative that fosters the experience of a shared history.<sup>58</sup> It enables a group “to represent and realize” itself as a cohesive group with a shared system of meaning that originates in particular actions with particular meaning.<sup>59</sup> In this way, ideology becomes ‘mobilizing.’ It diffuses the moment of the community’s origin into the future, allowing communities to incorporate into their membership people who were not immediately present for the

<sup>57</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia” in *Text to Action*, 310.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Science and Ideology” in *Text to Action*, 242.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

founding events. By reflecting the interpretive history upon which a group is founded, an ideology justifies the continuing existence of particular authority and social structures.

Moreover, ideology fuels a community's social praxis by presenting a simplifying (codified) view both on the nature of the group and, more broadly, on history and the world in general. In other words, ideology "mediate[s] not only the memory of founding acts but systems of thought."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Ricoeur writes, "we think *from* it rather than about it."<sup>61</sup> Ideology surrounds us; it operates "behind our backs, rather than...before our eyes."<sup>62</sup> We live *within* ideological interpretive codes. As with the labyrinth of the previous chapter, there can be no external view, map, or design. This is why Ricoeur suggests that it is not that one desires authority, but rather that we desire *within* a system of authority. In order to see alternatives to dominant systems of authority, we must change the spaces *in which* we think.

Ideology's consolidating and conserving dynamic allows the formation of communities and their praxis over time by propagating shared narratives of origins and belonging. As is true with all narrative, however, there always are real experiences and realities that cannot be assimilated. When ideology becomes closed—that is, when ideology ceases to be critically engaged with the excesses and absences of its systems of thought—it becomes pathological. This gets tricky: we cannot see the boundaries of our ideology, because we live and think within it. Ideology often presents the local view as not only as representative of the whole, but *as the whole* of lived possibility. When it becomes closed in

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 244. (emphasis mine)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

this way, it does not so much provide mechanisms of belonging, but rather mechanisms of alienating those whom it excludes.

Because ideology conserves and underwrites the praxis of a community in relation to a particular system of authority, its excesses have the potential to threaten the security of those who seek to dominate. These excesses open opportunities for rupture. In her dissertation's discussion of Ricoeur's concept of ideology, Althaus-Reid phrases the tension with respect to the ideology of Christianity: "In this distinction from Ricoeur, we find the basis of the movement of emancipation of consciousness.... Christianity can be oppressive when it is treated as a "closed" paradigm, which cannot be confronted with new challenges. However, a Christianity opened to receive criticism becomes creative, and thus able to be a liberative force."<sup>63</sup>

I am interested in these excesses, and the demands that the excess makes on our practices of writing theology. Across her texts, Althaus-Reid experiments with writing that will push readers into textual spaces where the text itself encourages experiences of what overflows the text's own narrative ordering. This is evident in her suggestion that a primary standard for evaluating success is that it should "feel" like walking with women serpents. Althaus-Reid welcomes the group at the Scottish Churches House into a praxis of solidarity that changes the temporal and spatial path of knowing, more than she argues a thesis. I imagine the hurricane blowing into the room that Lesley Orr remembers being the *experience* of this shift. If you allow me a moment to return to the complex labyrinth of the previous study, I will draw a more tangible example from which to think about writing into the excesses of narrative order.

<sup>63</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 278.

This sort of labyrinth, recall, took shape in conversation with Umberto Eco's notion of the complex rhizomatic labyrinth and Borges' story of "The Garden of Forking Paths." Differing from a simple labyrinth (e.g. the labyrinth at Crete) or a maze (e.g. the mazes of Renaissance garden design), the rhizomatic labyrinth describes an infinite network of shifting possibilities that take shape as we move through its corridors. Our view on the labyrinth can only be local and internal. That is, we only know a complex labyrinth locally, from the inside as we walk through it. Our movement catalyzes interconnections that will never be experienced again in the same way. The complex labyrinth does not propose a discrete path or teleological goal. It changes. The labyrinth refigures over and across time, just as it can be refigured in all of its dimensions. In Eco's words: "it is dismountable, reversible, and susceptible to continual modifications."<sup>64</sup>

Following Ricoeur, the interpretive corridors that open in labyrinthine writing are not arbitrary. The labor of writing and the narratives this labor inscribe instantiate a certain order. Yet to write a labyrinth is to offer invitations into a peculiarly unstable narrative. Divorced from the author by distanciation, labyrinths expand toward the excesses of creative possibility. The experience of walking (and rewalking) possible combinations of paths restructures the labyrinthine narrative and any order that it might suggest. Complex labyrinths infinitely re-configure themselves. Nor does a labyrinth of this sort judge or give meaning to various permutations. Its dynamic structure does not differentiate between right and wrong, licit or illicit, or decent or indecent readings. Knowledge and meaning depend on the paths one takes and, importantly, whom one encounters along the way. Within a labyrinth, narrative creativity occurs in the consecutive placement of our feet. Step by step we move through corridors that shift to become our path, but also reshape in

<sup>64</sup> Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.



response to our path. The patterns of our steps can reorder the narration of history and thereby to “re-collect our horizon of possibilities in a resolute and responsible manner.”<sup>65</sup>

Imagine the journey through a complex labyrinth as a metaphor for time. The turns of the labyrinthine corridors ‘blind’ us to what we just passed. We are left with memories that can never be relived. The labyrinth constantly shifts in relation to our experience of it. Even if we perfectly retrace our steps, our memories ensure that we will never return to find the same view. Likewise, what lies ahead is blocked. We have only our intuition of the future and trust in the path illuminated by learning from our past steps to guide us. A labyrinth only exists as a labyrinth when we move. It solidifies as labyrinthine in the experience of the shifting networks of a particular path. To stay within the labyrinth, we must keep moving. If we stand still, not only does the partial and fleeting quality of our local view become encompassing, paths no longer shift and corridors no longer open. When we stop moving, the labyrinth freezes. Labyrinthine writing requires a commitment to never be content with a singular narrative and the order it provides. Instead, labyrinthine writing must constantly encourage what exceeds the narrative’s order by welcoming the unruly experiences of readers in traversing the text.

Shifting to a temporal frame from a spatial one allows us to consider how Boff’s headlights constrain the future horizon for theology by the way in which they illuminate the horizon of tradition. His writing of theological tradition through a correspondence of correspondence hermeneutical model insists on a singular way of ordering the past, though the content can and does shift over time—an order that he, as the writing theologian, has a special authority to discern and protect. With good intentions, Boff let the knowledge he gained through his experiences with poor communities order his articulation of theological

<sup>65</sup> Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth,” 104.

tradition. He writes so that readers will follow his road from the past into the future. He does so *for* readers *on behalf of* the communities with whom his feet were on the ground, rather than *with* the historical communities to which he belonged and also those that would arise in the future. In Freire's terms, Boff's writing evidences "a narration sickness."<sup>66</sup> When this happens texts become "detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words become emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity."<sup>67</sup>

Freire does not mince words: to constrain another's activity of learning is, without exception, an act of violence. "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects."<sup>68</sup> Violence never ends violence. Hierarchy (even strategic uses of hierarchy) cannot disrupt authoritarianism. Liberation depends on doing things differently. Only when we engage with the world, each other, and knowledge with horizontal mutuality, will we achieve transforming knowledge.

Again, the *experience* of transforming knowledge comes to the fore here. Freire admits the ease with which even those deeply committed to the struggles for liberation succumb to narration sickness. Liberationists can—and too often do—contribute to oppression. This is why we must insist over and over again that: "one does not liberate people by alienating them."<sup>69</sup> The same ideas—indeed, the same words—written as a praxis

<sup>66</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2005), 71.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

of loving solidarity will effect something markedly different than those same words deposited for someone's benefit.

Though each step is individual, no one walks labyrinths alone. We encounter others walking the labyrinth, some of whom become old and new companions. Ricoeur and Althaus-Reid join Freire in marking that the identity and agency of oppressed communities are at stake in how we narrate our journey through time. Indeed, liberation theologies, broadly construed, recognize a need to retell history from its underside. How liberationists do so differs however. Althaus-Reid opens the possibility for us to walk the peripheries of time by walking with Others through the past, present, and future. The narratives that result from this praxis of walking re-order time and therewith the possibilities it holds forth.

#### Paths toward Heterotopia

From the opening story of Leslie Orr's memory of Althaus-Reid's 'coming out' presentation and Althaus-Reid's critique of her teacher and close friend, Alistair Kee, through Ricoeur's articulation of his interpretation theory in conversation with his student and friend, Richard Kearney, the materials with which I have been primarily engaging in this chapter are those that expose their basis in friendships, conversations, and dialogues. Other sources could have been chosen, but here I *want* to write into the fabric of my text that no one walks labyrinths alone.

I turn now to enter into the space of a story that is told about the origins of Latin American liberation theology, one that Althaus-Reid cites in her dissertation. It is a story that begins at an impactful meeting and the resulting friendship of Gustavo Gutiérrez and José María Arguedas. Near to the end of his life, Arguedas encountered the text of a talk by the young Peruvian priest. Resonating powerfully with the commitments he found in

Gutiérrez's words, Arguedas contacted him for further conversation. The relationship that followed influenced Gutiérrez's theology, shaping what would come to be the course of liberation theologies. The space opened by their relationship also reveals the importance to liberationist writing of how we imagine time—and our journey through it—differently.

Arguedas spent his life stretching, pulling, and breaking the Spanish language. He sought to write within and across the *huayco* (abyss) between Spanish-speaking lives and the lives of Peru's indigenous, poor, and oppressed lives by working on the materials of language. He set as a task writing the excesses of lives and events for which Spanish does not offer space: "To realize oneself, to translate oneself, to transform a seemingly alien language into a legitimate and diaphanous torrent, to communicate to the almost foreign language the stuff of which our spirit is made: that is the hard, the difficult question."<sup>70</sup>

Arguedas ruptures Spanish with Quechua and multiplies the languages by which the events of the past can be written. He refigures societal possibilities by breaking Spanish and its colonizing univocity. This leads to truly radical—and, I add, remarkably beautiful—liberationist writing.

Arguedas' novels tell stories of indigenous Peruvians through and across the experience and effects Spanish colonization. Arguedas was of Spanish descent, but raised speaking Quechua. After his mother's death, his father entrusted him to the care of servants while he travelled Peru fulfilling his role as a judge. Arguedas thus moved between two languages that symbolize two disparate worlds, one rich and one poor. He wrote years later that he had been "tossed over the wall" as a child, to live in a world that Spanish can see

<sup>70</sup> José Maria Arguedas, "The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru" in *Yawar Fiesta* trans. by Frances Horning Barraclough (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), xviii.

only from a distance, the world that spoke Quechua.<sup>71</sup> As he experienced first-hand the colonial ordering of two disparate worlds of experience, he became keenly aware of the distance between lives lived in Spanish and those lived in Quechua. The colonizing *imaginaire* represented in Spanish excludes Quechua history, and the humanity and experience of Quechua speakers exceed Spanish altogether.

How does one write to give voice to the voiceless? Indigenous memories translated into the language of the colonizers become colonized. They cease to be indigenous. In other words, translation colonizes. How does one write so as to tell a history that language itself denies? In an article included by way of prologue to his first novel *Yawar Fiesta*, Arguedas expands on this struggle to realize indigenous lives through writing. “What language should the indians be made to speak in literature?” he asks.<sup>72</sup> What language could he use “to describe the life of those villages, to describe it in such a way that its pulse would never be forgotten?”<sup>73</sup> Finding a way to write these lives became an existential imperative. “What other kind of literature could a man born and brought up in the interior villages write then, and even now?”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> “They had been transformed into a corralled nation (isolated in order to be better and more easily managed) about which only those who had walled it in spoke, while viewing it from a distance with repugnance or curiosity. But oppressively isolating walls do not extinguish the light of human reason . . . nor do they dam up the springs of love from which art flows. Inside the oppressive isolating wall, the Quechua people, rather archaized and getting along by dissembling, went on conceiving ideas, creating songs and myths. And we know very well that the walls isolating nations are never completely isolating. As for me – they tossed me over that wall for a time when I was a child.” José María Arguedas quoted by Adriana Michèle Campos Johnson, “Narratives and Deep Histories: Freyre, Arguedas, Roa Bastos, Rulfo” in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Sara Castro-Klaren (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 465.

<sup>72</sup> Arguedas, “The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru,” xix.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

Accordingly, Arguedas developed a sort of strange Spanish that incorporates elements of Quechua—at times its spirit, desires, struggles, rhythms, and words. He pulled apart ruptures in the colonial ideology, so that his novels would project a world where readers can recognize the humanity of Quechua-speaking lives, even in the midst of the colonial structures that render these lives broken, alienated, and invisible. “There is a case, a real case,” he writes, “in which the man from those regions, feeling ill at ease with the Spanish he has inherited, sees the need to use it as a raw material that he may modify, taking from and adding to it, until he transforms it into his own means of expression.”<sup>75</sup> Arguedas was successful. Few authors transformed the possibilities of cultural imagination to the extent of his writing. Within Arguedas’ texts, the actions and experiences – in other words the history – of the colonized and oppressed peoples of Peru become recognizable.

Arguedas reworks the language available to him into a form that can narrate history differently. Using Ricoeur’s words, he found a way to let the *imaginaire* function to rupture by finding that “what is lost in experience is often salvaged in language, sedimented as a deposit of traces, as a thesaurus.”<sup>76</sup> He makes space in language and narrative to critique colonial ideology by use of the past. His strange Spanish recognizes indigenous Peruvians in its telling of history. By returning them to history, it opens possibilities for the future. Yet, as Arguedas is very aware, it does so painfully and tenuously: “the Indians do not speak that Spanish, not with Spanish speakers, and much less among themselves. It is a fiction. The Indians speak in Quechua.”<sup>77</sup> Arguedas’ texts stretch the language he has available to him through the indigenous excess of past lives, experience, and myth. In doing so, he presents a

<sup>75</sup> Arguedas, “The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru,” xvii.

<sup>76</sup> Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth,” 110

<sup>77</sup> Arguedas, “The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru,” xix.

fiction that serves a transitional purpose, but one that also is potentially radically transformative.

Arguedas does not write the speech of indigenous or decolonized Peru. He opens the door to such speech becoming possible. If it does indeed become real, it will occur beyond him, in a future that he, as the *mestizo* bilingual author, cannot access. His language is a temporary path that must itself be overcome in the overcoming of oppression. This is, as he characterizes it, “the bilingual artist’s Way of the Cross.”<sup>78</sup> Both the writer and the writing move toward crucifixion. Metaphorically and literally, Arguedas writes toward death.

The unruly confusion of real life, bodies with textual, narrative struggles, hopes, and pains marks Arguedas’ writing both as novelist and ethnographer. His final novel, *The Fox from Up Above and The Fox from Down Below*, pushes to a climax of the confusion. Mixing diary, myth, history, and fictional narrative, the story moves through complex contemplations of narration/writing, identity, experience, and social formation. Beginning and ending with diary passages meditating on suicide, the text finally ends with an announcement that the suicidal act must and will be done: “I am sure that it is by now the only spark I can strike. And I am compelled to wait for I don’t know how many days in order to do it.”<sup>79</sup> Leaving behind a packet of notes with directions to publish the novel and to produce an affordable Peruvian edition of *Todas las Sangres*, Arguedas twice shot himself in his university office. I set aside the complex question of whether and how Arguedas’

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>79</sup> Arguedas, *The Fox from Above, The Fox from Below*, trans. by Frances Horning Barraclough, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press: 2000), 260. Alberto Moreiras goes so far as to suggest that Arguedas “signed the end of the book with two bullets.” Alberto Moreiras, “The End of Magical Realism: José María Arguedas’ Passionate Signifier” in *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 201.

psychological struggles relate to his writing to emphasize solely the interstice. In this act, in both text and life, the writer died.

Gutiérrez and Arguedas met in the process of Arguedas' last novel. Arguedas had encountered a talk given by Gutiérrez and become intrigued by the then chaplain. As Arguedas wrote to Gutiérrez: "Reading the words you wrote in Chimbote and having had a chance to be with you strengthened my faith in a future which cannot fail me. How marvelous that we understand and see each other."<sup>80</sup> Ten years after Arguedas' death, Gutiérrez offered his own memory of their meeting:

I met Arguedas in the last year and half of his life. José María was in Chimbote preparing his last work and had a chance to read a talk that I had given in Chimbote on liberation theology. That was the reason of the contact we had a few weeks later in Lima. In that first meeting the conversation revolved almost entirely around the meaning of a God who liberates for indigenous Peruvians, for the poor of our country, and for himself."<sup>81</sup>

"I believe José María was right," Gutiérrez notes.<sup>82</sup> Arguedas interrupted the harms of Spanish colonialism by stretching the languages he had available to tell the histories and myths of the past. In doing so, he opened narrative space to expose and call into question colonial ideology from within the dominant *imaginaire*. "The God of the oppressors, of those who pillage and kill people, is not the God of the poor, not the same God at all."<sup>83</sup> The God of the poor is the God that liberates and in whom hope for the future abides.

Both Arguedas and Gutiérrez encourage the inclusion of oppressed voices within narratives that otherwise exclude them. Arguedas writes a strange fiction of a language as a

<sup>80</sup> Arguedas quoted by Curt Cadorette, *From the Heart of the People: The Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Oak Park: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988), 72.

<sup>81</sup> Luis Peirano, "Entrevista con Gustavo Gutiérrez", *Quehacer* (March 1980): 115 quoted by Cadorette, *From the Heart of the people*, 70.

<sup>82</sup> Peirano quoted by Cadorette, *From the Heart of the People*, 75.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*



praxis by which to narrate history, myth, and experience in a way that excluded people will find themselves included. He writes to put the *indio* back in time. Gutiérrez, on the other hand, turns his attention toward the future and toward utopia. As he summarizes in *Theology of Liberation*, utopia subverts the current order by offering a historical plan for a qualitatively different society and relations. The future of a new historical cycle denounces the suffering of the past and present. Raymond Bautista Aguas is right to clarify that utopia is at the heart of Gutiérrez's theology.<sup>84</sup> While Arguedas' struggled to open different possibilities by alternative ways of writing the past, Gutiérrez projects an alternative vision of the future. Gutiérrez encourages us to imagine the utopian vision of a new society and new humanity under the reign of God. Liberation theology supports the processes by which the oppressed people of Latin America can imagine and articulate alternative futures for themselves. Utopia changes the orientation and substance by which to evaluate ideological narratives. For Gutiérrez, it does not entail primarily a reworking of how we write theology. This makes it comparatively brief to set forth.

In Gutiérrez's theology, the project of utopia connects Christian faith with political action and the coming of the Kingdom of God with today's struggles. Indeed, utopian narrative orders his understanding of the task and work of liberation theology. Gutiérrez explains that utopia denounces the past as it announces a different future. By repudiating with revolutionary force the dehumanizing suffering of current experience with a vision of another world, "utopia moves forward; it is a projection into the future, a dynamic and mobilizing factor in history."<sup>85</sup> With reference to Ricoeur, Gutiérrez cautions that the

<sup>84</sup> Raymond Bautista Aguas, "Relating Faith and Political Action: Utopia in the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez" (PhD Thesis, Northwestern University, 2007).

<sup>85</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* trans. and ed. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 233.

rejection implied by utopian denunciations of the current situation are only authentic when “it is made within the very act of creating more human living conditions—with the risks that this commitment implies today.”<sup>86</sup>

The motion between denunciation and annunciation occurs in praxis. Utopia, if it is not pathological must lead to action in the present. The image of a better future pushes toward new explanations for the insufficiencies of today’s social reality and demands that these explanations appear recognizably intelligible. Against notions of utopian irrationality, Gutiérrez insists that utopia transforms knowledge by recasting rational possibility. Utopia itself is thoroughly and recognizably rational: it occurs in today’s language and imaginary. While Arguedas makes Spanish strange enough to subvert and extend what can be said of the past, Gutiérrez juxtaposes an insistent future that renders present experiences of oppression visible and thinkable.

In their praxis of re-narrating the possibilities of time, both Arguedas and Gutiérrez transform the possibilities of theology in essential and life-giving ways. Yet, both approaches collapse the distance of time in the ways that they write—either past (Arguedas) or future (Gutiérrez) from ‘now’ (whenever the now to which the writing *or* reading might belong). Rather than collapse the distance, we need to traverse it. We need to “walk” the peripheries of time, in the same sense that theological writing does well to open the labyrinthine spaces. It helps here to return to Ricoeur one final time.

Distanciation appears at the heart of Ricoeur’s understanding of ideology in much the same way as it appears in his consideration of writing. The central problem of ideology, like that of writing, is the communication of meaning across temporal (and spatial) distance. Distanciation enables the multiplicities of historical narrative, in the same way that

<sup>86</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 234.

distanciation enables the hermeneutical freedom of readers. Ideology traverses the distance between the founding events of a community and the social memories a social group propagates in order to mediate and justify the community, its praxis, and its structure of authority. Our belonging to a group dialectically relates to the distance between us and the events and conditions with which the group formed. In Ricoeur's words, ideology is "a function of the distance that separates the social memory from an inaugural event that must nevertheless be repeated."<sup>87</sup>

As with writing, the distance itself is constitutive. To enable cohesion and shared meaning across this distance, ideology codifies an interpretive representation of the group that traverses the temporal gap in the same way that writing fixates speech to enable the communication of meaning across time. We need what Ricoeur calls a positive distancing: "*a consciousness exposed to the efficacy of history can understand only under the condition of distance.*"<sup>88</sup> The distance between ourselves and the past allows us to constitute and consider historical events with "a relative autonomy," even as we are affected by the ideology created in other tellings of the same events.<sup>89</sup> Because of distance, we can recognize what exceeds the narrative and call it to account. In Althaus-Reid's words: "The confrontation of the memory of a founding act (as in Exodus) is then contrasted with the history of the effects transmitted through people's experiences in a critical way."<sup>90</sup>

This is why, to borrow Ricoeur's words, "nothing is more necessary today than...to carry on with patience the endless work of distancing and renewing our historical

<sup>87</sup> Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology," 242.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 260. (emphasis original)

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 279.

substance.”<sup>91</sup> The work is not once and for all, but must be carried on with patience over and over again. We constantly re/produce ideological narratives as we re/tell the stories of our communities. Indeed, we constantly re/produce ideological narratives when we write. We need to attend to how we write the narratives that will establish the ideology in which we think and desire. When the [temporal] distances that ideology traverses collapse in our writing, we efface the hermeneutical processes that re/produce ideology both for ourselves as writers and for readers.

The collapse of distance makes troubling demands on writers and readers. In Arguedas’ case there was but one spark left to strike. The past and present became tightly linked. The past has to end—to be no more—in order for the present to change. The “Way of the Cross” for the bilingual author and ‘his fiction’ takes literal as well as metaphoric form; it appears as praxis. When Arguedas shot himself, his act set his writing and its interpretation free in the hope of opening space for new writing, new language, even perhaps a new *imaginaire*. “Perhaps with me one historical cycle draws to a close and another begins in Peru, with all that this represents,”<sup>92</sup> he writes. Yet, by denying his place in the future, Arguedas effaced the distance his writing continues to traverse. He foreclosed his own interpretive freedom. For this reason, his is writing toward death. It kills the writer to make space for others. This is a role that should be reserved only for Jesus as the word of God.

Gutiérrez, on the other hand, sets a demand that is troubling in a different sense. As he carefully and repetitively insists, utopian vision must always and everywhere be subject to radical critique and revision from the perspective of oppressed communities. Otherwise, it risks ossifying the utopian narrative. When this happens, utopia can itself be used to

<sup>91</sup> Ricoeur, “Science and Ideology,” 262.

<sup>92</sup> Arguedas, *The Fox from Above, The Fox from Below*, 259.

legitimize today's suffering and oppressive structures on the basis of a better future. Thus, liberation theology occurs only in the midst of community and church as a mode of praxis; utopia must never be divorced from the experiences of life.

Yet, in practice, it is difficult to discern whether lived experience requires that we recast utopian vision, or whether a utopian vision calls us to account for the structures in which we live. It is all too easy for a frozen utopia to take priority over the incremental messiness of experiential change in authority, hierarchy, or power. This is especially the case given that the nature of ideology as such entails that what we must critique informs not only the content of our actions, but our way of thinking about those acts. Gutiérrez's insistence on the rationality of utopia and the knowledge it illuminates collapses the distance between what will be knowable with different structures of knowledge in the future and what is known today. Utopian knowledge articulated in the language of today's ideology becomes domesticated. When the structure in which we think continues to (invisibly) shape how we think without critique, we have not and will not challenge ideology. As a result (and as Althaus-Reid emphasizes), the exclusions of women, sexuality, and race continue to plague liberation theologies.

Distanciation separates a text from its author and its readers. Distanciation also separates ideology from its founding events, narrative from the experiences it represents, and what can be known today from what will be possible tomorrow. With Arguedas, we need to stretch and expand the languages with which we tell history and memory. As he discerns, this requires different ways of writing. With Gutiérrez, we need to let utopian promise illuminate the insufficiencies of today. But this too means attending to how we write. To again echo Ricoeur's words to Kearney: "It is not that *we* are without utopia, we

are without *paths* to utopia.”<sup>93</sup> We need to attend to what we can do today that traverses the distances of time without collapsing their distances. As Borges writes: “Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen.”<sup>94</sup>

When Althaus-Reid writes theology by walking with those from in and beyond the valley of Mexico while also conversing with indigenous women of the Andes, she walks with diverse communities of women into and through the excluded peripheries of time without collapsing past or future into the present. This illuminates the possibility of heterotopian writing. Embracing distanciación frees us to create strange encounters that manifest similarly to what Foucault calls heterotopias. Distinct from utopia, “heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.”<sup>95</sup> Complex labyrinths can foster these strange moments, but there are other shapes to be found as well. When we walk freely through infinitely shifting corridors, we encounter strange combinations that expose what exceeds the possibilities of our narratives and language. Heterotopias expose the illusions of ideological closure and function as an *imaginaire* of rupture. How we write time matters.

<sup>93</sup> Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth,” 112. (emphasis original)

<sup>94</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths” in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 20.

<sup>95</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xviii.

### Walking Illegitimately

“We are used to a universal reading of the Scriptures,” Althaus-Reid sighs. Theology is full of scholars and preachers who seek understanding “for all humanity.”<sup>96</sup> Their scholarship sounds legitimate. Indeed, it *is* legitimate. These scholars and preachers hold the keys to legitimacy, letting each other through the door. “Legitimization is the instrument in support of patriarchal ideologies, inside and outside of the churches.”<sup>97</sup> Legitimization surveys, clears, paves, and patrols the road to ‘universal well-being’ according to European, white [...] male interests. Perniciously, universal readings also deceive us into forgetting the diverse perspectives of vast numbers of people whom universal reading excludes—even when an excluded perspective is our own. Rather than this legitimacy, Althaus-Reid suggests illegitimacy and subversion. In place of a “legitimately” univocal discourse in the style of Herod, we need plurality in our narratives of the past and present. There are always more and other paths that need walking. There are always other *Others* to be met along the way. She moves toward dialogue and solidarity across difference, not sameness or simplicity. She creates strange combinations that shift narrative orders.

Althaus-Reid asks: “these women, these Mayas, Incas, Coyas, these Zapotecas, how do we read with them the message of Christ? Walking with their bodies covered with rags, and with their children on their backs, barefoot, illiterate, malnourished: what did we do to them?”<sup>98</sup> “Traditional hermeneutics has made of them passive recipients of history, and it has silenced them.”<sup>99</sup> To change this, Althaus-Reid proposes walking with them. As she

<sup>96</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 32.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 34.

walks to accompany these women serpents, Althaus-Reid hails a woman from still another different time and place: Mama Huaco, the first Coya woman and mother of the Incas. Mama Huaco holds in her hand a mirror—"the mirror of otherness, reflecting the triple otherness of gender, race, and economic exploitation in Latin America."<sup>100</sup> By walking with these women, Althaus-Reid gathers together an arguably illegitimate complex 'we' with tools to call into question the silencing and oppression of Latin American women.

In the reflection of the mirror of Mama Huaco, we learn to order time differently by seeing the events of Christian history reflected in the religious universe of Andean women. The mirror's surface reflects the face of a Coya woman, who subverts "the narrated time" of the bible.<sup>101</sup> "Latin American women do not participate in the same elaboration of time as Europeans."<sup>102</sup> Althaus-Reid explains that their "world-time" (*mundo tiempo*) does not sharply divide between public/private, sacred/profane, and divine/economic. Mama Huaco's mirror reflects a religious universe where there is no meaningful division between "the temple and the cornfield" because religious and productive spaces are not distinguished; where every day life and the sacred interweave; where there is sexuality to spirituality; and where worship and sacrality are feminine and in relation to every day things.<sup>103</sup>

Foucault meditates on a mirror in his essay "Of Other Spaces." On the one hand, "a mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place."<sup>104</sup> A mirror lets us see ourselves

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>104</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* 5 (October, 1984): 46-49. Available online: [foucault.info//documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html](http://foucault.info//documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html)



where we are not. A mirror places our image where we can never be. It is a reflection, over there, “behind the surface” of the glass.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, however, there is a sense in which a mirror’s reflection does exist in the experience of its occurrence. The place that I see myself occupying is there, not here where I stand. I recognize myself there in a different place. In his words: “I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.” This strange dynamic occurs because, in Foucault’s term, the mirror is a heterotopia. The mirror “makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.”<sup>106</sup> In a mirror’s reflection, I come to know the place that I stand in relation to the reflection and vice versa. As Foucault writes, heterotopias expose the illusions and messiness of our real spaces. We recognize in the mirror’s reflection what we cannot otherwise see. This includes ideological illusion.

What Foucault considers ‘real’ heterotopian spaces interest him in this essay—spaces such as cemeteries, museums, and gardens. He sets himself to describing heterotopian qualities that these places share. Foucault notes that every society constitutes heterotopias, though with great variety in form,<sup>107</sup> and that these heterotopias change over time to fulfill different functions. Like the mirror’s ability to hold together absence and presence, heterotopias welcome into a single frame that which ordinarily is incompatible.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Foucault organizes the many different spaces that can be heterotopic into two types: heterotopias of crisis (“privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women”) and heterotopias of deviation (“those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed”). Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

Neither Althaus-Reid nor I suggest that the mirror of Mama Huaco easily sits with Foucault's. They are of different times and places, produced by different cultures, and reflecting different discourses. Yet, a complex labyrinth takes shape as any node connects with any another. The juxtaposition of the mirrors' reflections of each other opens a space at once familiar and strange. Althaus-Reid writes her way into a heterotopian juxtaposition of this sort when she walks with women-serpents to join Mama Huaco and positions the path of her text to allow Mama Huaco's mirror to reflect the biblical narratives of Jesus' birth.

Christian scripture narrates the birth of Jesus as it has been imagined by men. The narrative reports male "fantasies about women's feelings, needs, and biology."<sup>109</sup> Yet, in these stories (unlike other parts of the Scripture) we cannot avoid the activity or experience of women. Indeed, they center the birth narrative. Think about it, Althaus-Reid requests. These actions took a significant amount of time. There are nine months of pregnancy (biological time); Herod's months of consultation, planning, and execution of the children (political time); Mary and Joseph's escape from Judea and settling in Egypt (exile time); and the dwelling of the word of God amongst the people (cosmic time). If Jesus' birth were to be told with the rhythm and pacing of any of these four temporalities, the narrative of the actions and experiences of women would provide a long historical account. Yet, the scriptural narrative of Jesus' birth is brief.

Rather than narrating women's activities in biological, political, exile, or cosmic time, the Bible narrates only the time of women's everydayness under patriarchy. This is private/domestic time—the kind that does not enter into historical accounts and thus renders women silent and passive. Both in the writing of the birth narrative and in its long

<sup>109</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Walking with Women Serpents," 34.

history of interpretation, the complexity of women's actions are foreshortened by private/domestic time. This allows men to center men's activities, which by patriarchal definition comprise public time, while Mary's few words to the angelic messenger stretch to become "unbearably long."<sup>110</sup> In the narrative of the patriarchal church, "May it be done to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38) obsessively "tell[s] women their public place in church and society."<sup>111</sup>

The church interpellates women with an *imaginaire* that closes to efface their actions and experience. It expresses a corrupted and oppressive social ideology that legitimates patriarchal authority along with all its harms. However, Althaus-Reid continues, the foreshortened narrative of domestic/private time can never fully suppress women's actions or the duration of biological, political, exile, or cosmic time. We need to "charter the unexplored resources of the to-be-said on the basis of the already said."<sup>112</sup> That is, we need to retell the story of the birth of Jesus according to women's actions in biological, political, or exile time, but "our method of reading the birth narrative of Jesus from this perspective can only start when and if women serpents meet Mary on their road."<sup>113</sup> Seeing the narrative in the reflection of the mirror of Mama Huaco lets us constitute the story of Jesus' birth with the world-time of Latin American women. Colonialism, violence, patriarchy, and economic exploitation all become evident when we walk with the women serpents within the narrative orders of their world-time. So too do the presence of the times that women's lives and bodies experience in the scriptural accounts.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur: The Poetics of Language and Myth," 106.

<sup>113</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Walking with Women Serpents", 35.

Heterotopias “function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” Foucault writes.<sup>114</sup> Sometimes heterotopias accumulate time; other times they abolish it. In either case, heterotopias shift temporality by changing how we can and do experience time. I add that heterotopias transform how we move within and across time. The reflection in Mama Huaco’s mirror not only shifts how we narrate the activity of women around the birth of Jesus, it changes the relationship women today have with the activities of the biblical women. In “Walking with Women Serpents,” the mirror of Mama Huaco instantiates a heterotopia that “[recovers] a project of the Kingdom which had been lost, and, at the same time, [gives] birth to a new church for a new society.”<sup>115</sup> It does so by offering expanded possibilities of language by which Althaus-Reid can write of the subjugated, conquered past. She walks with Mama Huaco as a praxis of solidarity that changes both history and the present without collapsing the distance—or the differences—between the two. At the same time, encountering the heterotopia of Mama Huaco’s mirror lets us experience new possibilities for the future—“a new church for a new society.” As Foucault contemplates in *The Order of Things*, heterotopia can do this because of the ways that it differs from utopia.

“[*The Order of Things*] first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age,” Foucault writes in his preface.<sup>116</sup> The passage of Borges to which he refers offers a taxonomy of animals with a strange series of lettered possibilities. The passage “transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible

<sup>114</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces.”

<sup>115</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 38.

<sup>116</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv.

thought.”<sup>117</sup> Foucault laughs at the absurdity of Borges’ encyclopedia list, but continues ill at ease: The alphabetical series of the taxonomy gathers together animals, which, according to the ordinary laws of thought and nature, cannot unite. Even so, their twisted possibilities arise on the page. Borges writes these animals into impossible relation, one after another. A utopian vision could reconcile the incongruous encounter, Foucault acknowledges. This would re-order the disordered impossibility that they represent according to what we can actually and rationally imagine in today’s language of fables. It would heal the shock of Borges’ strange juxtapositions and console our discomfort. This is not what we need, Foucault insists. We need to rethink order and the power of languages to provide it. We need the heterotopia and the discomfort that we experience in encountering its occurrence. In other words, we need the “feeling” of seeing the reflection in Mama Huaco’s mirror as we walk with her.

According to Foucault, the unease that we feel in confronting juxtapositions such as Borges’ renders us disoriented and troubled. They should, Foucault confirms: the experience and knowledge that attends heterotopian juxtapositions exceed both the content and form of rationality. They expose the insufficiencies of our structure of knowledge to assimilate or suppress that which exceeds it. Because of this, heterotopias cannot be explained or demonstrated. They must be encountered as we walk through both time and space.

This can also be expressed in the Ricoeurian language with which I began. As the corridors of hermeneutical labyrinths move into and out of the fissures between ideology and utopia, they meet at strange intersections that exceed the dominant narrative. This is the pluralizing effect of labyrinthine writing. It also is the basis for writing into heterotopias.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

When we encounter the excess that seems like a strange juxtaposition, for at least a brief moment something strange occurs. We experience an *imaginaire* that ruptures; it reconfigures our experiences and knowledge. While Arguedas stretched Spanish to recognize those whom Spanish excludes, heterotopias rupture narrative order through the *experience* of alternatives. Unlike Gutiérrez's utopia, which must be, but yet fails to remain, sufficiently distant from today's experience, the experience of heterotopia is constituted by distance. Heterotopias let us "feel" like we walk with illegitimate communities of women long dead, still living, and yet to be born in the peripheries of history. Indeed, we do walk with them.

### Beyond the Chair

The final chapter of Althaus-Reid's dissertation begins at a passage by Arguedas from his novel, *Todas las Sangres*:

He came yellowish, broken, without even a *Chulo* (a traditional hat). He came back with the same clothes, but with God in his eyes... -Which God? How do you know? - God is hope, God is courage. He came *unpu* (shrunken), ill, bent down. He left firm, steady as an eagle, like a young man.<sup>118</sup>

The *indio* at the center of this story symbolizes the broken and subjugated people of Peru, Althaus-Reid explains. The people of Peru find themselves in their recognition of a God who liberates: "The *cogito blessé* of Peru, the broken thought of centuries of alienation produced by the *Conquista* and colonization, finds in God, 'its original truth,' in Ricoeur's words."<sup>119</sup> A few pages later, she returns "to recall" Arguedas as he sat on "his cathedra chair in the University of San Marcos in Lima, Peru" starting his research into the Quechua

<sup>118</sup> José Maria Arguedas, *Todas las Sangres* quoted by Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 340.

<sup>119</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 341.

myths.<sup>120</sup> “The healing of [Latin America’s] *cogito blessé* begins, precisely there,” she writes.<sup>121</sup> That is, the healing of the *cogito blessé* begins at the incorporation of indigenous traditions, poetry, and legends with the self-knowledge of oppressed people. The subjugation of the Andean people “needs to be related to being part of a first humanity destroyed by God due to its imperfections, and replaced by an Hispanic one, which has proved to be the dominant force of the rest of Latin American history.”<sup>122</sup>

For a moment, I will enjoy my labyrinthine freedom to take the phrase in a different, but equally relevant, direction: “The healing of the *cogito blessé* begins, precisely there” with Arguedas, a novelist and professor of ethnography, as he struggles in an institutional chair that unites religion and academy to rework language such that it will have the potential to retell history that realizes the humanity of indigenous Peruvians. The healing of Latin American alienation begins with reworking the relationship between language and the events of colonial history, including the practices of knowledge that are part of these relationships. The stories that are often told of liberationist movements, including liberation theologies, begin with (or center) the importance of figures like Arguedas or Gutiérrez. Indeed, the *imaginaire* of Althaus-Reid’s dissertation reaffirms liberation theology’s dominant story of itself.

The dissertation’s history of liberation theology “begins, precisely, there” in a cathedra chair and moves through a stream of well-recognized male scholars, whose fluency in the languages of the (British, European, American) academy is well demonstrated in accessible works read across in Europe and North America. When Althaus-Reid recalls

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

the memory of Arguedas in her dissertation, she calls to attention the subjected histories of indigenous lives in Peru and across Latin America. She also articulates the history and structure of liberation theology as a tradition with an academic lineage that takes shape in men's relationships. Arguedas' encounter with Gutiérrez's text and their subsequent meeting and friendship provided time for sharing ideas and mutual influence. As a result, Arguedas' writing inspired Gustavo Gutiérrez, and vice versa. It is worth imagining how her narrative of Ricoeur and liberation theology would differ had Althaus-Reid told the history through a different set of relationships—perhaps hers with her other teacher at ISEDET, Beatriz Melano Couch—or the conversations over *cortado* in a café in Buenos Aires to which she alludes at the beginning of *Indecent Theology*.

Like all narrative, academic theology orders the events of the past in the retelling of history. In doing so, it tells us where (and whether) we fit in relation to others. That is, it maps our possibilities vis-à-vis the positions held by others. Maps are spatial narratives; they always hide an excess of experience that cannot be assimilated. As with Jeremiah's camel, love leads us astray because love calls us to disregard boundaries to be together. When this happens something changes. The same with solidarity. This is why, to use Freire's words, "we must seek to live *with* others in solidarity."<sup>123</sup> The 'we' that we form in writing and reading makes transformative knowledge possible.

What Freire terms "authentic thinking" (that is, thinking that is concerned about reality) occurs only within the trust of mutual relationships. This is where and when effective communication becomes possible. Thus, he argues, education "must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power."<sup>124</sup> An educator does not provide

<sup>123</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 76.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



knowledge; she facilitates relationships wherein authentic thinking can occur. “People teach each other, mediated by the world.”<sup>125</sup> The same can be said of liberative narratives. The question is how can we write to create the conditions under which knowledge (knowledge as *praxis*) becomes possible. How can we write with a profound trust in people, past and present? We—all of us, in the many roles that we inhabit—need to rework how we engage Christian theology so as to encourage experiencing the excess of life that overflows all narrative orders. We need to live with others in solidarity in our writing as well as all else.

“Walking with Women Serpents” departs from the narrative told in Althaus-Reid’s dissertation. She brought to the Scottish Churches House not only a different story of the history of liberation theology, but a different way of writing the narrative. She returns in time to live in solidarity with women serpents. With them and with others, she walks in the peripheries of history. “We are going then to walk with women who are alive, and with women who are long dead. Women serpents were massacred 500 years ago, with the invasion of Latin America, but because nobody ever gave them a voice in our theology, I have decided to let them speak and criticize us.”<sup>126</sup> The heterotopian encounter with these women will confront us with foundational symbols of an *imaginaire* of rupture and call to account the mystifying discourse of *conquista* Christianity. It will “feel” like walking together; the heterotopia cannot be described. It occurs in our experience by subverting the monological structure of decent knowledge. These are just first steps of many on her theological journey toward other *Other* companions. Andean women’s bodies—and many other bodies—have been effaced from theology. Their knowledge of God has been mutilated

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>126</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Walking with Women Serpents,” 33.

in our memories. Yet God remains with and for them. If we can return to them, if we can walk together and dialogue with them, we will find the liberator God.

## **Structural Notes**

There are marked differences in *The Queer God*, *Indecent Theology*, and “Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation.” Considered in aggregate, the three works evidence Althaus-Reid’s ongoing commitment to learn and experiment with the writing of theology. Her dissertation has the linear, analytic style appropriate to the thesis genre. The writing moves theological thinking cogently through liberationist and hermeneutical theory. *Indecent Theology* provokes with the voice of a feminist liberationist, who knows with her flesh that capitalism, colonialism, sexuality, and poverty make life too indecent for either liberationist or feminist theologies. She exhorts theology to see—but also to smell, touch, and taste—the revelatory obscenity of lives lived under exclusion as manifesting the expansiveness of God. *The Queer God* transgresses the logic of theological writing itself. Althaus-Reid *writes* a theological understanding of God known in the intimacies of God’s love that exceeds what can be described or analyzed.

Accordingly, the tripartite structure of this project can seem self-explanatory. Althaus-Reid’s major works appear in chronological order and in conversation with their variously related essays. The first part centers on Althaus-Reid’s early writings, namely her dissertation and a conference paper written towards the conclusion of her degree program. The second engages her first major work, *Indecent Theology*, and a conversation that arises in response to this text between her and Lisa Isherwood. The third part focuses on a scene that stages a queerly troubling experiment in her final published text, *The Queer God*.

Told this way, the dissertation follows the path that Althaus-Reid walked as she lived into the work of writing theology. The delineation of three chronologically ordered parts simplifies the task of representing an increasing complexity (and obscurity) of her texts over time. It is a simple structure for a straightforward goal: to provide an entry into Althaus-Reid's theological writing that welcomes new and old readers into a range of motifs, concerns, and ideas central to her indecenting of theology as an activity of writing—without collapsing the uniqueness of each text.

Yet, this chronological telling risks a fundamental interpretive error. The whole may be misrecognized as offering some variation on a life-story about Althaus-Reid, the Argentinean woman, or Althaus-Reid, the indecent theologian. I do neither. Given that in these pages I share a small portion of *my encounters* with her experiments in writing, it might be more accurate to suggest that they tell a story of me, a student of indecent theology, and of my learning. That too, however, could be misleading. With a fractal like rhythm, multiple layers of our texts resist (and at times break) life narratives, as well as our desire for them.

I deny biography and psychology entrance through the front doors of the text, though I welcome the surreptitious arrival of both as constantly ambivalent elements of the discourses that Althaus-Reid and I both use. The denial concerns more than a refusal of 'romantic hermeneutics' and its interest in the relationship between an author and her writing (though this is also at play). It marks the complex ambiguity that attends the insufficiency and opacity of language in relation to human life.

Pieces of Althaus-Reid's life story appear throughout her texts. These and other fragments likewise appear at various places in my engagement with her writing. The relationship between textual fragments of a life story and the person who wrote these fragments cannot be determined from the text that contains them. Nor can the relationship

be clarified by threading discordant fragments through a coherent biographical narrative. That is, biographical or psychological references cannot—and ought not—be solidified into any sort of referential form, whichever direction it runs. The relationship always remains a question.

As a question, it carries a great deal of force for potential creativity and new interpretive possibilities. For instance, Althaus-Reid insists that indecent theology be written with the autobiographical attentiveness of a first-person accounting—a methodological claim that I take very seriously. Yet her texts unravel the illusory possibilities of writing with autobiographical or testimonial transparency. She draws on a much more complex relationship between author and text—one that I characterize in the fourth chapter as “honest.”

In addition to respecting the resistance of Althaus-Reid’s writing to conform to expectations for biographical narratives, I also suggest that indulging in the biographical or psychological distracts from what her writing does in the absence of biography. Althaus-Reid put herself under an intense spotlight in order to twist a voracious academic voyeurism into a transformative theological dynamic. She made use of the problematic fact that the academy and public delight in consuming the scandals of a petite Latina theologian with red lips and high heels speaking salaciously of God. Yet Althaus-Reid remained intensely private. Her life holds as many or more hidden alcoves, as those that she opened to public view. Undoubtedly, she protected these secret spaces. Among her closest friends, as well as with strangers, she offered radically different views on her life. She permitted varied access to her memories and desires. Indeed, at the time of her death, close colleagues discovered that she was married to a Scottish man, while members of her family discovered the queerness of her compañeras. I hear that some of her family and some members of the academy—even ones who love and honor her—still do not know.

As a writer, teacher, and performer, Althaus-Reid used her body, history, and foreignness. She wrote a first-person nomadic theology that lets life call into question the types of knowledge that are produced by contextual theologies. She and her writing moved with impunity (but not without consequence) through discourses, traditions, contexts, countries, and languages. She did so without determining a destination or justifying her routes. To write Althaus-Reid's theology in relation to biographical or psychological narratives of her life story overwrites this practice of living, writing, and teaching. It makes an object of her, while also denying her theology any space of its own. It makes it impossible to learn from the fact that exposure did not result when Althaus-Reid lifted her skirts.

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We risk additional interpretive dangers by assuming or engineering other types of bridges between the three parts of this project. For instance, if I map the transitions between Althaus-Reid's texts in terms of various possible *telos*, we risk missing or overwriting the fact that she does not write progressively. Althaus-Reid never stops walking her theological *caminata*, but she does not orient toward a determined destination. The advances of her earlier writing do not get left behind, as she stretches further boundaries in later writings. She creates layers of indecent texture that allow her writing to move in complicated ways from liberationist to feminist to indecent theology without losing the energy or immediacy of each. Hers is a nomadic journey.

A complex harmony builds as she iterates or folds experiments into each other. Accordingly, I keep the three parts distinct without proposing analytic arcs to hold them together. Likewise, each study pulls up short before hailing an end that might herald a new beginning. We are not in the realms of sequence. The works dance with each other—I might even say tango. Similar reasons explain why I shy away from the temptations of evaluative comparisons. There are interesting parallels and contrasts to be drawn between Althaus-

Reid's writings, but not in such a way that one experiment gains precedence over another. I leave the generative creativity of each experiment open without implying the foreclosure of a 'next' or 'better' word or 'next' or 'better' work to follow.

Similarly, nowhere do I pretend to achieve saturation, completion, or wholeness in my engagement with Althaus-Reid's texts. I seek only to instigate a serious consideration of writing as a theological problem and as a theological promise. I extend five invitations to join me in beginning to discover the complex worlds of writing that Althaus-Reid's texts create. None of the five studies properly conclude, if concluding entails that I close the circle, complete the analysis, or evaluate with the clarity of hindsight. My goal is not to satisfy or exhaust the questions of writing; nor do I intend to exhaust my own study of Althaus-Reid's writing. I simply want to lead us into the beginnings of these considerations. I want to show that the questions matter, and I want to demonstrate that there are many possibilities before us. No single language or approach will prove sufficient. Indeed, I want to let the disjunction of these studies show that the diversity and contradictions that we encounter in tracing different paths give rise to future possibilities. I hope that it will prove a curious enough taste to encourage more of a hunger.

I am content in each chapter to open one engagement with one experiment with writing, knowing that there are many other things to be said. I accept that the choice of foci is idiosyncratic, but not without significance. They are my entry points. As Althaus-Reid writes: indecent theology can only be first person. We write from where and when we find ourselves, as who we are and who we become in writing. There can be no other way. Thus, this dissertation offers *my* indecent theology in two senses. First, these pages tell of my interactions with Althaus-Reid's indecent theology. I work to communicate meaningfully the engagements that comprise my experience with her texts, but they always will remain mine. Second, the project re/presents the indecent theology that I want. That is, my desire



guides the dissertation. My desire leads to these particular studies; it outlines the shape of the text that now appears before us. I want to belong to a theological community that is confident enough in God's transformative embrace to risk everything for the chance of disrupting suffering and destruction. For academic theology, I believe this requires risking writing itself.

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Admittedly, Althaus-Reid's texts do not always work. Some experiments are more successful than others. Rather than calling her ability or insight into question, the public failures increase the importance of her writing. Failures, like successes, teach us. Their pedagogy should not be relegated to the privacy of individual offices, but chanced within and for the larger community. If we allow a desire to write God's revelation to move toward its object with an honest self-recognition that our languages and knowledge will always be insufficient, our attempts to use those languages will at times struggle. Sometimes these struggles—even those that result in outright failure—open into new possibilities. Althaus-Reid risked the work of transformative writing in public, which gives us access to both what works and what does not in her texts. In doing so, she evidences a sort of writerly humility that we do well to emulate.

I chose to explore a few of what I experience as Althaus-Reid's more successful and central experiments. But haunting everything that is written is that which is not written. Throughout these pages, the question of what does not appear pulls for attention. I implore you not to mistake silence with apathy, ignorance, or the un-thought in any writing, much less Althaus-Reid's or my own. Absence plays an important role in the overall structure of all text. The times when Althaus-Reid's writing comes up short should not and cannot be forgotten. I also recognize that the studies I offer here likewise vary. Some struggle a good

deal, some a good deal less. Though I find it painful to admit and more difficult to put on display, I believe this is good.

Being brilliant, erudite, or analytically incisive is not enough to make someone a theologian. Indeed, these qualities are less important than many others for cultivating knowledge of God in our broken world. Yet the academy disproportionately treasures and rewards these qualities. The church and public err by mistaking them as primary standards of value for the theologian, as well as her theology. Theology in any form, but especially including the writing of theology, depends on the qualities of empathy, patience, generosity, kindness, creativity, and trust. A theologian cares for understanding and knowledge in the world. She does not create, determine, or protect it—except as one member who lives and loves within and with the much larger community of all those whom God loves. The distinguishing mark of a theologian, in other words, is that she gives herself to learning, writing, and teaching about what concerns us ultimately. That she writes of God by accessing the richness of all that we have been given to do so. In Althaus-Reid’s case and mine, this entails moving ourselves, and therewith our commitment to academic theology, to the communities of those whom the world does not recognize that God loves.

Indecent theology finds the breath to move between what has come before and what will be without being subject to either. Its language walks between the texts it studies and those that will be of the current writer. In a different idiom, I say the same thing by noting that indecent theology walks the spaces that unite the struggles of history and God’s loving promise. Writing is always a practice of trust in the theological claim that the sole Divine eternal truth—that which is revealed in God’s loving presence—will always be articulated, but always differently, in each age and place. Or put still differently: like manna in the desert, each day the writing of theology is given as a new task. However abundant the day’s provision, writing cannot be stored; it will not last. Until the day that God alone appoints,

writing must always begin again and then, yet again, begin again. Althaus-Reid believed in these possibilities, and so do I.

**Part II:**  
**Indecent Theology**

### 3: Obscenity

*Paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it.... At once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it.*<sup>1</sup>

*Indecent Theology* opens in a state of undress. We find ourselves in the port of Buenos Aires, with two epigraphs and a question. The first epigraph shares a slice of a story in which a police officer tells a woman that her lack of underwear lacks respect for morality. The second epigraph echoes a missionary's sermon during which the preacher decried the indecency of *Coya* women. These women pray to saints but do not wear underwear, he exclaimed with the laughter of derision. Then the body of the text begins with a direct question: "Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not?"<sup>2</sup> What if she is a lemon vendor selling you fruit? A bit later: "What difference would it make if she sits down to write theology without underwear?"<sup>3</sup> Moving quickly from historical or general characters (the missionary, indigenous women, lemon vendors) to the immediately familiar world of academic theology, the text draws our attention to whether the writer herself might or might not be wearing underwear: "The Argentinean theologian would like then to remove her underwear to write theology."<sup>4</sup> The reader's undergarments—as well as those of anyone who sit nearby—become implicated in this undressing. 'Is your underwear decent?'

<sup>1</sup> de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

the text whispers by implication. Will you undress yourself? What sort of underwear do you dress the body of your text with? How about those whom you read: do they wear underwear? Will you undress them?

Undergarments rely on a strange quality of visible invisibility. Undergarments exist to deceive. They protect bodies of style and labor from the fluids, scents, and sensation of flesh. They foster the illusions of bodies that ‘naturally’ move in perfectly unnatural shapes. The engineering of cone shaped, ‘perfect t-shirt’, or ‘18-hour comfort’ breasts and taut backsides reshape flesh into the curves of culturally commodified desire. Functionally, the illusions require the undergarment’s self-effacement. Success is achieved by an efficacy that remains invisible and unknowable to all but the one who wears the garment. Sometimes, however, the illusion falters. This occurs in acts of seduction, but also elsewhere and in other ways. Eyes may not know what lies beneath, but other cues—both imagined and real—provide hints: the missionary expresses disgust at the behavior of indigenous women. The Coya women “sit for a second and... Can you imagine? No underwear, the streets are their toilets.”<sup>5</sup> Or consider: Althaus-Reid muses that perhaps the lemon vendors’ “musky smell may be confused with that of her basket of lemons, in a metaphor that brings together sexuality and economics.”<sup>6</sup>

Beginning with undergarments and musky smell, *Indecent Theology* makes visible what cannot ordinarily be seen, and it does so without apparent care for fear or shame at revealing what ‘should’ be hidden. Indeed, the text welcomes the obscenity of doing so, because obscenity will provide a tool of exposure. “We are going to use Sartre’s concept of

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

obscurity, although in reverse,"<sup>7</sup> Althaus-Reid explains. The obscene for Sartre occurs with the appearance of flesh that destroys the illusions of graceful freedom, but it is not this concept in itself that she wants. Rather, with allusion to Baudrillard, Althaus-Reid wants to 'reverse' obscenity. She wants to use 'obscurity, in reverse' as a method of writing theology.

This marks a provocative experiment with writing in *Indecent Theology*. As will be explored in the following pages, writing by means of 'obscurity, in reverse' opens the possibility of moving apophatically across and beyond the boundaries dividing illusion and reality, transcendence and materiality. One cannot achieve nakedness in language, whether spoken or written. Languages veil bodies with ideas, desires, and movement. Yet we can foster textual performances that expose the fleshiness of life by allowing its obscenity to irrupt in our texts. When we do, we write apophatically. In our activity of writing, we write what cannot be written: a resurrection of what is disappeared even by language itself. That is, to use Althaus-Reid's metaphor, we can write obscenely to reach under skirts.

Think of a burlesque dance. The activity of obscene exposure provides the purpose, promise, and pleasure. The striptease seduces our imagination with bodily exposures that never present the body transparently. Likewise we and our writing are never nude—even when we are in the process of undressing. In Althaus-Reid's wording, there are always more skirts to be lifted.

This study of writerly obscenity progresses in three movements. In the first, I read Sartre's concept of obscenity in conversation with Baudrillard and his articulation of reversibility and writing. I consider how Althaus-Reid's performance of 'obscurity, in reverse' enacts a form of apophatic writing. Second, I enter the story of a young Nicaraguan boy named Guto dancing in his sister's shirt, which Althaus-Reid uses to close *Indecent*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 110.

*Theology*. With reference to Butler, I nuance the performativity of using Sartre's concept of 'obscenity, in reverse' as a writing technique. Obscenity exposes the materiality of lives lived. In Althaus-Reid's words, obscenities gesture toward the resurrection of that which has been or is disappeared, whether that is the exclusions of sexuality or economics or the forced disappearance of whole human beings. Yet to write by means of 'obscenity, in reverse' entails a citational performance that occurs with the ambivalence of drag. Obscenity never exposes bodies transparently, fully undressed of constitutive ideological illusions. Rather, obscene writing always returns writing to new (or old) 'skirts'. Finally, I turn to the Virgin Mary and Althaus-Reid's inspiration for dressing as "a female impersonator" of the Guadalupana at Carnival. Althaus-Reid's treatment of Mary provides an example of writing 'obscenity, in reverse.' It demonstrates how "obscenity appears now to us as the *dis-covering* of grace, and the way to transcendence."<sup>8</sup>

#### Sartre's Obscenity, in Reverse

Giorgio Agamben suggests that Sartre describes grace as clothing "in terms so closely resembling Augustinian categories that – were the proximity not explainable by noting the common theological inheritance that infuses our entire vocabulary of corporeality – we might conclude that the connection was intentional."<sup>9</sup> Theological memory need not be intentional to be meaningful. Althaus-Reid follows Derrida to suggest that the deferrals of language leave "a footprint or outline which has the characteristic of being present in the text by denoting an absence or otherness."<sup>10</sup> In any concept, there

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 105.



always accompanies the positive articulation of that which is not present, and that which is excluded.<sup>11</sup> Theological reflection may be largely excluded by Sartre's philosophy, but it remains relevant. The puzzle is how to draw what appears only as shadow. Agamben uses his ear for shared rhetoric to find theological valence in Sartre's discussion of grace. For Althaus-Reid, the theological manifests in the space between Sartre's grace and its tethered concept, obscenity.

Sartre's consideration of obscenity and grace moves in the recesses of his meditations on bodies and desires. The concepts appear in the context of an extended discussion of love, hate, desire, masochism, and sadism in the second part of his consideration of "Concrete Relations with Others" in *Being and Nothingness*. Here, as elsewhere, Sartre's consistent concern centers on the possibilities of freedom. How can a person be free, he asks, when so much of existence is largely given? Physicality, context, language, and history shape and determine what it is that we are and what we can be. These dynamics are beyond individual determination. A good portion of our existence is given to us. We can only be passive participants. Sartre terms this the "in-itself" principle of being human. The given part of our existence constitutes our "facticity." Yet facticity alone does not offer a sufficient understanding of being. As dynamic creatures we are able to (and do) surpass what has been given to us. We transform the possibilities of our materiality and our history. We "transcend" our givenness. This second principle he terms the "for-itself" principle of being. Ultimately, human existence is characterized by an ambiguous combination of both transcendence and facticity that manifests as *freedom*: our transcendence transcended. In the simplest formulation: we are more than our situation.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

As Sartre develops his ontology of human beings, an obvious question comes to the fore: what happens when one individual encounters another? He answers first in terms of sexuality: the relation is between physical bodies and their attractions. “Not that the body is the instrument and the cause of my relations with others. But the body constitutes [my relations’] meaning and marks their limits.”<sup>12</sup> Humans are incarnated in the gaze of the Other, he explains. “In order for my flesh to exist and for the Other’s flesh to exist, consciousness must necessarily be preliminarily shaped in the mould of desire.”<sup>13</sup> Desire, when it arises, is the desire to have one’s flesh reflected back to oneself by someone else. Desire draws toward a mutuality of recognition of freedom and givenness in shared skin-to-skin caresses. In the encounter of bodies, however, the tension between the givenness of facticity and the possibilities of freedom manifest in a variety of forms, all of which are rooted in sexuality and all of which will be alienating—that is, if we are not God. “As soon as ‘there is’ the body and as soon as ‘there is’ an Other, we react by desire, by love, and by the derived attitudes.”<sup>14</sup> The derived attitudes to which Sartre refers include masochism, indifference, and sadism.

Let’s say that I love a person. For the sake of that love, imagine that I emphasize my facticity. I position my givenness before her, readily available to receive her gaze. Perhaps in doing so, I seduce her by making of myself an object available for her affection. I forgo my

<sup>12</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 361.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 527. Sight motivates the relations between individuals, because sight will become important to these considerations a bit below. Bodies become a topic of consideration when a body falls under the gaze of an Other: a person exists as a body when she is known by the Other (461). That is, I realize in the Other’s look that I exist as an object for her. In her gaze, I apprehend my facticity as an object which I cannot fully know through her eyes. I become conscious of my body as it is available to her (464).

freedom in order to solidify hers.<sup>15</sup> This is deeply alienating to the extent that I have abdicated my transcendence to obtain her look.<sup>16</sup> In Sartre's view, the masochism, such as I display here, appears as an attitude of annihilating my own subjectivity so as to give myself over to another person as an object available for her free embrace.<sup>17</sup>

I could potentially take up various other attitudes as well. For instance, rather than seeking out the Other's gaze, I might seek recognition of my own gaze. In Sartre's phrasing, perhaps I seek "to look at the look."<sup>18</sup> This would be an attitude of indifference. Perhaps I seek confirmation of my freedom by transcending the other person's freedom, relegating him only to his facticity. If I demand of this person that he becomes flesh so that I can experience my transcendence over him, I adopt a sadistic attitude.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, desire and sadism share the goal of exposure. Yet while desire draws toward a shared uncovering of flesh to flesh in the experiences of mutual caresses ("By each caress I experience my own flesh and the Other's flesh through my flesh."<sup>20</sup>), sadism occurs as a one-sided demand for a non-reciprocal exposure. A sadist refuses to acknowledge her own flesh while forcibly revealing the flesh of the Other.<sup>21</sup> This is the point at which the obscene appears in Sartre's text. It manifests as a tool by means of which the sadist accomplishes her objectification of the flesh of the Other.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 489.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 493.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 495.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 514.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 518.

Sartre defines the obscene as an appearance of the facticity of flesh that does not provoke desire and, as follows from the lack of incitement, does not draw toward mutual exposure.<sup>22</sup> The image Sartre provides of sadistic obscenity is visceral: a tortured body, unmoving in its bindings—a person that (for the moment) exists only in terms of facticity, who chose in freedom to abjure the fight against depredation by the sadist. Consequently, the sadist renders the tortured flesh an object. His bound body appears solely as it is given in terms of its facticity. The flesh is inert; the person’s freedom has been broken and enslaved.<sup>23</sup> Though the sadist quickly will fail, in that moment it seems that he accomplished his goal. Facticity and flesh saturate the space.

“The obscene is the category of the indecent,” Althaus-Reid notes.<sup>24</sup> Sartre does not disagree. Obscenity appears in a philosophical dungeon where the fleshiness of the scenes risks transcendence. Yet Althaus-Reid notes that she does not use Sartre’s concept straightforwardly. She intends to use the concept, in reverse. An epigraph offers a clue as to the nature of this reversal. Taken from an interview with Baudrillard, it reads “obscenity is another world.”<sup>25</sup>

### Baudrillard’s Seductions

Althaus-Reid credits Baudrillard as the one “who elaborated the idea of a postmodern culture where the borders between reality and appearance are systematically

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 524.

<sup>24</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 104.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Revenge of the Crystal” in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. by Mike Gane (London: Routledge, 1993), 62.

blurred as the effect of technology is applied in the media.”<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard explains that simulations blur distinctions between the real and the artificial to the point of unrecognizability. While it used to be the case that simulations mirrored something real, technology and media now surround us with second order simulations that function *without reference* to the real. Moreover, in today’s world, artificial simulations provide for more intense experiences than those on offer in the banality of every day life. They are, to use his term, hyperreal.<sup>27</sup> This holds for what we consider to be scientific or political, as it does for anything else. The illusions of simulations saturate our experience and thought. In homage to Baudrillard’s love of science fiction, we might say: we transverse a galaxy of untethered second-order simulations where there is not only no earth below or sky above, but also no gravity by means of which to define “below” or “above.” This is not only abstractly dangerous. It inflicts real harm and suffering in the world. As Althaus-Reid notes: “We are under the spell of seduction, an erotic style of domination-control that happens to the oppressed.”<sup>28</sup>

For simulacra, truth (as reference to the real) has no standing. Instead, we move in the realm of persuasions. Baudrillard suggests that within the context of the hyperreal, theory functions by means of seduction. The relative presence or absence of truth will not disrupt a play of illusions that have no underlying reference, and the goal is their disruption. Thus Baudrillard sets truth to the side.

<sup>26</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, of a referential being, of a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 1983), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 96. See also Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* trans. by Brian Singer (Montéal: New World Perspectives, 1990), 174-175.

Rather than seek 'truer' articulations of truth, radical theory seeks to displace what has come before with something less harmful. Theory defies "the world to be more: more objective, more ironic, more seductive, more real or more unreal"<sup>29</sup> through the seduction of its own illusions.<sup>30</sup> To counter seduction, Baudrillard recommends seducing. At its best, theory appears as an art of seduction that draws out the excesses of illusion. "Seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe," Baudrillard proposes.<sup>31</sup> Seduction patterns desires and our relationship to ideas about reality. By shifting the orientation of desires or by inciting other desires altogether, we can interrupt seductions. Writing as seduction disrupts the illusions that saturate our world by encouraging desires to move into places that cannot be signified by the hyperreal.

According to Baudrillard, the influence of any concept occurs because of enticement and incitement of desire, not the strength or coherence of its reference. Seduction shapes and reshapes symbolic possibilities. We cannot argue in traditional ways against concepts that are formed by the logic of simulations, because the logic of simulations also determines the dynamics of opposition, contradiction, addition, or subtraction. This leads to a conundrum: if simulations control symbolic possibilities and their logical structures render traditional argumentation impotent, how do we find our way beyond their illusions?

Baudrillard's answer takes shape as a *via negativa*. He describes the writing of theory in terms of an apophatic task of pleasurable seduction: "Writing has always given me pleasure. It's essential, it's not at all despairing, just the reverse. One recourse seems to me

<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Why Theory" in *The Ecstasy of Communication* trans. by Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 1998), 100.

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard, "Revenge of the Crystal," 62.

<sup>31</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 8.

to have been open: never to abandon language but to guide it in the direction where it can still utter without having to signify.”<sup>32</sup> The writing of theory draws out from the shadows what has been hidden by the garish spotlights of the hyperreal. In doing so, it seduces language into the places where we can utter without needing to signify. That is, we write into the (as yet) unsignifiable and (as yet) unwritable. Theory writes absences. Following Baudrillard, one technique for doing this is by way of the reverse.

Baudrillard’s reversibility is not a process of negation or opposition. Nor does reversibility suggest turning away from an illusion in order to invert or dissolve it. Rather, reversibility foments the symbolic excesses of irreconcilable but not dialectical things by holding them together. “One must find the reversibility of the subject and the object. Then these terms disappear as such and one must find another mode...there is something irreconcilable and at that moment the terms are not dialectical.”<sup>33</sup> Systems contain within themselves mechanisms of their own reversal and their own destruction. “The order of things takes upon itself the task of reversing things.”<sup>34</sup> The task is to draw out the system’s own dynamics, and in doing so “become the acceleration of this logic.”<sup>35</sup> By exposing the excess of the logic of the simulation, we open the possibility of gesturing obliquely beyond the signifiable.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Writing has always given me pleasure” in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews* ed. by Mike Gane (London: Routledge, 1993), 179. (emphasis mine)

<sup>33</sup> Baudrillard, “Revenge of the Crystal,” 58.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard, “Why Theory,” 99.

### Althaus-Reid's Reversal

Althaus-Reid holds to her conviction that in order to move beyond the certainties of dominant ways of thinking, there must be a rupture or irruption in the symbolic universe.<sup>36</sup> While simulations constrain the symbolic possibilities, she agrees that they also “provide ways to alternatives.”<sup>37</sup> Internal to theology are processes of disorder that unravel the logic of its systems. Finding, exposing, and pulling these threads allow us to gesture beyond the constraints of the system—to utter what cannot be signified—to write apophatically. To the extent that the illusions of traditional theology are built upon the exclusion and harm of individuals and communities, this is essentially liberative work and a central task of *Indecent Theology*. In her words, indecent theology “is the art of pinpointing obscurities, twisted categories and queer details which appear in disorder, and with or without apparent continuation.”<sup>38</sup> *Indecent Theology* experiments with Baudrillard’s technique of reversibility by applying it to Sartre’s concept of obscenity. Obscenity destroys grace, she writes, but it is through an obscene “dis-covering” of grace that a way to transcendence appears.<sup>39</sup>

As Althaus-Reid walks with Baudrillard, she learns with him. His insights open space for her to consider theology differently, but it is not a one-way interaction. Walking together, they dialogue. Along the way, she marks points at which she critiques or extends his thinking. For instance, Baudrillard provides resources to think productively about simulations that seduce the oppressed to an extent that some structures of harm are now

<sup>36</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 107. Althaus-Reid is here talking about Lacan.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.



seen to be desirable. Yet, she cautions, his discourse must be made broad enough to “include the technologies of subversion of the poor.”<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Althaus-Reid extends her text beyond meditations on ‘the postmodern’ and its dominant types of technology and media to turn explicitly toward the simulations of empire in colonial societies. From Pinochet in Chile to the military junta of Argentina “dictatorial regimes carry their own fantasy-land to extremes,” she notes.<sup>41</sup> In both contexts, graffiti and songs—with their own techniques of blurring real and imagery—have offered ways to resist the seduction of illusions.

Similarly, while Althaus-Reid follows the path that Baudrillard has forged, she also invites him to traverse her path. For this reason, we need to note the route that she chose to take within his corpus. While she cites both *Seduction* and *Baudrillard Live* (a collection of interviews curated by Mike Gane), she features two epigraphs from a single interview—“Revenge of the Crystal.” In this interview, Baudrillard discusses obscenity and reversibility at some length. He then connects the concepts with his thinking about the writing of theory. In many ways, this interview prefigures Althaus-Reid’s arrangement of obscenity, reversibility, and apophatic writing.

Baudrillard’s interviews stand apart from his writings. Gane shares that Baudrillard rarely edited, corrected, or rewrote his interviews, which allows them to present a sort of “live” articulation of his thinking.<sup>42</sup> Speech allows for a greater level of flexibility across a range of ideas or topics than is possible in the intentional course of writing. As interviews progress, they often coalesce around certain constellations of his ideas and commitments, including their complications and contradictions. Baudrillard’s writing, on the other hand,

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>42</sup> Mike Gane, “Introduction” in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. by Mike Gane (London: Routledge, 1993), 9.

manifests the play of these ideas. As Baudrillard states: "it's in the written form that I express most radically what I think."<sup>43</sup> His writing performs the seduction. In interviews, Baudrillard speaks seductively about his thinking on seduction, in texts he writes to seduce. The distinction is fine, but it matters. The interviews feel more accessible (but beware confusion of the feeling of reading with textual quality). More, the interviews expose his logic differently than his writing. This difference reveals the trace of an aspect that Althaus-Reid picks up in taking 'obscenity, in reverse.' She reverses obscenity's valuation.

For both Sartre and Baudrillard, the obscene offends because it renders the material world visible, all too visible. For Sartre, there is no ambivalence: the obscene denies freedom. Here we encounter a difference between sadism and obscenity. A sadist can appear as an ambivalent character. She fails to achieve her desire, but she fails due to an attempt to over apply freedom, not a negation of it. The obscene, however, results from freedom's failure to transcend the givenness of flesh. Obscenity is the result of the sadist's domination. It negates freedom and makes an object of a human. This makes Sartre's skin crawl. In his view, a person must transcend her givenness; she must take responsibility for her freedom. It will be complicated, yes, but the responsibility to act is hers. The obscene excludes that which makes us human with its relentless exposure of facticity.

Likewise in the interview "The Revenge of the Crystal," Baudrillard objects to obscenity, because it shows things as they are. Whereas art holds the power of illusion, "obscenity is a power of disillusion and of objectivity;" it causes a "terror of the visible."<sup>44</sup> The obscene denies the possibility of enchanted space.<sup>45</sup> Because art is not beholden to laws

<sup>43</sup> Baudrillard quoted by Gane, "Introduction," 12.

<sup>44</sup> Baudrillard, "Revenge of the Crystal," 60.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 61.

of social or physical reality, it can work within the realms of appearances to establish spaces where one can play with new symbolic possibilities in an alternate world. It is in these alternative spaces that transformation is possible. Obscenity, on the other hand, destroys the play and possibility of alternative spaces by its demand for the real<sup>46</sup>: “Obscenity is objectivity in the visible.”<sup>47</sup> Obscenity renders the material world visible.

Imagine a dancer, Sartre suggests, without clothing or adornment. The dance of the dancer positions her as an actor in the world. Indeed, so long as she dances, the dancer’s body appears “for-itself”: her self-determination transcends her givenness, and her dance transcends her skin. While she dances “the nudity of the flesh is wholly present, but it cannot be seen.”<sup>48</sup> The grace of the dance clothes her; her movements veil her body. Rather than breast or hip, we see movement and shape. This movement and shape, according to Sartre, are the appearance of freedom. The possibilities of action performed by a free actor veil the givenness of her fleshy materiality. The grace of her dance veils her flesh, because her movements invoke the world to which she belongs and the world in which she acts. The necessity of what is given (e.g. in history and by her body) opens up into an unpredictable future. It is grace that hides her naked body from our gaze and clothes her flesh with the greater context. It is an illusion—an important illusion—that Sartre suggests manifests the possibility and actuality of freedom. Indeed, the illusion offers a view of unpredictable, but real, transcendence. According to Sartre, this exhibition of a grace-veiled naked body

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>48</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 520.

demonstrates “the supreme coquetry and the supreme challenge of grace.”<sup>49</sup> (Note that desire, seduction, illusion, and coquetry tangle throughout.)

Sartre proposes that grace veils the dancer’s body. Indeed, the ultimate challenge of grace is to fully clothe a nude body with active movement, such that even though the flesh is entirely present, it is not seen. By situating her in the world, the dance functions as a garment covering the dancer’s otherwise exposed flesh. Grace manifests the transcendence of freedom; it covers her facticity. Now juxtapose the image of a dancer’s veiling and graceful movement with the bound flesh of the sadist’s object: the inert flesh of the obscene body. Though, as Sartre makes clear, not everything that is ungraceful is obscene, obscenity “belongs to the genus of the ungraceful.”<sup>50</sup> Obscenity destroys grace because it confronts the eye with naked flesh. Rather than the coquetry of grace, the obscene occurs in the absence of and without arising desire.<sup>51</sup> In Althaus-Reid’s words, Sartre’s category of obscenity is “a category of body visibility, an exposure of the flesh without means of control, such as jiggling or body postures outside the law.”<sup>52</sup> Obscenity reveals the facticity of the body. In doing so, the confrontation with unabashed materiality disrobes the veiling illusions of coquettish seductions.

We can look at the naked and tortured flesh of Jesus hanging on the cross, Althaus-Reid remarks by way of example. That is, it is acceptable to look at Christ’s body, so long as the body does not have a penis. We do not even know whether Jesus had a penis at the time of his death. Perhaps it didn’t develop in the way we assume is normal or perhaps he had an accident. We cannot know. The bible tells of him arriving for circumcision, but nothing more

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 521.

<sup>52</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 104.

detailed. Moreover, the memories of tradition veil his flesh with constructions of his masculinity so that even when a penis appears it functions as a phallus. As she points out: “we know more about the gender making of the man Jesus than of his biological status, or, what is more important, his sexuality.”<sup>53</sup> What would happen if we confronted the obscenity of his fleshy facticity? What would happen if we confronted the hanging body of Jesus with (or without, as the case may be) a penis? What if rather than a graceful image of Jesus crucified, veiled to suit heteronormative, patriarchal [...] desires for God, we witnessed the obscenity of his inert flesh as it was given that painful day (or other more pleasant ones)? Perhaps we would encounter God?<sup>54</sup> The second motion of Althaus-Reid’s use of Sartre’s concept of obscenity, the motion in reverse, begins with wordplay. “Obscenity appears now to us as the dis-covering of grace, and the way to transcendence,” she writes.<sup>55</sup> By removing (uncovering, dis-covering) the veils of illusion, obscenity exposes (sees, discovers) grace. Transcendence connotes the symbolic excess to which the reversal of obscenity gestures.

Baudrillard and Sartre conceptualize obscenity in distinctly different registers. Yet for both men, the central offense of the obscene is its disillusion/dissolution of that which they claim to be helpful shrouds of the real. We need to be able to transcend a given situation, they teach; we need to be able to transcend materiality. As such, obscenity appears unredeemable. For Sartre, obscenity destroys the dancer’s garment of grace and leaves her flesh exposed; for Baudrillard, obscenity destroys the rituals and rules that set the stage of an imagined scene. Herein occurs the second aspect of Althaus-Reid’s reversal of obscenity. She folds an insistence on the productive possibilities of material exposure up

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> C.f. “Obscenity no. 1: Bi/Christ” in Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 112-120.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 111.

against the philosophers' negativity. Althaus-Reid reverses the valuation of obscenity. Obscenity ruptures ideological illusions in order to expose material realities that these illusions hide, but the formulation of obscenity also leaves the body immediately available for persisting and for other citations.<sup>56</sup>

Like the sadist's efforts to ensnare the freedom of his object, the apophasis of writing with 'obscenity, in reverse' only succeeds within fleeting moments. When the shake of a muscle, the bounce of a breast, or the drop of sweat interrupt and claim our attention with the exposure of materiality *but do not yet make sense*, we can gesture obliquely beyond the signifiable. Once they start to make sense, however, the signifying webs of language and the illusions of simulations again veil the flesh. Althaus-Reid experiments with letting 'obscenity, in reverse' serve as a technique to foster encounters with the materiality of lives lived. The apophatic technique utters that which cannot be written: obscenity allows texts to expose bodies and their disruptions.

I add that the writing of obscenities finds these fleeting appearances of fleshy facticity in surprising textual spaces. We can write apophatically with a sensibility for establishing other textual spaces in which language, knowledge, and power function differently. "The road is broad and needs to be per/verted (given another interpretation), twisted in a forbidden direction,"<sup>57</sup> Althaus-Reid writes. The per/versions of theology arising out of diverse experiences of exclusion and suffering expose processes of disorder that unravel the logic of theological simulacra. Constantly multiplying per/versions helps to ensure that we do not confuse new veils with the flesh below.

<sup>56</sup> Judith Butler, see discussion p. 128-130 below.

<sup>57</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 121.

## Obscenities

*One day, Guto's older sister, Aida, obtained a luxurious blouse through extensive economic negotiation. Guto took it from her as she proudly displayed it to her family. Putting it on, he began a dance. With scarred breasts covered by the distinctly feminine fabric, cheeks brightened with rouge, and ears adorned with clip-on earrings, Guto sashays around his mother's small house to the music of whistles and kissing noises. Guto wraps his poor Nicaraguan body with a soft and frilly fabric of wealth and privilege. In doing so, he performs economic drag that becomes inseparable from both his imperial drag and gender drag. The family delights in him, as they delight in the young Nicaraguan boy's queer performance. His mother and sisters cheer him on with calls such as "¡Qué fina, bonita, muñequita!" "See Roger...Look," Aida calls out, "Guto's a cochón (queer)."<sup>58</sup>*

Althaus-Reid closes *Indecent Theology* by picturing indecent theologians in the image of Guto and his dance. She writes that indecent theologians "come out in their pursuit of honesty and engagement with the real and, like Guto, grab a blouse and a lipstick and per/vert the normative socio/theological script, unveil obscenity, and are able to see...tales of God and criticism of political systems."<sup>59</sup> Obscene exposures mark successful irruptions of hidden or excluded theological meaning that promise an efficacious theological indecency. "Theologies...may be effective as long as they represent the resurrection of the excessive in our contexts, and a passion for organizing the lusty transgressions of theological and political thought."<sup>60</sup> The chapter, "Talking Obscenities to Theology," concludes with three numbered obscenities, the second and third of which are obscene resurrections.

"Resurrection was not a theme for my generation," Althaus-Reid admits.<sup>61</sup> During her time studying at ISEDET, *los desaparecidos* claimed their attention, not the empty tomb.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Lancaster, "Guto's Performance" in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America* ed. by Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 10.

<sup>59</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 200.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 121.

People vanished daily, and they did so without a trace “as if people could evaporate into thin air without leaving a body behind.”<sup>62</sup> Across Buenos Aires and Argentina arose a plea for their return. The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* walked the *Plaza* every Thursday morning “asking for the return of their children.”<sup>63</sup> This was the needed resurrection: “a resurrection of justice, of those declared ‘vanished’, to say that they had bodies, corpses, and these needed to be found.”<sup>64</sup> The obscene resurrections were not a question of a special, single empty grave, but of returning the real bodies—the likely tortured and murdered corpses of persons that have been disappeared by political, military, and ideological fiat. People do not actually disappear. Whether in the return of a hat or sandals that continue to carry their scent or in the memories of those whom their lives touched, people can—and do—come back.

In Turkey, for instance, where the enforced disappearances of the 1980s and 1990s remain largely unrecognized, the walks of the Saturday Mothers continue. There have been no truth commissions or reconciliation processes. There have been no formal admissions of the practice. The forced disappearances remain veiled by grace in a number of forms, for instance: nationalist histories that exclude Kurdish peoples; neoliberal governance; and a global willingness to efface broken bodies and lives for political or economic benefit.

One morning in Istanbul, I stopped still on Istiklal Caddesi to stand vigil in witness to “a gallery of the disappeared.” It took a serpentine shape down the main commercial thoroughfare as portrait after portrait—some photographs, some hand-drawings, some news text—were presented by relatives to demand the return of these lives and deaths to

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



their communities. Standing there as witness, it was as Althaus-Reid writes of Guto's performance: "it works as a test for the person who is the witness... '*Un test para el testigo*'"<sup>65</sup> The gallery confronted us with the obscenity of faces, memories, loves, histories, events, and bodies; it "shows us with clarity what it is that is excluded."<sup>66</sup> In doing so, it communicated what is impossible to know, understand, or signify within legitimate speech. Resurrections, Althaus-Reid insists, have "consequences...for instance, the continuous struggle for justice and truth."<sup>67</sup>

Exposing the bodies of the disappeared disrupts the illusions that render them invisible. Their fleshy givenness – their histories, names, faces, bodies *cum* corpses — fundamentally challenge the grace of the oppressive systems. It is through this obscene "discovering" of grace that a way to transcendence—in this case, resurrection—appears.<sup>68</sup> Yet most of us who are indecent are not *desaparecidos*. Indecent persons "lived and are still around and leave their traces in history."<sup>69</sup> We are not disappeared. For most of us, it is not the obscene torture and destruction of our whole being, our very existence, that has been veiled by ideological illusions. Rather, the grace in our systems veils obscene denials of everyday economic and political subsistence, corporeal autonomy, and physical intimacies.

In my pages, an additional difference must also be addressed. Writing moves in a different space than street protest; it culls a different set of possibilities. In writing, the obscene appears ambivalently. It can appear only in and through text, which is a product of language and, in Baudrillard's terms, the logic of simulations. Unlike the Saturday Mothers,

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 123.

whose very act of walking with portraits manifests the disappeared as not actually disappeared, we cannot directly write to expose what language itself (and therewith writing) conceals. Instead, again in Baudrillard's language, we need to draw language to where it can utter without signifying. Something a bit tricky is needed: a mode of apophasis capable of uttering the excessive materiality of lives and deaths. Baudrillard suggests writing as seduction. Here Guto's story becomes instructive.

"The devastating economic situation of Nicaragua is present in that blouse," Althaus-Reid makes clear, but it is through the drag that this becomes meaningfully exposed and contested.<sup>70</sup> Guto's dance manifests the realities of Nicaraguan life through a queer performance of signification. As he performs for and with his family, the simulacra, which veil the web of its materiality shudders a bit—but ambivalently. Made in the USA, the fabric is both the product and symbol of "imperial economic abundance, in contrast with the restricted economy of the Contra war."<sup>71</sup> Using Lancaster's numbers, Nicaragua experienced severe shortages of food and basic goods; real wages fell around 90% between 1980 and 1988. The Sandinista government's attempts to manage the crisis led to nearly 35,000% inflation in 1988 and large-scale job losses in a situation where employment already was scarce. In 1987, over 60% of government expenditures were dedicated to defense against Contra forces; simultaneously the US embargo cut off Nicaraguan access to the agricultural and machinery markets necessary for economic viability.<sup>72</sup> Aida's possession of her blouse was exceptional. The desires that the blouse represents, however, were common. By

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Power and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), especially 1-7.

coquettishly playing with the signifying illusions of the blouse, Guto exposes what is veiled and unveiled by the seductions of the blouse. It is an obscene performance.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler reiterates the concept of drag that she introduced in *Gender Trouble* and then returned to in *Bodies that Matter*. “The point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested,” she writes.<sup>73</sup> Drag’s mimicry opens space for subversion because it exposes the instability of identities that are constituted by constantly repeating citations of gender [sexual, racial, economic, national, and so on] norms. Ordinarily the effacement of the repetitive work of citation disassembles this contingency. For instance, drag exposes the illusions of heteronormative gender formulations by making manifest the constant effort required for the repeated imitation of their ideal forms. It reveals authoritative norms as “nonnatural and nonnecessary;” it can be politically radical “by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted.”<sup>74</sup>

Guto’s dance succeeds as political when Aida recognizes him not as a macho teenage boy, but as a cochón. Yet Butler cautions that mimicry of a norm does not necessarily displace it. Citation can serve as “the means by which that dominant norm is most painfully reiterated as the very desire and the performance of those it subjects.”<sup>75</sup> Drag manifests an opposition to the regimes of power, but it simultaneously reflects and instantiates the

<sup>73</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 218.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>75</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), 133.

performers' implication in those same regimes.<sup>76</sup> Guto's drag manifests the gender, sexuality, economic and political situations incorporated with the obtaining and wearing of Aida's shirt by a dance that depends on his implication in these same regimes of power. Drag is ambivalent. It can—but will not always—open space for subversion by means of the citations that it seeks to destabilize.

Something similar can also occur in written form. By writing obscenities, it is possible to “allegorize the...ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested” as a sort of textual drag performance. Writing in this way appears as ambivalent in much the same way that drag is ambivalent. Blending Baudrillard and Butler, we never leave the play of simulations, but rather seek a dance that exposes them as “nonnatural and nonnecessary.” Althaus-Reid dis-covers the illusions of grace to undress its simulations so that she can discover grace, or transcendence.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler spends a fair amount of time with the documentary “Paris is Burning.” As part of her analysis, she pauses to consider the desire to achieve “realness” within the drag balls. Performances achieve “realness” when a performer so effectively cites the norms constituting a chosen identity that their performance becomes impossible “to read” as artifice. In her words, the performer compels the belief of the spectators in the naturalization of a performed identity by appropriating and imitating the gender, class, and racial norms. This is the height of drag performance. Though explicitly the presentation of an illusion, the performance denies the ability to read it as such. It appears as real.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 125. “At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.”

At times, Althaus-Reid's way of using 'obscenity, in reverse' achieves an appearance of "realness" in the sense that Butler develops. Recall her opening suggestion in *Indecent Theology* that "the Argentinian theologian would like then to remove her underwear..."<sup>77</sup> For many readers, the performed obscenity of the text identifies Althaus-Reid as a theologian who literally does not wear underwear and loves the kink of orgiastic sex. This may or may not have been the case. Writing obscenely with "a theology of exhibitionism"<sup>78</sup> takes form as a type of drag exhibitionism. In order to show ways in which reality can be questioned and new norms instituted, the drag of obscene writing becomes 'unreadable.' It succeeds but remains an ambivalent performance. We ought not confuse the "realness" of the illusions that we see exhibited with the material subversions that occur in the activity of writing.

I mark this here because of the ease with which we can read the obscenity of Althaus-Reid's writing with the salaciousness of a scandal-saturated tabloid that promises to tell us the indecent truth about [fill in the blank] lives. It is a concern for this sort of reading that fuels Emilie Townes' worry that Althaus-Reid's text undresses indigenous women in the same way that Saartjie Baartman was undressed—submitting their bodies to the invasions of colonial voyeurs.<sup>79</sup> It also is this sort of salacious reading that finds support in Althaus-Reid's texts for making indecent theology a theology of ever-more-indecent sexual testimony.

The musk of the lemon vendors, like the musk emanating from theology written without underwear, affronts our senses. It brings to mind (seductive or aversive — but certainly erotic) images of the intimacies that women's clothing conceal. But, to quote

<sup>77</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Emilie Townes, "Panel Response to Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology*," *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (January, 2003): 70.

Baudrillard: “If one lifts one’s skirt, it is to show one’s self — not to show oneself naked like the truth (who can believe that the truth remains the truth when one lifts its veil?), but born in the kingdom of appearances, that is to say of seduction, which is just the opposite.”<sup>80</sup>

What is written by ‘obscenity, in reverse’ remains veiled and in need of undressing. It is a drag performance that calls for ever more drag performances, such as the one to which I turn now: Althaus-Reid’s undressing of the Virgin Mary.

### Mary’s Skirts

*“The Virgin Mary is overdressed.”<sup>81</sup> From her dress to her thick cloak, the church ensures that fabric covers Mary’s body from the top of her head to the tip of her toe. The Virgin of Guadalupe, for instance, is drawn as “the icon of a no-body.”<sup>82</sup> The Church paints her as a woman who “[fulfills] a vocation of accommodating God’s desire when God pleases.... A life that cannot have any choice because it is a woman’s life.”<sup>83</sup> A blue starred cloak wraps around her delicate face. The draping folds of a long dress straighten any hint of fabric curving along a breast or hip into the shape of a woman’s body. With hands clasped gently in front of her, Mary’s countenance gazes down and to the side. There appears a sexy woman without sex and without struggles; a woman un-assailed by the challenges of poor urban life and unhardened by the calluses of day-to-day labor; a woman with striking physical beauty who protects dictatorships and military. This “Mary was the beautiful killer woman of the Americas.”<sup>84</sup> She represents “the theological project of the Conquista.”<sup>85</sup> Among liberationists, Mary appears with different clothes. Sometimes she appears as a peasant—“a clean-faced smiling child-mother simply dressed, and perhaps with a scarf on her head.”<sup>86</sup> But are either of these (or any other) really Mary, the mother of Jesus? Does she have a clitoris through which she knows a range of pleasures internal to her own body? Does her skin stretch or sag where she carried and fed the body of God’s son with her own? Do scars tell of the torture, abuse, molestation, or prostitution that characterize the lives of so many women in Latin America (and elsewhere),*

<sup>80</sup> Baudrillard quoted by Althaus-Reid, “Queer I stand: Lifting the Skirts of God” in *The Sexual Theologian*, ed. by Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), epigraph.

<sup>81</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

*just as they did in Israel?*<sup>87</sup> *We do not know, though we need to know. "Nobody has taken the trouble to lift up her skirts to see what is under it."*<sup>88</sup>

Althaus-Reid writes to remove the decent skirts that theology tailors for Mary. These skirts veil the obscenity of her flesh and history, along with all those who take refuge under her cloak. The skirts legitimate the illusions of patriarchal and colonial desires. "Mary becomes the symbol of grace for women, who are called ontologically and materially to cover themselves up and metaphysically speaking to take a cold shower to inhibit lust."<sup>89</sup> Rather than demonstrate the queer curves of Divine love, Mary's dress straightens them.

Elsewhere, Althaus-Reid puts it this way: Mary is a "simulacr[um] in which the process of making ideologies...is exemplified."<sup>90</sup> The theological symbol of Mary needs the dis-illusion of obscene exposures. We need to dis-cover (uncover) her grace, and, in doing so, discover the way to transcendence. "It is not only that our idea of a woman who does not reflect the human experience of womanhood in the least has been made a narrative of authority, but this 'thing' called the Virgin Mary has interfered with other political and social conceptualizations."<sup>91</sup>

The remainder of this chapter considers Althaus-Reid's disrobing of the Virgin of Guadalupe in *Indecent Theology*. To mirror the dual motions of the obscene, in reverse, I first walk with Althaus-Reid's depiction of the graceful Mary, which is represented by the Mary that Althaus-Reid attributes to Gebara and Bingemer's *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of*

<sup>87</sup> "The narrative of Jesus' birth is a violent text because it is a text of the irruption of God during the *conquista* of Israel by the Roman Empire....The story represents the violence to which life is submitted in an occupied territory." Althaus-Reid, "Walking with Women-Serpents", 37.

<sup>88</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 61.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

*Grace*. I set aside the question of whether Althaus-Reid's reading fairly represents Gebara and Bingemer's text, because regardless of its exegesis, the reading paints the image of the 'graceful' Mary whose skirts Althaus-Reid wants to lift. This leads to a consideration of Althaus-Reid's "female impersonation" of the Virgin inspired by Yolanda López's "Portrait of the Artist as Our Lady of Guadalupe." Throughout, I keep in mind Baudrillard's suggestion to approach Althaus-Reid and her Mary with the intimacy of a lover asking permission to slip a hand below a shirt, under a belt.

Let me be clear, however, that I do not lay claim to Mary's flesh, nor does Althaus-Reid. I seek to write toward what is not mine to signify, a transcendence escaping the exclusions of our language and ideology. It is a *desire* for touch—the reach under the skirt—that concerns me. Though certainly not the only approach possible (nor the only approach embraced by Althaus-Reid's writing of *Indecent Theology*), here this involves an apophysis that draws theological writing away from its illusions and toward the materiality that manifests the transcendence of the Divine. To be sure, to reach toward Mary's body with the intimacy of a lover scandalizes. I hope that it will be obvious that the scandal of the obscenity is the exclusions, oppression, and suffering hidden below and by the folds of her skirts—not the desire of and for intimacy. Indeed, the shame attached to desiring certain intimacies itself needs to be undressed. The desire to touch and be touched by those we love is part of what makes us human.

### Mary of Grace

In *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid directs one of her strongest critiques at a work of Latin American feminist theology: *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. In her words: "The passion for idealism and the constant use of ideology as a method has never been so blatant as in the case of Latin American Mariological Theology...The most consistent



example of this has been the text produced in Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer's *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*.<sup>92</sup> According to Althaus-Reid, this text serves as a metonym for a false consciousness in liberation and feminist theologies, broadly speaking. Liberationists have failed to challenge the ways of producing theology in their mechanisms of production, she argues.<sup>93</sup> From exclusionary uses of an authorial 'we' to falsely suggesting a collaborative writing process that never occurred and on through the uncritical adoption of colonial academic discourses such as anthropology, liberation theologians in this style "tend to feel happier creating legends such as 'the theologians work in community' for the benefit of Western consumerism, than for the sake of doing things in a different way."<sup>94</sup>

*Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* opens with critique of Mariology as a tool for the perpetuation of patriarchy: "So Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of God, as presented by the androcentric and patriarchal world, far from provoking conflicts, actually strengthens the cultural foundations of that world to the extent that she also becomes its great Mother."<sup>95</sup> Yet Althaus-Reid worries that Gebara and Bingemer accept dominant ideological structures of patriarchy when they proceed by means of inverting gender paradigms, rather than by unraveling the ideologies upon which these paradigms are built. This allows women's decency to continue as an idealist underpinning of the theological enterprise. Using Baudrillard's language, I could paraphrase this critique with a reminder that simulations structure the logics we have available and thus these logics cannot be used to dismantle them rationally. In order to subvert decency, one must cross its boundaries.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 2.

Otherwise, however radical the reading, decency remains an unquestioned assumption. For Baudrillard, this calls for seduction; for Althaus-Reid, a performative use of the obscene, in reverse. Gebara and Bingemer, however, do not transgress the logic of the simulation (or so Althaus-Reid argues). Consequentially their Mariology continues “a decent field of work for women, approved by male theologians.”<sup>96</sup> They write a Mary of grace.

*Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* follows a recognizable path for feminist works of liberation theology. It begins with method, moves to a discursive consideration of its topic, and then finally closes with application. The text’s methodological question stands at the center: How ought or can the doing of theology be reshaped in order to respect and do justice to the lives and experiences of women, especially poor women? Gebara and Bingemer’s answer is to write “the groundwork for a Marian theology” by means of writing a theological anthropology “that can do justice to the complexity of human reality.”<sup>97</sup> In order to accomplish this, they suggest that there need to be four key transformations in theological anthropology. First, it needs to become human-centered, rather than male-centered. Second, it needs to resist platonic dualisms so as to write a “unifying anthropology.” Third, it must embrace a realist contextualization of Mary in history. And fourth, it ought to recognize the pluri-dimensionality that reflects man and woman as complementary aspects of human reality and the various aspects relationship to Mary can take.<sup>98</sup> Once they establish these commitments, Gebara and Bingemer re-envision Mary by means of a textual voyage through scripture, dogma, and devotional practices.

<sup>96</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 36.

<sup>97</sup> Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-12.

Though their stated goal is to write a theological anthropology “that can do justice to the complexity of human reality,” Althaus-Reid argues that Gebara and Bingemer fail to engage with the real materiality that comprises the lives of poor women in Latin America. *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* talks about women. Indeed, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* centers on women’s stories of experiences and devotions. Yet the real and everyday lives of women as they relate to Mary do not enter the writing. Nor do Gebara and Bingemer wrestle with the historical experiences of women’s oppression that occurs (and is enforced) in their relationship with the Virgin Mary.

If one is to claim a feminist anthropological consideration of the Virgin Mary, Althaus-Reid argues, it should incorporate the fleshiness of bodies in relation. Witness the sharpness of her critique: “One would think liberationists [such as Gebara and Bingemer] would be as suspicious as Althusser” of using an approach related even tangentially to an anthropological science “which had its origin in the colonisation of Africa, and the scientific ordering done under the colonial gaze.”<sup>99</sup> Yet Gebara and Bingemer not only do not express suspicion of a discourse that elaborates on the nature of humanity based on general characteristics, they do not draw on the materiality of anthropology itself. They do not “refer to anything specifically recognisable as coming from an anthropological field of studies, cultural or philosophical.”<sup>100</sup>

Althaus-Reid allows that if we set aside suspicion of anthropological discourse *in toto*, a theological anthropology committed to the complex materials of lived lives could find inspiration in Marxist and feminist materialist anthropologies. She names anthropologists such as Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Kate Young as potentially illuminative interlocutors.

<sup>99</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 41.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

Rosaldo, for instance, is famous for her insights into the influence of public/private distinctions on the asymmetrical social relations between the sexes, but it is her ethnography of the Ilongots of Northern Luzon in the Philippines to which Althaus-Reid refers. This ethnography represents Rosaldo's sustained immersion with the Ilongots as they negotiate bodies, violence, and social opportunity and communicates her understanding by manifesting the materiality of life lived rather than accepting or telling stories about them.<sup>101</sup> The example of Rosaldo's immersion in the lived materials of the Ilongots does not, however, position ethnography as a privileged method.

Althaus-Reid does not propose that Gebara and Bingemer should have cast themselves as anthropologists in the field. Indeed, had they taken this role, her critique of them and their writing likely would have been no less pointed. Two pages later, an ethnographer arrives as the character who, though having good intentions, enforces the marginalization of the Other.<sup>102</sup> Ethnography appears as one of many alternatives that possess the potential to take seriously and incorporate the fleshy materiality of lives lived. Althaus-Reid's articulation of alternative approaches helps to make clear the limitations of Gebara and Bingemer's writing by evidencing that their approach to Mary is "nonnecessary."

Althaus-Reid shows that this graceful Mary is "nonnatural" by exposing that which the veils of grace hide. This is the bodies, real fleshy bodies, she argues. Nowhere do they appear. Gebara and Bingemer write that they have "have paid attention" to the experience of Latin American women.<sup>103</sup> Through interaction with these women, they have "become

<sup>101</sup> See Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot notions of self and social life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>102</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 45.

<sup>103</sup> Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 30.

more and more aware” of the struggles and experiences of that affect them.<sup>104</sup> Latin American women, “especially of the poorest, those who are ranked third or fourth” in society, taught the theologians at some point in the past; perhaps these women continue to teach them.<sup>105</sup> Yet, their bodies and fleshy lives do not appear in the text. Gebara and Bingemer do not write the materiality of these women’s lives into their pages. For so long as ideas suffice in the absence of bodies, ideological processes prevail—even when the ideas on the page seek to counter their effect. The theologians write apart from the women, just as they also write apart from themselves. The bodies of Gebara and Bingemer likewise do not appear. The theologians’ flesh lurks under erasure. When Althaus-Reid exposes the ravaged bodies of young Latin American women who are told to look toward the Virgin as model, she raises the question: Can this Mary withstand the exposed presence of bodies? Making use of Sartre’s concept of obscenity, the answer is no. Mary is the symbol of grace for women, and obscenity destroys grace.

This matters because Mary’s skirts cover not only her own body, but the bodies of those who are interpellated by her. She is a “simulacr[um] in which the process of making ideologies...is exemplified.”<sup>106</sup> Take, for instance, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Just as the Spanish Catholic Virgin appeared asking for a church to be built on native land, the symbols of her portrayal overwrite and veil the embodied lives of women and men. When this Mary is held out for devotion to young Latin American women, who are themselves forcibly married and impregnated, she renders invisible their real bodies and pains. This Virgin Mary is not a Mary of liberation, but a Mary of heteronormative and colonial domination.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 39.

Mary needs reality as a first act. She is a symbol of grace for women who “ontologically and materially” are clothed by her skirts.<sup>107</sup> The graceful “Mary is in the realm of the fantastic and phantasmagorical,” and she will be destroyed by the obscene exposure of materiality and lives lived.<sup>108</sup> She needs her skirts lifted to expose the obscenities of the bodies that huddle under her cloak.

### An Obscene Mary

Though *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* bears the brunt of Althaus-Reid’s attack, she speaks to liberation theologies — with a particular concern for feminist theologies — at large. The pages present Althaus-Reid in a stridently aggressive mode of critique. There are many ways to challenge, complicate, or nuance the claims she makes about the text. Here, I only seek to understand how Althaus-Reid uses “obscurity, in reverse” to return materiality to a symbol (in this case Mary) that leads again to transcendence. If, as the text repetitively insists, the theological ‘voice’ of Mary “betrays the Virgin, who then appears as the toy sitting in the lap of that great ventriloquist God the Father,”<sup>109</sup> we need an apophatic writing that utters what escapes this Father’s voice.

Obscurity, in reverse discovers grace and a way to transcendence, Althaus-Reid writes. If Althaus-Reid’s obscenity destroys the Mary of legitimate patriarchal and colonial grace, it also discovers alternate obscene Marys. “It was an inspiration,” Althaus-Reid remembers. She had a sudden realization that for the next carnival in Buenos Aires she should be a “female impersonator of the Virgin of Guadalupe,” one of a trio of Marys that

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 57.

would include Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Althaus-Reid would attend as “a female impersonator” of the phallic, colonial Virgin. Transcendence found in cosplay to be performed as drag. Together as a trio, they would address “the carnival multitudes with a mimicry of Virginal discourses starting with the words such as ‘My children!’”<sup>110</sup>

Althaus-Reid’s inspiration was an image—the “Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe” by Yolanda López. Althaus-Reid describes the image of the Virgin as a young Chicana, who looks like her maker. López as the Virgin of Guadalupe appears in a jogging attitude with her cloak open behind her, and dressed in a modern skirt and sneakers. That, if one looks carefully, her cloak has the appearance of an open, swollen, and red vulva fascinates Althaus-Reid: “curiously, nothing has been said about this tender, swollen reddish vulva from where she emerges.”<sup>111</sup> This image is open for the self-identification of any woman, not only a Latina, Althaus-Reid muses.

López drew her image in 1978 as one of three portraits of the Virgin of Guadalupe portraying herself, her mother, and her grandmother. A first iteration combined a self-portrait photograph of herself in running clothes with black and white drawings of her mother and grandmother, and provided the model for oil pastel image to which Althaus-Reid refers. “I feel living, breathing women also deserve the respect and love lavished on Guadalupe...” López has said of the image. “It is a call to look at women, hard working, enduring and mundane, as the heroines of our daily routine.”<sup>112</sup> It is difficult to imagine a stronger contrast than that which Althaus-Reid develops between López’s “Portrait of the

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Betty LaDuke, “Yolanda López: breaking Chicana stereotypes,” *Feminist Studies* 20 (1994): 118.

Artist” with the Virgin of Guadalupe as she appears in *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*.

Gebara and Bingemer turn to the Virgin of Guadalupe as they explore devotions of the Virgin Mary. Through exploration of these devotions, they hope “to demonstrate the diversity of our social reality and the complexity of the question of the relationship between those who ‘live in history’ and those who ‘live in God.’”<sup>113</sup> The “experience that springs from the depths of human beings” must be part of the conversation.<sup>114</sup> Yet their engagement with the Virgin of Guadalupe only considers the narrative, and that narrative only in a singular form. They explicitly bracket questions of varied translation or popular interpretation. They do not tell the story through the words of living communities or practices of devotion. They do not share their own presence in the devotion. The historical materiality of devotions relating to the appearance of Mary on the hill are relegated to haunting the text in ghostly deferrals. The task at hand is only a narrow narrative analysis in order “enter into the description of the appearance and to view it as a religious experience that reveals a deep dimension of the human.”<sup>115</sup>

Althaus-Reid decries this approach: “How far is this apparitional theology from an orthopraxis approach! Yet, articles and books from Latin American liberationists are still dedicated to the starting point of an apparition, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, for instance, which relates the questioning of our lives as women (and men) in Latin America to the image and likeness of the theological project of the Conquista.”<sup>116</sup> The Conquista is the fantasy that births the ghost of Gebara and Bingemer’s Mary, Althaus-Reid argues. She is a

<sup>113</sup> Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 128.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>116</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 46.



creature of illusion, the ghost of imperial ideologies that overtook Latin America, organizing its bodies in the heteronormative and economic patterns of its Catholic colonizers. This “Mary interpellates men and women, especially amongst the poor, and produces the false consciousness that is Marian faith, concerned with the perpetuation of capitalist models of marriage, biological sexual definitions and universal faith constructions of women believers.”<sup>117</sup>

In López’s self-portrait, Althaus-Reid sees the reversal of Mary’s interpellative effect. López maintains the beauty and strength of the traditional icon as she replaces an unembodied phantasm with an image of her own body that sings with the resonances of her mother’s and grandmother’s portraits. According to Althaus-Reid, the obscenity of López’s image of a bare-legged running Chicana exposes what any drawn or written image of the Virgin always already exposes (beyond the fleeting interruption of obscenity at the moment of exposure): namely, that in and through which we see ourselves. As Althaus-Reid writes: “The point is that to write about the Virgin will always be ‘the portrait of the theologian as the Virgin of Guadalupe.’”<sup>118</sup> Obscenity destroys the old holographic Mary, but obscenity also reveals what is likewise true: that our image of the Virgin will always itself be a self-portrait. Mary always wears skirts of an ideological design. Whether thought of in terms of ending the old, continuing the work, or beginning again, the need to interrupt illusions by writing obscenely persists. We keep reaching under Mary’s skirts.

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López’s image appears slightly differently than one would expect from Althaus-Reid’s description of a woman stepping out from a giant vulva. The oil pastel drawing

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 53.

portrays a smiling young woman in mid-stride as she jogs toward the viewer. The bounce of her hair and the flow of the fabric that surround her body emphasize the motion of her movement. With her left hand she holds the corner of the iconic blue starred cloak, which flows out over her shoulder and behind her. In her right hand, she holds a snake just behind its head; her feet trample the red, white, and blue wings of a cherub below. Above white sneakers, the tea-length skirt of her belted red shirt-dress has blown up revealingly high to expose lean muscular thighs before curling down to its natural length in the rear. From behind her, light shines: yellow rays radiate outwards on an oval of grey rimmed at the edge with red.

In the essay “Queer I stand,” Althaus-Reid quotes Baudrillard’s caution about the illusion of finding naked truth under skirts. It is a passage that she takes from a review essay written by Stuart Jeffries about Catherine Millet’s memoir, *La Vie Sexuelle de Catherine M*, published in *The Guardian*.<sup>119</sup> Jeffries reports on Baudrillard’s text, which originally appeared in the French daily *Libération*. In both Jeffries’ report and Baudrillard’s text, Baudrillard’s statement continues beyond Althaus-Reid’s quote: “But if one lifts one’s skirt, it is to show one’s self — not to show oneself naked like the truth (who can believe that the truth remains the truth when one lifts its veil?) [end of Althaus-Reid’s quote], but to be born in the kingdom of appearances, that is to say of seduction, which is just the opposite.”<sup>120</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Cited in Stuart Jeffries, “Body of Evidence” in *The Guardian Weekend* 30 June 2001. In this book report, Jeffries gathers responses to the book “La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.” by Catherine Millet (Paris: Seuil, 2001).

<sup>120</sup> “Penser comme une femme enlève sa robe» dit Bataille. Oui, mais la naïveté de toutes les Catherine Millet, c’est de penser qu’on enlève sa robe pour se déshabiller, pour se mettre à nu et accéder ainsi à la vérité nue, celle du sexe ou celle du monde. Si on enlève sa robe, c’est pour apparaître - non pas apparaître nue comme la vérité (qui peut croire que la vérité reste la vérité quand on lui enlève son voile?) mais pour naître au royaume des apparences, c’est-à-dire de la séduction - ce qui est tout le contraire.” Jean Baudrillard, “L’élevage de poussière”, *Libération* May 29, 2001. [http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2001/05/29/l-elevage-de-poussiere\\_366193](http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2001/05/29/l-elevage-de-poussiere_366193)

Jeffries translates the last phrase as: “to give birth to the kingdom of appearances, that is to say seduction....”<sup>121</sup>

I trace the convoluted transmission and note the change from López’s image to Althaus-Reid’s description of it because the layers of textual veiling work like Mary’s skirts. Each layer exposes something. Yet, we immediately encounter it re-skirted. We reach under one iteration to discover another that is slightly modulated to suit the image and purposes of the writer. ‘Obscenity, in reverse’ does not reach under skirts with a naïve hope of accessing a perfect nudity. Neither does it manifest the cynicism of an endless reflection of mirrors. It is a performance that like the ambivalence of drag cannot be stabilized because its subversions work within an inescapable play of illusions. This is part of the image’s reversal. Rather than the simulacra of Mary’s ideological appearance interpellating living flesh, exposed and living flesh reveal the Virgin. Through an obscene “dis-covering” of grace we can discover transcendence that is grace, which again calls for obscenity.

<sup>121</sup> Jeffries, “Body of Evidence.” (emphasis mine)

## 4: Bodies

*The voice of Marx helps us to understand that the voice of writing, a voice of ceaseless contestation, must constantly develop itself and break itself into multiple forms.<sup>1</sup>*

### A World of Illusions

Near the castle in Edinburgh, just around the corner from New College where Althaus-Reid taught at the University of Edinburgh, peers a camera obscura. Maria Theresa Short built this spyglass nearly two centuries ago, close to the period that Marx wrote in London's British Library, on top of what (at the time) was a crowded tenement building.<sup>2</sup> Years before, the building had been a grand house. Today, the building serves as a tourist attraction of the finest sort: the so-called "World of Illusions." In this space, history, science, illusion, souvenirs, and spectacle blend into two or three hours of expensive family fun. Holograms and mirrors span multiple stories of entertainment and appear in every possible configuration. Designed to bewilder, the installations confound and delight the young and old alike.

To reach the camera obscura at the pinnacle of the building, we are led on a journey through labyrinths of illusions. The attraction is educational. At each waypoint, a visitor

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Marx's Three Voices" in *Friendship* trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 99-100.

<sup>2</sup> According to the self-history given by the attraction, Maria Theresa Short installed the camera obscura in the 1850s and gave the observatory the name: *Short's Observatory*. [www.camera-obscura.co.uk/camera\\_obscura/camera\\_history\\_attraction.asp](http://www.camera-obscura.co.uk/camera_obscura/camera_history_attraction.asp)

learns the scientific explanations for the effects she experiences. Indeed, the attraction teaches that we should take time to learn and understand the science. This is a moral lesson, backed up by pleasure. Knowing why the illusions work does not disrupt their efficacy. Rather, our increasing knowledge strengthens the mismatch between perception and reality. Understanding the science behind the experience makes vertigo within the tunnel of light all the more powerful: I know this is an illusion; I know how the illusion works. Yet, my body falls to the side. I struggle to walk. My heart pounds, and my gut rebels. Nausea crests at the offense of fairy lights.

Illusions surround us and affect us; we cannot escape their effects on our bodies by knowledge alone. To move through the tunnel, I must use knowledge of the illusion to change how I walk. I must do things differently.

Eventually, we will arrive at the pinnacle of the attraction: a dark theater where a staff member directs all who enter to disconnect their technology. Our host needs to protect light for an ancient technology to work: this is the camera obscura. After a short wait for latecomers, the host locks the door and uncovers the lens. An image of a city teeming with movement immediately appears on a surface at the center of the room.

A camera obscura differs from other cameras. It does not freeze time, nor does it capture it for later. The image of the camera obscura only projects 'now.' The image moves constantly. Always.

A tour of Edinburgh begins promptly, but the real fun waits for a game that starts a few minutes later. The host distributes white cards among us. While orienting the gaze of the camera obscura, he suggests that we choose a person who walks on the street. Try sliding a card under this person as he turns this corner; look how we can lift him up. If you

want, scoot her—yes, her, over there on that street, do you see?—along. Perhaps you'd prefer to make a bridge that a bus must now cross on its route?

The camera obscura reflects the flesh and activity of persons, but also plants, buildings, animals...anything (but only that) which actually exists and takes up space within the space encompassed by the camera's line of sight.

As we take the host's direction, ghosts of people from the city below start to float here and there. The play with light and mirrors reshapes Edinburgh's streets and the journeys of those who move through them. We scoot and re-place real people living real lives in a real city. A good deal of the fun occurs in the knowledge that the images floating on our small cards reflect the real people who walk the streets below us right this minute. On top of a hill in Edinburgh, at the pinnacle of the "World of Illusion," tourists pay for the opportunity to consume ghostly images of bodies, lives, and a city for pleasure.

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The same year that *Indecent Theology* was published, Althaus-Reid published an essay under the title "¿Bién Sonados?" In this piece, she meditates on what she considers to be Marx's greatest contribution to the study of ideology. He articulated the historical degradation of philosophy that inverts and effaces the ordered relation between living bodies and philosophical reflection. In her words, ideology appears as "a methodology based on a sort of disappearing act or 'escapology.'"<sup>3</sup> Over time, ideas that begin with concrete experiences separate from the embodied lives and actions that gave them rise. When this happens, bodies fade until only ghostly shadows of materiality remain to haunt

<sup>3</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "¿Bién sonados? The future of mystical connections in liberation theology" *Political Theology* 3 (November 1, 2000): 51.

the ideas. When the inversion completes, ideas cease to be accountable to reality. Instead, ideas stand in judgment of reality.

Marx employs a metaphorical camera obscura to describe ideology's dynamics of inversion. As ideas replace reality, reality becomes strangely spectral. Rather than philosophy held accountable to the complexity of real lives, the camera obscura of ideology holds real lives accountable to the standard of ideas. In Althaus-Reid's words: "if reality does not match ideas, reality is distrusted. People for theology, and not theology for people. People for God, and not God for people."<sup>4</sup>

Notably, the inversion of Marx's camera obscura is of a different order than that of a physical camera obscura.<sup>5</sup> The physics of a physical camera obscura inverts the real and reflected spatially: it projects an upside-down reflection. Because the image confesses the inversion—the top appears as bottom and vice versa—it becomes difficult to forget that we watch an inverted image. At the "World of Illusion," for instance, it would be strange to forget that the images with which we play are second to and dependent on the bodies down below. Constant reminders surface in the moving images. Obviously, the image is flipped. But also: if a person on the street walks indoors, their silhouette disappears from our white card and spectral world. Though we can pretend to shape their path, the real moments of their journey disrupts our imaginative sport. With the camera obscura of ideology, however,

<sup>4</sup> Althaus-Reid, "¿Bién sonados?" 69.

<sup>5</sup> Marx likens the science of the inversion of historical-actions and ideas by a camera obscura of ideology to the science of a camera obscura's inversion of light: "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process." But while the process has similarity in this formulation, the effects are notably different. Not only does the inverted relationship become impossible to see, there is no disrupting the image by shutting the lens. Ideology creates "phantoms in the brain." One must struggle to interrupt it by seeking out and exposing the material life-processes of which these phantoms are sublimates by mucking around in the materials of life. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968). Available online at the Marx/Engels Internet Archive, [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org).

*forgetting is the illusion.* Ideas not only take the place of reality, they appear as reality. They colonize our imagination with phantoms. “As Marx would say, always when ideas come first, historical experiences do not even come a close second. They are erased and alienated from philosophy, theology and economics, and from the nation's memories too.”<sup>6</sup>

The physical camera obscura projects shifting reflections that announce themselves as inverted images. Its moving image invites us to play with its possibilities, even as it reminds us the illusions we foster are of our imagination. Marx's camera obscura, on the other hand, creates illusions. In experiencing the camera obscura of ideology, we do not simply view a flipped image; we enter a world of illusion. Ideology hides itself; ideology effaces its inversions; ideology presents its moving projection as the real.

The problem with liberation theology, Althaus-Reid suggests, may be that it has come to believe the illusions of Marx's camera obscura. “Theology of Liberation has been under the illusion that the best of Christianity expresses people's needs and struggles. In reality, this is an inversion of the fact that the best of the Liberationist approach to Christianity is not Christian at all.”<sup>7</sup> It is not the case that the best of Christianity expresses people's needs and struggles. The best of Christianity occurs in ongoing reflection on the ever-shifting experiences of life and its struggles. Taking the time to internalize the slippery distance between the two prior sentences accomplishes a first step, but only a first step, in returning bodies to theology. As the World of Illusion teaches, neither knowledge that an illusion exists nor how the illusion works will alone disrupt the effects of the illusion. Illusions work on our perceptions, experience, and bodies. Even when we know the illusion, it continues to shape what we can and do perceive as possible and as truth. Rather than relying on knowledge, *we need to do something differently.*

<sup>6</sup> Althaus-Reid, “¿Bién sonados?” 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 59.



Knowledge and language cannot alone interrupt or establish alternatives to the effects of ideological illusions. We need to write differently.

Althaus-Reid never wavers in her agreement with Marx's central claim: "The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals."<sup>8</sup> Liberation theologies depart from the conviction that only on the basis of encountering real people who live lives submerged in the real world, do we have the materials upon which to reflect. Meaningful and transformative knowing occurs as a second act, during reflection on lived and existing realities. Bodies first and experience first. Only then—and only *if* then—do we have the materials by which to engage in the secondary work of theological reflection.

"It may seem redundant to say so," Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood write, "but in order for there to be feminist theologies there have to be women."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, liberation theologies require the presence of oppressed people; postcolonial theologies call on colonized people. The pattern holds for indecent theology. In order to have an indecent theology, we must encounter indecent people. However much it may seem that this should go without saying, it does not. Women do not always appear in feminist theologies—nor do oppressed, colonized, or indecent people always walk the pages of liberation, postcolonial, or queer theologies. At times, we find stories that tell about lives; at times, we encounter the strenuous work of describing bodies and experiences. But the questions: 'Where are the bodies?' 'Where are the people?' often prove remarkably difficult to answer.

<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*.

<sup>9</sup> Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 17.

Althaus-Reid insists that when theology appears without people, it becomes what it is not.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is not at all clear what might allow writing and flesh to coincide—even fleetingly or fragmentarily. Take the discussion of the previous chapter. Althaus-Reid’s use of ‘obscenity, in reverse’ participates in the shifting possibilities of language. The potent combination of Sartre and Baudrillard opens the potential for apophatically writing toward these moments by reaching under the metaphorical skirts of theology. Writing obscenities draws language to where surprising exposures of fleshy materiality occasion writings’ utterance of what language cannot signify, but only for the fleeting instant when a drop of sweat or goosebump—the irruption (or insurrection!) of facticity—do not yet make sense. When writing, materiality can interrupt the re/productions of simulations, but always with the ambiguity of drag. We will never write perfectly nude bodies, but rather bodies that have been re-dressed with ideological illusions by the very words that lifted their previous skirts.<sup>11</sup> ‘Obscenity, in reverse’ exposes to exploit the tension, but does not offer a way to positively articulate the coincidence of flesh and writing.

Theology may or may not have the ability in itself to overcome its tendency toward a mystifying discourse, yet God continues to be found with people. God’s love caresses and heals living flesh, as people continue to struggle to live real lives. The task of the indecent theologian is to write toward God’s manifestations of love, even at the demise of theology

<sup>10</sup> Althaus-Reid, “¿Bién Sonados?” 49.

<sup>11</sup> Though Marx precedes Althaus-Reid’s internalization of Sartre and Baudrillard by many calendars, she effectively troubles the ordering. Which has priority over the other as idea and extension cannot be discerned. Neither should it be. The point is the indeterminability of multiple ways of thinking that return and re/iterate the centrality of the flesh, with the differences each moment entails. It may be that her use of obscenity echoes her liberationist Marxism. Perhaps—and this is most likely—they both echo something else. The ambivalence that arises from refusing a cause or origin for an idea or method is part of the point. Althaus-Reid multiplies languages that promise or hope for presenting the materiality of lives lived, because materiality is the *only* thing that can come first. The languages themselves are fleeting, partial, broken, and deferring.

(should that be necessary).<sup>12</sup> This requires bodies and a willingness to seek those that have been relegated to the shadows, so that we may share a consensual love with them ourselves. Althaus-Reid's texts tenaciously challenge us not only to find forms of writing that expose and exploit the boundaries of language, but also those that participate in God's disruption and destruction of human exclusions. Althaus-Reid's texts challenge theology to [also] write kataphatically the ongoing reality of God's love. As with the tunnel of lights, we must walk differently. To do so requires that we write into the world of languages' ideological illusions differently. Thus the experiment that concerns this chapter sits uneasily next to the previous study. We need to write bodies, not just write toward the moments of fleshy irruption. Specifically, we need to write women's bodies in language that excludes women's existence. We need to write indecent bodies in language that denies the indecencies of life and love. The question is: How?

The third and fourth studies mark a difference in perspectives, language, and imperative. They intimately relate, but do not intersect—nor do they reflect, compare, or judge one another. Multiple vantages give multiple possibilities—all of which are needed. We need to write women's bodies, poor bodies, tortured bodies, indecent bodies, and the bodies of lovers.

For so long as flesh and its desires remain off the page, embodied persons—whose sensuous experiences and material struggles are the basis of transformative theologies—cannot appear. In the place of bodies and lives, we can glimpse only shadows that hint at who and what cannot be found: the exclusions of ideology cast as the exclusions of language. Theology uses languages determined by ideological dynamics. We write in and

<sup>12</sup> "Mystical connection may be an intrinsic part of the process of doing theology itself, and as such it may be useless, as Marx himself has claimed. Or it may be reformed through a materialist method, as Feuerbach and many Liberationists have claimed. That in itself is something still to be resolved." Althaus-Reid, "¿Bién Sonados?" 51.

through the weavings of words that organize bodies, lives, and loves. It must be so, and it cannot be otherwise. In what follows, I suggest that language itself, and therewith writing, must shift—not once and for all, but continuously. It must morph in ways that are unforeseeable and strange. In other words, we must write effectively within the camera obscura of ideology's World of Illusion by doing things differently—that is, by writing differently.

### A Question

*What does it entail to write with theological honesty the bodies and lives that must inhabit texts for them to be liberative?*

Althaus-Reid's experiment with writing women's indecent bodies draws feminist theologies into the discomfort of languages of bodies that refuse to play by the rules. Because flesh can be made into words, but words always will fail complexity of flesh, we need a different standard by which to evaluate our writing. She proposes that the measure between indecency and feminism is one of sexual honesty. Indecent theology, like indecent theologians, must be honest.

We cannot speak the once-and-for-all truth of bodies. Indeed, we cannot describe bodies adequately, much less represent them. Even the most physical words—words like breast, vulva, or vagina—slip beyond, outside, and underneath their supposed referents. But regardless of the insufficiency of language for the task, we can still lift our skirts. We can write our bodies and lives honestly in the attitude by which we orient ourselves and our writing toward especially the rebellions of our bodies. Sure, the words will need to be undone and redone even as they appear, but because honesty concerns a writer's relationship with her words rather than the reference of the words themselves, we can always be honest. As a feminist imperative, honesty establishes a liberative standard for

writing in excess of (or alongside) a texts' representational or discursive sufficiency.

Honesty is a demand to do and write theology differently—over and over again.

In this chapter, I study the idea of honest writing, because it may suggest a way to write bodies even in languages that veil or exclude their presence. To do so, I continue with Marx, who quickly leads to Derrida. In meditating on Marx's writing, Derrida finds a materialist responsibility, which is 'radical' in the sense of continual philosophical self-reflexivity and transformation. In other words, Derrida suggests that Marx's materialism occurs in discordant voices of writing within Marx's texts. Among these voices is one that accepts responsibility to constantly reshape the ideas, structures, and words of Marx's own writings. I explore the ways in which this specter of Marx resonates with Althaus-Reid's honesty.

The second half of the chapter lets one of Althaus-Reid's variations on writing the indecencies of women's bodies test the idea of honest writing. In conversation with 'experimental' writers such as Kathy Acker, Althaus-Reid experiments with finding an indecent praxis of writing in which bodies appear, even as they disappear again under the text. In Acker's terms: "The body does not lie. Language, if it is not propaganda or media blab, is the body; with such language lies are not possible."<sup>13</sup> Bodily writing must be honest, and honest writing must make bodies present. Acker notes that 'experimental,' 'avant-garde,' and 'marginal' are labels that mark texts that belong to "the nonacceptable literary tradition" that is "the tradition of political writing as opposed to propaganda."<sup>14</sup> For Althaus-Reid, as for Acker, the activity of experimenting with writing bodies honestly—writing the body and bodily writings—has political purpose and effects. When we write

<sup>13</sup> Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9 no. 3 (Fall 1989), 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

honestly, we write the body without expectation for sufficient representation or description (“description is totally incompatible with what we want to say”<sup>15</sup>). Instead, we write with the insistent scandal of written insurrections that undo political regimes with constantly shifting language.

### Many Marxs

I sat at a conference listening as two young Native American students raised the irony of a senior white male European scholar filling a podium to denounce alienating and exploitative economies by echoing the booming voice of Marx’s texts. Their argument went something like this: your argument and its sources, as well as the fact that you can be heard and recognized for speaking it, rely on an economy of knowledge that is every bit as exploitative and alienating as the economic structures that you protest. Indeed, it is thoroughly entwined with the economic structures you protest. Why do we need the authorizing words of two European philosophers—Marx and yourself—to deny the basis and harms of contemporary capitalism? The prescient critiques of so many excluded voices wait to be heard. We do better turning away from you to listen to them. The students are, of course, correct.

Another voice, this one belonging to a Latin American male scholar of mid-rank, responded to them. Remember, friends, that Marx was born into a Jewish family in a time and place where to be Jewish was to be excluded. His father converted to extend the family’s economic possibilities within a hostile environment. Rather than hearing Marx as the white European academic patriarch, try hearing him as a member of a subordinated community

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Acker quoted by Ellen Friedman, “‘Now Eat Your Mind’: An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 38.

seeking a different configuration of power. Marx *is* an excluded voice. This response, of course, also is correct.

Althaus-Reid's "¿Bién Sonados?" resurrects another identity for Marx. He opened the door to an epistemology from the poor because he was poor, she writes. When Marx completed his doctorate, an increasingly conservative political climate denied him access to university positions. In need of employment, Marx turned to journalism. The income that he earned proved meager for how he wished to support his family, lifestyle, and work. His letters to Engels evidence the frustrations and dangers of his economic situation. With his wife and daughter sick, he did not have funds to call the doctor or to pay for medicine. Days would go by with little to eat but potatoes and bread; sometimes these would run out. In 1858, Marx joked that probably no one has written on money when so short on the stuff.<sup>16</sup> Marx knew the dynamics of capitalism with the type of knowing that becomes possible as a poor man. "It was from that experience of everyday poverty that he recognized the structure of ideology as a methodology, and by contrast, the fundamentals of an epistemology from the poor," Althaus-Reid writes.<sup>17</sup> He knows from his experience of navigating the wrong sides of economies. Marx writes out of his own historical experiment in surviving the dynamics upon which capitalism turns.

If we continue to look around, the Marxs will continue to multiply. We could respond to the students' critique by recalling that Marx wrote the texts that are now authoritative academic fare in London's British Library as a scholar whose politics denied him entry to academe. Or in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida draws out still another Marx—a Shakespearean Marx that surfaces in conversation with the three additional voices that

<sup>16</sup> Frances Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (New York: Norton, 2000), 234.

<sup>17</sup> Althaus-Reid, "¿Bién Sonados?" 45.

Blanchot hears in Marx's writing. "Blanchot does not name Shakespeare here, but I cannot hear 'since Marx,' since Marx, without hearing, like Marx, 'since Shakespeare,'" Derrida writes.<sup>18</sup> Marx enjoyed a life-long relationship with the Bard that began as a youth and continued through his death. Shakespeare provided him and his family with entertainment, wit, and wisdom, as well as lessons and practice with English. The Shakespearean phrases, scenes, and allusions that appear throughout Marx's texts evidence the sustenance of their companionship.

This Marx adds to our list of the many Marxs who cannot be reduced or integrated into one. The Shakespearean Marx joins the European philosopher with the power to authorize thought, the Jewish-born academic agitator, and the poor man—and they all await the arrival that is a return of various other Marxs. It is easy to imagine an Abbott and Costello skit. Marxs upon Marxs do not sit easily with each other. Sometimes one hides as another takes the page; other times they get mischievous, switching places and causing confusion. Yet, the more serious importance of each Marx can be realized only in the midst of the multiplying community of the many, many Marxs of writing. What can be held together in flesh far exceeds what can be held together in words. Indeed, flesh always exceeds words.

In "Marx's three voices," Blanchot observes that "neither science nor thought emerges from Marx's work intact."<sup>19</sup> The three distinct voices with which Marx writes create a theory of science and a scientific theory that represent an internal, ongoing process of self-transformation. The discord between these voices challenges, distorts, and destabilizes the substance that each voice contributes. For Blanchot, the first of the three

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* trans. by Peggy Kamuf, (London: Routledge, 1994), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Blanchot, "Marx's Three Voices," 99.



voices is that of the “writer of thought.” Marx’s first voice uses the language of the philosophical logos to write as if history itself provides the introduction and his writing the end, or at least cessation, of philosophical inquiry.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the voice attains truth “only at the moment of the arrest or rupture of history.”<sup>21</sup> The second voice manifests as Marx’s political voice. This voice does not carry meaning; rather, it quickens with the urgency of a call to revolution. Marx’s second voice (always) peals with the violent immediacy of imminent ruptures. Then, finally, Marx’s third voice is that of the writer of science. This voice is patient and open to revision because it is the voice of “a man of science, [who] responds to the ethics of scholarship.”<sup>22</sup>

When Derrida writes his reading of Blanchot, he cuts the few pages of “Marx’s Three Voices” into several pieces. Re-presenting segmented passages allows still other voices that speak in the (literal) spaces of Blanchot’s margins to find their own textual, written place. The Shakespearean Marx is first among these.

Derrida highlights Marx’s repetitive returns to a scene in *Timon of Athens* that appears, for instance, in *The German Ideology* and the first volume of *Capital* as well as his *Economic Manuscripts of 1844* and the first edition of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.<sup>23</sup> It is the scene in which Timon decries the effects of money’s illusions, even as he gives gold that he found to various parties in order to instigate havoc in the political and social order of Athens. Derrida writes: “Marx loves the words of this

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 99

<sup>23</sup> See for instance Karl Marx, “Third Manuscript” in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; Karl Marx, “Chapter 3: Money, or the Circulation of Commodities” in *Capital* vol. 1; and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Alienation due to Private Property” in *The German Ideology*. C.f. William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* ed. by Karl Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), IV.iii.

imprecation. One must never keep silent about the imprecation of the just. One must never silence it in the most analytic text of Marx. An imprecation does not theorize, *it is not content to say how things are, it cries out the truth, it promises, it provokes*. As its name indicates, it is nothing other than a prayer.”<sup>24</sup> Marx conjures the ghost of Shakespeare’s Timon to write with a voice that prays a prayer of impatient malediction.

Money’s spectrality focuses Derrida’s attention as he thinks with Marx thinking with Shakespeare’s Timon. I pause his argument to emphasize only the writing of impatient speech: speech that Derrida emphasizes “one must never silence” even in the most analytic text. The voice—which I add to Blanchot’s three and arbitrarily number here as Marx’s fourth voice—shares in the energy of Derrida’s deconstruction. It effaces as it shows (and shows as it effaces) a performative articulation of knowledge that moves through a dynamic attitude of words.

In Blanchot’s telling, Marx’s second (political) voice “short-circuits every voice” with the energy of revolution. It does not carry meaning, but instead the impatient immediacy that itself communicates the excessiveness of its demand.<sup>25</sup> The voice of Derrida’s Shakespearean Marx likewise has an urgency that exceeds meaning, but this fourth voice also promises and provokes. It is the voice of a prophet. The prophet’s sharp honesty communicates linguistically impossible truth that slips beyond factual or metaphysical discourses. Recall that for Derrida, law can never be just. The referent for just political speech cannot be achieved in language; it slips and defers away from articulation, always out of reach. Marx’s fourth voice, however, does something other than what language allows and therefore has a different relationship with law, language, and justice.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 52. (emphasis mine)

<sup>25</sup> Blanchot, “Marx’s Three Voices,” 99.

The fourth voice promises and provokes knowledge that cannot be articulated and is outside the law by being honest about the contradictions, limitations, and exclusions that are part of every utterance. The honesty of the voice exposes the gap between what is said and what is promised; it provokes us to try again. Thus it is performative in the sense that Derrida defines the performative in *Specters of Marx*: it “transforms the very thing that it interprets.”<sup>26</sup> Marx’s fourth voice performs the radically self-reflexive dynamism of a Marxism that is willing and able to transform everything that Marx gave voice for the sake of honesty about the earthly reality. Not only does the fourth voice carry the energy of a revolution, it *conjures* a revolution—a word that resonates across great distance and difference with the voice of Mary Daly.

Marx voiced a philosophy that incorporates within itself a dynamic of self-transformation. The revolutions that this voice conjures involve the restructuring of his own system. “People would be ready to accept the return of Marx or the return to Marx, on the condition that a silence is maintained about Marx’s injunction not just to decipher but to act and to make the deciphering [the interpretation] into a transformation that ‘changes the world.’”<sup>27</sup> His materialism deconstructs the stability and singularity of *its own* writing and ideas, as well as that which it critiques. Derrida finds the *dunamis* of deconstruction in this dynamism and marks it as central to Marx’s lasting legacy. “Who has ever called for the transformation to come of his own theses? .... so as to incorporate in advance, beyond any possible programming, the unpredictability of new knowledge, new techniques, and new

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. The occasion for this conference was the fall of Communism—and with the fall of Communism, the ‘fall of Marxism.’

political givens?”<sup>28</sup> Marx did, enabling his writing to open and open again toward the complexities of in/justice in history.

### Honest Writing

In “Queer I Stand,” Althaus-Reid lists three methodological considerations at the heart of doing theology indecently. First, indecent theology must proceed with “a *consensual* loving dynamic.” It takes shape within relationships that share among all participants a love that celebrates diversity. Second, indecent theology begins with self-reflexive honesty. We lift our own skirts before lifting those of God in order to remind ourselves of our identity at the moment of doing theology “while remaining committed to theological honesty.”<sup>29</sup> Third, indecent theology must move through the shifting permutations of possibility that arise from different sexual epistemologies. Indecent theology constantly changes its content and words: it reorders the system itself. Althaus-Reid uses a different vocabulary, but the motion she inscribes resonates with both Marx and Derrida. Indecent theology constantly shifts to let its writing manifest the complexities of bodies and their lives: especially lives that are excluded from law, economy and language—especially including our own bodies. In the following pages, however, I focus on Althaus-Reid’s return of the excluded bodies and lives of women.

We need to admit “for the sake of honesty” that it is common for theology to reduce people into objects that wait to receive correct understandings of themselves and the world—liberation theologies included. Rather than disrupting oppression, liberation theologies have been complicit with its orders by telling Latin American women who they

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>29</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Queer I Stand,” 107.

are, how they feel, and what their desires are and should be. “Even from the time that I was a student, Liberation Theology told me about myself as it was a normative discourse behaving as ideologies do, pretending to be a ‘natural’ or ‘a given truth,’ and ‘universal.’”<sup>30</sup> It should go without saying that this is a problem that should be named. Often, however it does not.

We need to admit how, when, and where this happens so that we can understand its reach and importance. As Althaus-Reid writes, it makes theology be “for domestication and not for transformation when theological methods ask people to fit into them, and not vice versa.”<sup>31</sup> Yet with the World of Illusion in mind: admitting the problem also is insufficient to effect liberative transformation. Understanding the ideological illusion to which liberation theologies contribute by interpellating women in a way that excludes them from themselves will not disrupt the ideology’s somatic and affective effects. We must do more.

We need to return people and their bodies to theology, with ready willingness to recognize that for every one that appears named, several more wait in the shadows. Althaus-Reid experiments with this task. Her work exhibits that when bodies return to writing, they do not sit easily together. As with the multiplication of Marxs, the extent to which these bodies do not fit the space of writing calls into question the order of the systems that conjured them. If we are honest, we acknowledge this and start again. We write with a voice whose quality promises and provokes—and thereby conjures—excluded bodies and lives.

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<sup>30</sup> Althaus-Reid, “¿Bien Sonados?” 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

The concept of honesty surfaces and resurfaces in Althaus-Reid's writing. In her dissertation, she highlights the pairing of honesty with authenticity, noting that the concept of "honesty, or authenticity (*autenticidad*)...[is] considered an important value in Latin America, and one of the words most frequently used in theological circles."<sup>32</sup> The concepts honesty and authenticity introduce a moral standard for the quality of theological speech and, by extension, writing. For Croatto, honesty raised the question of speech as "right action," and roots "right action" as a criterion for knowledge. In *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid writes, "the gap between a Feminist Liberation Theology and an Indecent Theology is one of sexual honesty."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the opening pages of her first book warn readers that Althaus-Reid is herself indecent enough to write with theological honesty. In "Outing Theology," Althaus-Reid challenges 'cultures of death' that destroy relationships of solidarity that are based on honesty.<sup>34</sup> In *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid marks that theological queering "requires from us honesty and courage," as well critical engagements with both queer theory and "non-heterosexual and critical Heterosexual Theologies."<sup>35</sup>

In "¿Bién Sonados?" honesty appears as a demand for theologians who take Marx's conception of ideology and mystification seriously. Althaus-Reid suggests that the illusions of ideological discourses speak with the authority of truth that is not factual, but rather metaphysical. Rather than witnessing to the facts of bodies and lives, theology enfleshes mystifying ideas to rule over these bodies. Ideology offers ghosts severed from the bodies, lives, and actions that gave them rise, but that (even so) claim a mystical truth about the

<sup>32</sup> For a somewhat tangential, but related idea in relation to Croatto, see: Althaus-Reid, "Paul Ricoeur and the Methodology of the Theology of Liberation," 212.

<sup>33</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Outing theology: thinking Christianity out of the church closet," *Feminist Theology* 27 (May 1, 2001): 64.

<sup>35</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 2.

materiality they no longer serve. In Althaus-Reid's words: "Mystical truth, even in theology, confirms dogmas as the dictatorship of divine illusions where people tend to disappear in methods and ready-made theological responses to questionings from reality."<sup>36</sup> Honest theologians, she continues, must acknowledge this. Honesty has the ability to disrupt the authority of ideology's truthful discourses.

Take the phrase "Bién Sonados," as Althaus-Reid defines it. "Bién Sonados," she explains, is "a slang expression from South America which means 'disaster struck us'; or 'we have been defeated.'"<sup>37</sup> The phrase can be used to express a range of difficult situations in which people find themselves without many or good options. Someone might utter it to mark that 'I lost my job,' or perhaps 'I am pregnant and on my own.' The words acknowledge that some circumstances are beyond our control and thus without stigma; yet we are responsible for our actions regardless.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes one can just be a casualty. But being a casualty does not relativize the worth of the life that is lost or the life's continuing importance. To be able to say *bién sonados* with the poor of Latin America, theology must be honest about the good and the bad, as well as the individual and the structural.

At heart, honesty relates to the candor with which we position ourselves with respect to our articulation of bodies, actions, experiences, and knowledge. Indecent theology requires honesty in this sense about the struggles that real people endure and face, just as it requires honesty about the economic, political, and sexual circumstances that can make life inescapably and unchangingly painful or even impossible. Honesty opens space to acknowledge the shifting experiences of systemic oppressions in which "one can just be a

<sup>36</sup> Althaus-Reid, "¿Bién Sonados?" 46.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

casualty,” while resisting the ideological basis for these harms.<sup>39</sup> Honesty entails writing frankly about bodies and lives without becoming trapped by pretensions to completeness, finality, transparency, linearity, or coherence.

Honest writing conjures bodies that matter in unstable languages. Living flesh exceeds the possibilities of words ensuring that the bodies and lives that we honestly write will not always sit easily with one another. This is not a flaw or fault. As these bodies interact, they call upon what we write to continuously transform itself. This is a dynamic similar to what Blanchot suggests of the voices of Marx. “Their heterogeneity, the divergence or gap, the distance that decenters them, renders them noncontemporaneous. In producing an effect of irreducible distortion, they oblige those who have to sustain the reading (the practice) of them to submit themselves to ceaseless recasting.”<sup>40</sup>

Honesty cannot be identified as a structure or tone. These ceaseless recastings shift the form, style, and substance of honest writing. The instability of honest provocation enables a body and life to call ideological exclusions to account. Sharing a spirit with Marx’s fourth voice, honest writing interrupts ideology as method by insisting that we constantly write theology differently. To borrow again from Derrida, honest writing promises and provokes what is impossible to achieve in language: the forthright and candid appearance of living bodies. Honesty thus must never be silenced even in the most analytical text: it can succeed when, where, and even as the text and its analyses fail. Honesty conjures bodily lives that writing itself excludes.

Thus, honesty remains distinct from Truth, though it can contain (and at times might exceed) truth. Something written honestly may be contradictory, paradoxical,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Blanchot, “Marx’s Three Voices,” 100.



confused, or simply wrong. It may [will?] be beholden to visible and invisible exclusionary ideologies and/or subject to distorting psychological curiosities. Indeed, it always has some elements of the above, which means that theology written honestly will always write bodies that call forth more bodies that call forth more bodies still. The work will not end. Yet this does not change that something written honestly carries the performative power to transform that which it interprets. Honesty exposes the gap between what can be said and what is lived.

### Women's Bodies

Bodies, many different bodies, fill the pages of Althaus-Reid's texts. Rather than a-historical characters or generalized experience, Althaus-Reid writes bodies that matter in their anatomical specificity, their laboring diversity, and their sensuous possibility. Without honesty, the obscenity of these women's fleshy, social, and economic lives remains hidden by skirts.

It takes just a few paragraphs for the opening pages of *Indecent Theology* to encounter a number of women in a state of undress. We meet a 'sexy woman' and indigenous women, street vendors, and theologians. From the economies of women's labors through bodily functions, the activities of these women materialize a range of traditional foci for feminist reflection: the 'sexy woman' might engage in prostitution; the Coya women disrupt the boundaries of public and private by relieving their bladders on the street; the street vendors sell lemons while caring for children; and the theologian prays and writes. Althaus-Reid does not pause for feminist critique. Honesty pushes her to continue toward indecency. Though skirts cover their flesh, each of these women lacks underwear. Returning people to theology requires honesty about bodies and lives—especially about the parts that cannot or should not easily be seen.

At the 2001 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, a panel convened to discuss the newly published *Indecent Theology*. Lisa Isherwood, Kwok Pui Lan, Emilie Townes, Mary Hunt, Robert Goss, and Kathleen Sands spoke of different indecent provocations within the text.<sup>41</sup> While some including Townes and Sands used the opportunity to challenge Althaus-Reid, others such as Isherwood and Goss stretched and extended her ideas. Isherwood opened her presentation with gratitude: “Marcella, thank you, you have presented a tantalizing challenge to feminist theology...I want to try to be brave and walk with you.”<sup>42</sup> The author of *The Good News of the Body* and *Sexual Theology and Feminism* had years of thinking and writing on bodies and sexuality in theology, especially bodies that do not conform to divine images, and her presentation highlighted one of *Indecent Theology’s* foremost challenges to feminist theologians: “You have asked us all to face the vulva and get over the womb.”<sup>43</sup>

In her response, Isherwood remembered Gloria Steinem’s story from the foreword to *The Vagina Monologues*. Sometime in the 1970s, somewhere in the Library of Congress, Steinem stumbled across “an obscure history of religious architecture that assumed a fact as if it were common knowledge:” traditional church designs trace women’s bodies. In Steinem’s words: “thus, there is an outer and inner entrance, labia majora and labia minora; a central vaginal aisle toward the altar; two curved ovarian structures on either side; and then in the sacred center, the altar or womb, where the miracle takes place—where males give birth.”<sup>44</sup> This fell upon Steinem like a “rock down a well.”<sup>45</sup> The insight transformed her

<sup>41</sup> These responses are published in *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Isherwood, “Indecent Theology: What F-ing Difference Does It Make?” *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 142.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Gloria Steinem, “Foreword” in *The Vagina Monologues: The V-Day Edition* by Eve Ensler (New York: Villard Books, 2001).

relationship with the church. The years were over of walking church aisles alienated from her women's body, a body under erasure. She now walked the aisle plotting: "plotting to take back the altar with priests—female as well as male—who would not disparage female sexuality."<sup>46</sup>

*The Vagina Monologues* belongs to a long tradition of bringing women's bodies into focus. Steinem used her story to review for readers of *The Vagina Monologues* feminist lessons from the 1970s that moved female bodies into open view. From the intimacies of women's health to the pleasures of masturbation, feminists listened to bodies to learn not only about what it is to be a woman, but also what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society. As Steinem remembered, women's bodies disclosed to those who paid attention the festering wounds and lasting scars of violence against women. Rape, sexual harassment, restrictions on reproductive freedom, and anti-lesbian violence inflict injuries that require exposure to fresh air to begin to heal. "Women's sanity was saved by bringing these hidden experiences into the open, naming them, and turning our rage into positive action to reduce and heal violence."<sup>47</sup> The mantra of the era—"The personal is political"—referred to real bodies. As it called into relief bodies' scars and their transformative potential, it made a strong claim about the relation between bodies and who women are, both essentially and in society.

The relation of body to woman names a truly contentious—and central—question for twentieth century feminists. Their debates on the topic manifest a twentieth-century version of an ancient puzzle that has never and will never be solved; it is not solvable. The

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

attempts to do so, however, significantly impact people's lives and their bodies. With every iteration, distinct political and philosophical inflections become revealed—and concealed.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir framed the feminist conversation with sharp simplicity: “the body of woman is one of the essential elements in her situation in the world. But that body is not enough to define her as woman.”<sup>48</sup> The conversation grew around the particularities of certain women's bodies and the ways those particularities read back into experience (or fail to do so). Within the conversation that followed, many assumptions of white, western, middle-class, heteronormative (even if not heterosexual) ideological exclusions quickly surfaced. The conversation became ever more complex and contentious.

Today de Beauvoir's proposition that women are made not born enjoys a cultural currency far beyond de Beauvoir's texts or her name. The experiences and bodies about which she reflects in her texts have also been left far behind by predominant feminist cultural memory. There is irony in this. De Beauvoir insistently began with material reality—bodies, lives, and experiences—as the source and site of philosophy. Phenomenological analyses reveal the fissures in ideological illusions by exposing the tensions between experiences of living and the societal narratives that give meaning to those experiences. De Beauvoir's attentiveness to bodies and lives founded her insight that interpretations of living female bodies affect claims about women's social and political possibilities. In other words, bodies and experience taught de Beauvoir that sex (the biological configurations of our bodies) is not the same as gender (the meaning that society ascribes to our bodies). Yet once de Beauvoir wrote the ideas, her words, along with the generations of words they spawned, became available to teach people about their bodies and experience apart from the sustained phenomenological attention to bodies and

<sup>48</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 63-64.

experience that her ideas reflected. Writings can open space in which people can engage their bodies and lives, but using ideas to teach about bodies (even insightful feminist words) is backwards. It is harmful, and it is demonstrative of how ideology functions to separate ideas from the materiality that birthed them.

By the 1990s, several distinct approaches to thinking about women and bodies were well established. On one side was a tradition of that emphasizes women's physicality and its effects. For feminists like Steinem and Ensler, the experiences of women's bodies offer unique and transformative knowledges. Others follow de Beauvoir to emphasize the limitations women's bodies impose on equal social and political participation. In both cases women's bodies gain definition through biological and anatomical determination. Alternatively, some feminists question the liberative potential of focusing on women's physical bodies. They suggested focusing instead on the ways that a body is a medium, which gains meaning through the scripts that society writes upon it. It is not women's anatomy or biological rhythms that fundamentally impact women's subordinated social positioning. Rather, it is the ways anatomical formations and biological processes are given meaning in society. The body serves as a raw material available for ideological interpellation.

"Basically, and at the risk of oversimplification, there is a division based on the 'gendered body' and the 'sexual body' as primary sources of theological reflection," Althaus-Reid ruminates.<sup>49</sup> In itself, the diversity of perspective is something to be celebrated. "Such apparent distinctions are necessarily part of any type of 'doing theology' such as feminist theology." The division expresses the scandal of "dividing and reuniting of the body divine

<sup>49</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, "'Pussy, Queen of Pirates': Acker, Isherwood and the Debate on the Body in Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 160.

to our bodies.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, Althaus-Reid notes that problems arise when the division leads to the limitation of how bodies can appear or be used in theological reflection or when feminist conversations bifurcate along the axis of sex or gender. As she says, “Divisions and differences that do not contribute to dialogue are always bad news.”<sup>51</sup> We need “ecumenical engagements” across “this major conceptual difference.”<sup>52</sup>

Ecumenism here refers to a mode of relating to one another that prioritizes the relationships of a community united by a shared concern. Ecumenism is not primarily about a diversity of ideas, although it has significant implications for knowledge. Ecumenism, like its political counterpart solidarity, has meaning only in terms of the relationships we have with one another. These relationships always involve bodies, and, where ecumenism is involved, we know that there will be difference. Are we willing to risk honest engagements with one another, our diverse bodies and lives, and the many ideas that have and will take shape?

The question of how to understand women’s bodies remains open. By distinguishing sex from gender by means of experience, de Beauvoir opened the door to analyzing prevailing assumptions about the relationship between bodies, biology, and culture. She did so by being phenomenologically and philosophically honest about the distance between the stories that are told and certain women’s experience. When the women in *The Vagina Monologues* tell their stories, they also participate in the traditions of honesty about bodily experience. The power of the monologues’ testimony does not lie in providing a transparent

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 161.

view of women and their experiences, but rather in the honesty of voices whose words candidly include the bodies and lives of those who have been excluded by speech.

Honest speech can be psychologically suspect, factually inaccurate, or beholden to exclusionary ideologies. Indeed it usually is and should be critiqued as such. Nevertheless these words need to be written. Refusing the exclusions of language with bodily honesty involves the risk of writing that which can only be written insufficiently, partially, or proleptically. The honesty of honest speech, even problematic honest speech, matters deeply. Without accepting this risk, those of us whom language excludes can only repeat the ideological processes by which we are rendered linguistically voiceless and absent. Our honesty interrupts this illusion; by being honest, *we* interrupt the illusion. Honest interpretation transforms that which it interprets; honest writing transforms that which it writes. Honesty creates space for still more transforming honesty.

### A Divine Body

In “Sex and Body Politics,” Lisa Isherwood thinks with Donna Haraway’s spatial organization. Does a body’s social location—its placement in complex webs of interconnections—sufficiently demarcate what that body is and becomes?<sup>53</sup> For Isherwood, the answer is ‘no,’ and she moves to consider the way that Thomas Csordas, an anthropologist, schematizes critical investigations of bodies in terms of the number of bodies recognized. He surveys Mary Douglas’ two lived and social bodies and Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock’s threefold organization: the individual, social, and political bodies. While Csordas continues to note the proliferation of bodies in John O’Neill’s

<sup>53</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

presentation of five bodies and beyond,<sup>54</sup> Isherwood stops at three in order to offer her own contribution: “a divine body” that “subverts the weight of patriarchy” by serving as the “transgressive signifier of radical equality.”<sup>55</sup>

Careful to deny that her proposal suggests any dualism or metaphysics, Isherwood argues that the divine body is the “grounded, acting, stubborn objection to life as it is.”<sup>56</sup> The divine body opens space for our rebellions, because it incarnates the material excess of our human bodies. This is a larger than life divine body that functions heterotopically; it offers “a third space in which to re-imagine bodies.”<sup>57</sup> God does not fit the structures of the world. Thus, in ordinary life, the divine body appears as space in which regular rules do not apply. The rebellions that occur in real life bodily acts fit within the expansiveness of her divine body.

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Isherwood and Althaus-Reid shared the special relationship of long collaboration and friendship. Across multiple books and multiple years, they studied and wrote together about the possibilities of body and sexual theology; they did so as women and as friends. Their bodies are written into their texts, just as the texts, in some important sense, write their multiple, related, and active bodies. At the American Academy of Religion, Isherwood responded to *Indecent Theology* with an essay published with the title “Indecent Theology: What F-ing Difference Does It Make?” In this response, Isherwood writes that she sets out to accept Althaus-Reid’s challenge in *Indecent Theology* to turn from wombs to vulvas. When

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Csordas, *Experience and Embodiment: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5-6.

<sup>55</sup> Lisa Isherwood, “Sex and Body Politics: Issues for Feminist Theologies” in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Pussy, Queen of Pirates,” 162.



Althaus-Reid responds to Isherwood's response in the essay "Pussy, Queen of Pirates" she turns again. In Althaus-Reid's words: "If her paper provoked uncomfortable feelings, that is usually the case with honest talk. However, Isherwood's paper succeeded precisely by its honesty and the perception that feminist theology has finally come of age.... In theology women's bodies count. Feminist theologies make our real bodies, what I would call our 'bushy armpits,' count."<sup>58</sup> Isherwood succeeds by being honest, Althaus-Reid allows, and honesty changes conversations.

We can see in their conversation how indecent theology, as an honest theology, turns from wombs to vulvas and from vulvas to bushy armpits—and will continue to turn again and again. "The fact is that beyond the domesticated, shaved bodies of patriarchal theology, and the politics of limits imposed on women's theological thinking, there are armpits with glorious, rebellious chestnut bushy hair shouting out loudly their different stories."<sup>59</sup> Written honestly, the stories of rebellious bodies that refuse the world as it is will "make indecent, unfitting and transgressive theologies."<sup>60</sup> Isherwood's notion of the divine body challenges feminist theologies to write differently: "feminist theologies need to reflect more on the concept of the divine body, in order to ground a theology of the body 'as is.' For that it is necessary to find new non-linear ways of writing feminist theology."<sup>61</sup>

To meet the challenge of finding new (non-linear) ways of writing women's bodies, Althaus-Reid looks to Kathy Acker. She offers three reasons for this, the first of which is Acker's risking of honesty. In Althaus-Reid's words, Acker consistently "attempts to work out a language of the body. While doing that, she confronts honestly the problems and

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 167.

contradictions that come from thinking/writing from a women's body."<sup>62</sup> In other words, Acker risks honesty in seeking to write bodies. Second, Acker deconstructs the authority of dominant texts by "confounding fact and fiction in a somewhat messy way." This manner of deconstruction reveals the ambivalences and contradictions of how women's bodies are mapped within heterosexual ideologies.<sup>63</sup> Third, Acker recognizes the omnipresence of the phallus; yet Acker does not accept the impossibility of escaping the phallus in language as the end of women's writing. Acker experiments with a language of the body that exists outside of patriarchal definitions, even if and as that language fails.<sup>64</sup> Acker inspires in Althaus-Reid an honest writing that promises and provokes that which is impossible in language. Acker writes women's excluded bodies in phallogentric language. Her voice transforms what it engages by conjuring women's bodies and their discordant rebellions that, in Isherwood's words, fit only within the expansiveness of a divine body that is the stubborn rejection of life as it is.

Althaus-Reid holds the language of the body that Acker seeks closely together with Isherwood's notion of the divine body. Both expand possibilities by stretching ideologically constrained imaginations. There is, however, a key difference to note and emphasize: Althaus-Reid accessorizes with Acker, while she conceptualizes with Isherwood. Isherwood gives Althaus-Reid a way to name God's transformative presence, while Acker gives Althaus-Reid a new style with which to write about that name. Metaphorically, Althaus-Reid imagines the divine body clothed by Acker's pirate myth. The strange pairing stretches theological imagination. The re-clothing of God's body changes not only how we see God, but

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 164. (emphasis mine)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Kathy Acker, "Seeing Gender," *Critical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 1995): 84.

also who is included and excluded in that vision. Put differently, accessorizing God's body refigures the relationships authorized in and by God. Put differently still, reclothing God in our writing allows different, other bodies and voices to surface in our texts. It is the difference between the interpellating effects of the long skirts of the *Guadalupana* and the hiked red skirt revealing strong running thighs of Yolanda López's *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*. As Althaus-Reid argues, changing God's wardrobe can "remind us that doing theology is a communitarian art and that by feeling free to take from our closets our own wardrobes of experiences we can join in solidarity with other people's theological journeys."<sup>65</sup>

### Queen of Pirates

In 1995, Kathy Acker penned an essay titled "Seeing Gender." The essay offered a window on the desire that motivated her career of pirate dislocations culminating in the novel, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. "When I was a child, the only thing I wanted was to be a pirate."<sup>66</sup> The following year, as Acker's *Pussy, King of the Pirates* arrived on shelves, Mary Daly opened an essay for *The New Yorker* with her own wish for piracy: "Ever since childhood, I have been honing my skills for living the life of a Radical Feminist Pirate."<sup>67</sup> The synchrony of these two public confessions of pirate desires is noteworthy, but there is nothing new about feminist piracy in itself. Feminist pirates have sailed metaphorical and literal seas for centuries.<sup>68</sup> With these two autobiographically inflected essays, the pirate

<sup>65</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Pussy, Queen of Pirates," 164.

<sup>66</sup> Kathy Acker, "Seeing Gender," 78.

<sup>67</sup> Mary Daly, "Sin Big" in *The New Yorker* (February 26, 1996): 76.

<sup>68</sup> The use of the phrase 'feminist pirates' to characterize a range of women pirates across the years presents curiously anachronistic questions, but the stories of historical women pirates (e.g.,

ships crested (again) in literary and philosophical form. The treasures that Daly and Acker seek are women's bodies. To find this treasure, the two writers plunder the languages that exclude women's existence. In doing so, they write remarkable texts.

Acker and Daly both posit that piracy permits the plundering of patriarchy for what it denies women. The patriarchal phallocracy designates bodies and knowledge according to its own economies. Under this exclusionary rubric, women's bodies are negated as not-male while non-phallogenic knowledge is dis-authorized. Women's bodies, women's knowledge, and women's writing becomes impossible without transgressing the sovereignty of law that determines and enforces not only what bodies may licitly do, but also what is within the bounds for thought, knowledge, and language. "I knew this as a child, before I had ever read Plato, Irigaray, Butler. That as a girl, I was outside the world. I wasn't. I had no name. For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language," Acker writes.<sup>69</sup>

Pirates, however, live with indifference to the law of the land. They sail the oceans without respect for boundaries. Pirates move as they wish, because theirs is a law of their own making. When one is a feminist pirate, patriarchal circumscriptions of women's bodies have no power. Feminist pirates refuse to respect or live by the laws of men. In Althaus-Reid's words, piracy allows women "to be makers, not receivers of the law."<sup>70</sup>

In "Sin Big," Daly tells a childhood story of finding a title about ships on a saleswoman's booklist. The saleswoman refused to sell the book to Daly's mother because it

Gráinne Ní Mháille (Grace O'Malley), Sayyida al Hurra, or Anne Bonny and Mary Read) overflow with an energy that makes sense under the name. See for instance: Anne Chambers, *Granuaile: The Life and Times of Grace O'Malley* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press: 1998); Jo Stanley (ed.), *Bold in Her Breeches: Women Pirates Across the Ages*, (London: Pandora, 1995); Gavin R.G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).

<sup>69</sup> Acker, "Seeing Gender," 80.

<sup>70</sup> Althaus-Reid "Pussy, Queen of Pirates," 167.

would be “silly” to order such a text for a little girl. The refusal only increased Daly’s desire for ships, “especially a pirate ship.” When Daly finally found her ship, it sails her to a new planet of ancient wordings. Aboard her ship, Daly sounded a pirate battle-cry for any woman with ears to hear: Plunder what the patriarchs have stolen from us. Seize the gems of knowledge that are rightfully ours, and then “smuggle back to other women our plundered treasures.”<sup>71</sup>

Daly realized from childhood that she must write that ‘she is’ despite the many myths to the contrary. Her struggle to do so launched a pirate ship that took her on an intergalactic journey. She wanted other women to join her, as she sought her own homeland beyond patriarchal restrictions. If she were to discover that it did not exist, the task would be to “somehow conjure it up.”<sup>72</sup> Of course, Daly did conjure as she travelled from *Beyond God the Father* to the *Wickedary of the English Language* with a voice that promised and provoked the arrival of the impossible.

For pirates to make law, pirates must speak a language of their own. Daly offers no exception. Finding it impossible to avoid the rule of the phallus in the old language and old theology, Daly “[rode] the rhythms of Racing Rage” to word something new.<sup>73</sup> Naming the Goddess means writing “the ultimate/intimate reality as movement, as Verb.”<sup>74</sup> Writing takes us on a journey to find ways of expressing our be-ing beyond the outer limits of patriarchal space. In her words: “Be-ing continues. The process of Naming proceeds.”<sup>75</sup> Daly

<sup>71</sup> Daly, “Sin Big,” 76.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (London: Women’s Press, 1986), xxv.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

sailed the skies in her pirate ship raiding phallocracy for the words that rightfully belong to us and re-turning them.

When Acker realized the impossibility of her childhood wish to be a pirate, she likewise turned to language. She withdrew into the worlds where pirates flourish: books. But as Acker immersed herself, she realized in her flesh that “it’s not enough to live in books.”<sup>76</sup> “Seeing Gender” tells her autobiographical story by rewriting Butler’s rewriting of Irigaray’s rewriting of Plato. It remains in the world of book repetitions. As Acker self-consciously remarks, “In this essay, as yet, I am only repeating those languages.”<sup>77</sup> Flesh matters; bodies matter. She needed to write a different language. She needed to become a pirate. *Pussy, King of the Pirates* witnesses an attempt to write her way into that new language and, in so doing, into piracy.

A young Acker realized that as a girl outside of the world, she was unspeakable. She couldn’t be named, yet everyone was naming her. Like Daly, Acker wanted and needed to find her body outside of its patriarchal determination. Piracy offered her the hope of accomplishing this because, as Christopher Kocela suggests, piracy served as “an idealized model of escape which provides the basis for belief in a society beyond the phallus.”<sup>78</sup> All available languages belonged to others.<sup>79</sup> Acker’s recourse was to dwell in these languages. She stole them to repeat them for her own purposes.

*Pussy, King of the Pirates* weaves Acker’s pirate myth into signification. The novel tells about a group of girls who seek a hidden treasure by means of a treasure map hidden

<sup>76</sup> Acker, “Seeing Gender,” 81.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher Kocela, “Resighting Gender Theory: Butler’s Lesbian Phallus in Acker’s *Pussy*,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 17, no. 1 (2006): 79.

<sup>79</sup> Acker, “Seeing Gender,” 80.

in the dead body of one of their mothers. They believe that the marked treasure will establish them as a band of girl-pirates. Along the journey, the girls discover ways of devaluing the penis as the site of the phallus. That is, they affirm Butler's "lesbian phallus" through a girl-pirate sexuality. They penetrate each other, a publishing warehouse, and discourses of meaning.<sup>80</sup>

In Acker's writing of this pirate myth, Althaus-Reid finds an exit out of a seeming theological dead-end: one cannot avoid the phallus in Christianity. Mary Daly demonstrated this dead-end with incisive clarity by showing that Christianity is the language of divine [ph]allacies. If God is male, male is God. If the phallus is signified by the penis, penises are the site of the phallus. If that language refuses us, we must leave it behind.

Daly, however, is not Althaus-Reid's named interlocutor. Daphne Hampson, with whom Althaus-Reid first and unsuccessfully attempted a doctorate at the University of St. Andrews, is. Althaus-Reid writes: "without a sexual theology to back her thinking, this [omnipresence of the phallus] represented for Hampson the end of the road for any feminist theology... Hampson's theology starts and ends in this basic point; the lack of choice that the presence of the Phallus gives us in Christianity."<sup>81</sup> Because Christianity's phallocratic regime renders it untenable, Hampson answers Daly's call to walk out of the church.

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Daphne Hampson surfaces in "Pussy, Queen of Pirates" as a contextualization of Lisa Isherwood's return of bodies to theology. "Isherwood's theology comes out of her materialist vocation... Together with Mary Hunt, Carter Heyward, Elizabeth Stuart, Naomi Goldenberg and many others, she pioneered a breakthrough in feminist theology by

<sup>80</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Pussy, Queen of Pirates," 167.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 165.

returning the body to Christian praxis.”<sup>82</sup> This breakthrough, Althaus-Reid continues, occurs alongside another radical body theology: post-Christianity. However, whereas Isherwood succeeds because of her honesty, post-Christianity fails: “Somehow, post-Christianity tends to kill the body by its strong gender position.”<sup>83</sup> Althaus-Reid’s reasons for this failure appear in terms of failures of Hampson’s critical insight. Namely, Althaus-Reid posits that “Hampson’s powerful attack on sexism and Christianity did not understand at that time that the genderised body, beyond being a meta-narrative of production, still conceals many surprises.”<sup>84</sup> Hampson does not engage the naturalization of sexuality in bodies or in theological production, and this omission serves neo-conservative ideologies of family, society, and economy.

Hampson summarizes her convictions in conclusion to *Theology and Feminism*: “What I believe we need to do then is to find a way to conceptualize God which is independent of the Christian myth, a myth which is neither tenable nor ethical. We must find a way to capture our experience of God in the language of our day.”<sup>85</sup> Christianity is fundamentally sexist. The language and symbols are inextricably masculine. Christology, for example, cannot be articulated outside of the gendered presentation of a man on a cross. Hampson offers as example the crucifixion images gathered in the book *On a Friday Noon* from around the world and across history. “There are yellow Christs and brown Christs, Christs who are serene and Christs who are in agony, Christs who are stylized and Christs in the image of the people who depicted him. But one thing these pictures—which reflect a spectrum of human art and imagination—have in common: they are all images of a man...A

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 171.



woman is the 'opposite' to Christ...."<sup>86</sup> Christian imagery presents the same intractable problem. She argues: "Daly's basic point is never satisfactorily answered...The problem is that there is no solution: the core symbolism of Christianity is masculine."<sup>87</sup> Women stand at an impasse. "Why symbolize one's deepest beliefs through a myth which jars with all that one believes to be moral in the realm of relations between human beings?"<sup>88</sup> Her answer echoes Daly — don't. Women, leave Christianity behind in order to find God again.

Althaus-Reid replies that Hampson does not interrogate what is constitutive of the category 'women' outside of patriarchal constructions of gender. As Althaus-Reid writes, "in this theological discourse, to be 'a woman' is something more or less known or at least, well guessed. It means to be heterosexual, but even so heterosexuality is seldom discussed."<sup>89</sup> Bodies are always sexual bodies; this includes textual bodies. If one writes bodies, one necessarily writes sexuality. The open question is whether that writing will assume or name the effective sexual ideologies. Hampson's assumption of a naturalized heteronormativity is the same that permeates many feminisms, as well as many societies. Put differently, for Hampson, Sartre's nude dancer appears fully clothed. She sees neither obscenity nor moving flesh. Not only does she leave unquestioned the constraints on permissible sexual desires, Hampson's theology naturalizes the neoliberal weave of [heterosexual] family values, voluntary organizations, and charity as primary functions of theology and church praxis. The dynamic is not unique to Hampson. Althaus-Reid suggests that this is "the contradiction to be found in many gendered theological discussions from the Global South. Feminist theologies there might claim to be politically socialist or even Marxist, but they can

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>89</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Pussy, Queen of Pirates," 163.

easily succumb to neo-liberalism and specifically to neo-conservatism when issues of women's identity are discussed."<sup>90</sup>

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Piracy not only plunders patriarchal sexual ideologies, it raids the regimes of economic and geopolitical neoliberalism. In the editor's introduction to a special issue of *darkmatter*, an open source and peer reviewed online journal operating outside of dominant academic modalities, Andrew Opitz concludes: "modern piracy, like the modern world itself, is inextricably bound to the history of colonial and neocolonial relations of production and the legacy of racial and class conflict that they produced – a history that forged the global capitalist order that continues to shape our everyday relationships with other people."<sup>91</sup> In the contemporary world, piracy takes many forms that range across the possibilities of digital, maritime, and literary rebellion. However it manifests, piracy coheres around a sustained refusal to respect the exclusions upon which global systems are built. Digital pirates, like plagiarists, steal in direct refusal of a capitalist exchange of intellectual or artistic resources (aka intellectual 'property'). Maritime pirates exploit the blurred geopolitical power in international waters to hijack and raid ships. Yet, as Ravi Sundaram argues in *Pirate Modernity*, piracy does not necessarily entail rebellion against late capitalist modernity itself. Even as it disrupts, piracy can also perform a parasitic re-inscription of it onto pirate bodies.<sup>92</sup> This tension becomes important when reading Acker's pirate myth. In denying phallocentrism through violent sexual penetrations (in itself, a phallocratic textual practice), Acker's writing does just this. As she displaces the phallus, she re-inscribes it into

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Andrew Opitz, "Editor's Introduction," *darkmatter* 5 (2009): 1-2.

<sup>92</sup> Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

differently configured (and differently related) textual bodies—specters of phallocratic ideology.

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Two out of the three reasons Althaus-Reid gives for choosing Kathy Acker to accessorize her theological response to Isherwood plausibly could have led her to Mary Daly. Daly, like Acker, responds to women's exclusion in language by language. She seeks a language of the body from women's bodies. In order to find this language she confronts with honesty the difficulties of thinking and writing from a woman's body. That is, both Daly and Acker experiment with writing transgressive texts as the transformative enactment of a new language (reason one). The transgressions of each writer's writing seek to express the be-ing of women beyond the omnipresent feminine exclusions of the phallus. As feminist pirates, they both reclaim what has been stolen: the material and textual bodies of women with the insight and knowledge that arises from them (reason two).

For Daly, this meant an intergalactic voyage to travel out of the Christian universe, with its Father God. Hampson likewise argued that because the phallus is unavoidable in Christianity, Christianity cannot be a home to women. Unlike Daly, however, Hampson does not pirate her way into a radical voyage of writerly possibility. Her call to women is relatively straightforward: abdicate the Christian myth as irredeemably phallic and articulate your own perception of God.

However radical the argument, Hampson never questions her writing's decency. Althaus-Reid makes a strong claim: regardless of mythological creativity, theology cannot be transformed to include women and other excluded strangers without writing historical, social, and sexual bodies. Althaus-Reid complains that in the process of gender critique,

post-Christian theologians, such as Hampson, “kill the body.”<sup>93</sup> Returning bodies to theology demands more than gender critique; it needs the refusal of epistemological presuppositions of heterosexuality.”<sup>94</sup>

Acker and Daly diverge in their writing of the intimacies of bodies’ illicit activities. Sexual decency hides bodies in heteronormative theologies. The obscenities of Acker’s pirate sex can defamiliarize theological desires in ways that Daly’s pirate ship does not. While Daly navigates her pirate ship beyond the reach of the phallus, Acker sets sail across the surface of troubled waters because she dreams of a buried alternative: “I have become interested in languages which I can only come upon (as I disappear), a pirate upon buried treasure... I call these languages, *languages of the body*.”<sup>95</sup>

*Pussy, King of the Pirates* experiments with writing a language of the body that begins with a treasure map hidden inside of a dead mother’s body. This map marks the most hidden treasure under the law of the phallus: a language of living women’s bodies, bodies which the phallus cannot kill. Acker suggests that even if we have to find the secret languages of these living bodies hidden inside of our mothers’ murdered corpses, they exist. To claim the treasure, however, means to be an outlaw, an outsider, a pirate.

Unlike Daly, Acker does not leave the world of the phallus and dead women’s bodies to heal prior injuries and to prevent future murders. She remains, writing as an outlaw who follows the dream of what lies at the end of her illicit map. The myth that results tells “of the

<sup>93</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Pussy, Queen of Pirates,” 163.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Acker, “Seeing Gender,” 84.

lesbian phallus, or of a discourse that could undercut the privileging of the penis in the positioning of the Phallus.”<sup>96</sup>

This resonates with Althaus-Reid. We need the *dunamis* that Derrida finds in Marx’s prophetic fourth voice that transforms the very thing that it interprets by doing something other than what language (and law) allow. We do not need to leave Christianity behind to subvert phallogentrism, but we do need to be honest about its exclusions. By writing honestly, we write differently. We promise and provoke what phallogentric language (and law) does not allow. Honesty does not confuse the insufficiency of what we write when we write bodies, with the impatient demand of the voice that promises and provokes them by writing them. By writing honestly, we conjure [our own] excluded bodies and lives over and over again.

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Continuing with Acker, treasures hide below the decent surfaces of heterosexual theologies. These are the languages of bodies, bodies, and more indecent, sexual bodies. The sexual interpenetrations of these bodies trouble elisions of phallus with penis and gender critique with heterosexuality. We need to find the treasure, and we need to write theology in the languages of these excluded bodies. Accessorizing the divine body with Acker’s pirate myth finds space for our indecent bodies under God’s skirts.

“The pirate’s myth is that of the third space, a chaotic space that transgresses....the tired limits of fixed heterosexual discourses,” Althaus-Reid writes.<sup>97</sup> In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, sexual desires move quickly and chaotically. Pirate sexuality cannot be stabilized, and it does not respect decent boundaries. By constantly repositioning her desires, Pussycat

<sup>96</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Pussy, Queen of Pirates,” 165.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

becomes herself. She becomes king of her own body. Similarly, Althaus-Reid suggests that the divine body could be described in terms of shifting desires of and for our own bodies. "We, outcasts and pirates of the world, could be re-imagining and re-desiring our bodies."<sup>98</sup> We know that our bodies do not fit what Christianity tells us, but do we realize that God's body does not fit either? Description cannot represent a "grounded, acting, stubborn objection to life as it is" in itself.<sup>99</sup>

We can say the same of Althaus-Reid as she writes of Acker: "For Acker, it is crucial to find a new language to express what has not and cannot be said: the undecidable."<sup>100</sup> For Althaus-Reid, it is crucial to find a new language to express what has not and cannot be said: the undecidable indecency of the divine body. The differences, however, between Acker's undecidable and Althaus-Reid's indecent divine body are extensive.

When Acker deconstructs the authority of dominant texts by "confounding fact and fiction in a somewhat messy way," she intimates a way for Althaus-Reid to reach out toward God's body.<sup>101</sup> For Acker, this is the dream of writing a language of the body. "Nothing in it has been *made up or created*," but the language determines much. Pussycat becomes King of her own body - that is, her own signification - that is, her own significance. She likes power and enjoys the vision it affords. Acker tells that her childhood desire to be a pirate grew into an adult realization that "*I do not see, for there is no I to see... There is only seeing and, in order to go to see, one must be a pirate.*"<sup>102</sup> The novel ends with Acker's Pussy - a bloody girl cum Pirate King, who cut the phallus from the penis in order to enjoy it herself -

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>99</sup> Isherwood, "Sex and Body Politics," 23.

<sup>100</sup> Althaus-Reid, "Pussy, Queen of Pirates," 167.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>102</sup> Acker, "Seeing Gender," 79.

walking with other pirate girls away from the found treasure—women’s bodies *found* below language—to ensure that her pirate reign continues.<sup>103</sup> Acker’s *Pussycat* is determined by her phallic pussy; the body she sought and found disappears. Though displaced from the penis to a vagina, the reign of the phallus continues.

One cannot find this pirate king in Althaus-Reid’s essay. The stubborn, resistant divine body incarnates not only the excesses of our sex organs, but also our bushy armpits. If, for Althaus-Reid, the pirate myth expands how we can think about writing theology, its pirate Queen must be her indecent God. While Daly’s pirate ship sails away from Christianity and its Father God, Althaus-Reid’s piracy moves her toward the divine body. As we plunder phallographic languages, including traditional theologies, to (re)discover our ‘as is’ bodies, we (re)discover the body of God. Our bodies extend as the divine body extends; the divine body extends as our bodies make their rebellions known. It is knowledge of God that makes knowledge of ourselves possible.

“The divine body holds a space of possibility to deconstrain the body from the ideologies that rule the body in society, politics and theology. It is the space to be able to re-imagine ourselves, away from heterosexuality and other political bodily narrowness.”<sup>104</sup> Between our body and the divine body transformation occurs: “In other words, there is a space of redemption to be found in the interstices between the place of God and women’s bodies.”<sup>105</sup> Honesty orients a praxis of writing bodies that resists the illusion that human words can be or have been made flesh, while the divine body extends an unstable space to

<sup>103</sup> Kathy Acker, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 276.

<sup>104</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Pussy, Queen of Pirates,” 159.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

write, re-write, and re-write bodies again—especially those that do not fit our languages and laws.

If we are willing to write honestly, we can find languages of bodies with which to write divine bodily incarnations. In other words, we can touch God under her skirts with our words on the page through the honesty of our voice, if not the substance of our words. Because ideology as a method will not stop effacing and excluding bodies in what we write, we must never cease seeking and welcoming the rebellions of these bodies excluded by our own ideas. We write our body honestly when we write it into the expansive embrace of the divine body. We write the divine body honestly when we write the rebellious incarnations of our own bodies. “This is why when theology is performed with honesty and transgressive indecency, we are all impersonating gods.”<sup>106</sup>

Indecent theologians write flesh into words; yet words can never be made into flesh. Althaus-Reid stands at the threshold of the semi-colon. She urges readers to confront it honestly. The divine body reveals itself to us as the incarnation of our most rebellious and indecent bodies. It incarnates the excesses of these rebellions. It incarnates what language denies and that which language renders unrepresentable or unknowable. For this reason and others, the divine body is, in itself, unwritable: it exceeds language. Our rebellions, however, are writable; they must be written, even in languages that will do them injustice. Nay, especially in these languages. We push theology to find the folds of fleshy possibility within the expanse of the divine body. When we write our rebellions, we write the divine body. What if we write these rebellions honestly? What if we do so with the voice of an impatient prophet that promises and provokes our language of rebellious bodies to expose

<sup>106</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 82.



itself to the plundering of still other excluded bodies? What adventures, what life, will we find next?

## Language Notes

The indecenting of theology challenges us to caress vulvas, but also bushy armpits. Given another day, we are drawn toward feet, calves, hands, eyes, and toenails. We search for places where theology and creation coincide. Indecenting helps words find bodies and bodies find words; it provides a rhythm against which text and life can dance a complex dance. Even at their most successful, the moments we find are fragile, fleeting, and prefigurative. Yet the claim of this project is that they matter. Writing calls us to what can be touched—...smelled, tasted, seen, felt, desired, experienced...—in any language that might even possibly be part of the task. This is every language.

Althaus-Reid allies her writing with continental, postmodern, liberationist, feminist and queer philosophers and theologians. She writes fluently in a wide range of languages found within these communities. She freely arranges strange combinations, knowing full well that the languages she invites into her writing do not play nicely together. Althaus-Reid does not seek to reconcile their differences, or to find a ‘universal’ language sufficient for all. It is as she writes: “the structure of socio-political, divine life in Latin America is diglotic [sic].... The fact is that Latin America is built upon the ashes of decomposed civilizations; traditional cosmologies and economic systems, which are still superimposed upon the Western ones, in the same way that our ancient languages co-exist with Spanish or

Portuguese. This is not syncretism. Liberation is part of the diglotic [sic] scenario.”<sup>1</sup> Like the bodies from which they rise, languages too enjoy libertine intimacies of illicit embrace. Sexual theologies must respect the eros of its words.

The indecencies of theology draw toward writing the provocations of heteroglossia under the bridges in Buenos Aires, as Althaus-Reid puts it. We need the combinatorial arts of divergent tongues—as well as the caressing contours of the lips that assist them—speaking the languages of knowing that are of and with the excluded. The languages found under the bridges are not simple languages. They are wise and learned, ancient and new. They are academically complex, existentially impactful, and historically rich. In their insurrectionary grammars can be heard the inflections of the many queer, feminist, liberationist and philosophical languages. They hold the infinite variations on language that appear, but do not reconcile, when the boundaries of the academy, colonized, women, poor, and erotically dissident blur.

This creates a pedagogical puzzle in my studies. I cannot isolate one language at the expense of others, without denying the heteroglossia of indecent theology that is my concern. In doing so, I would lose the thrust of Althaus-Reid’s creativity or dull the sharpness of her critique. Yet I also cannot parse when varied languages cooperate—and when they collide—without some element of (counterfactual) isolation. To approach her writing, I need to both hold them together and pull them apart; I need a both/and.

I attempt a middle space by allowing each part to privilege one discourse without silencing the others. I privilege consideration of liberationist elements in my engagements with her dissertation on liberation theologies, feminist in *Indecent Theology*, and queer

<sup>1</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, “The Hermeneutics of Transgression: Time and the Children of the Streets in Buenos Aires” in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A clash of socio-economic and cultural paradigms* ed. by G. de Schrijver (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 259.

elements in *The Queer God*. Yet many others also move through the shadows of these studies. Should you be so inclined, they call for your attention from off the page, just as they call for mine. Answering these calls, however, will require projects other than the current one. The ethical question I believe it important to leave here is simply: Can you hear them? If not their actual words, can you hear their tones? However faint, however far from you, do you feel their reverberations?

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Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opens *Tendencies* with a memory of a Pride parade where the slogans of t-shirts adorned bodies that did not agree—but that also did not disagree—in identification. Gay men wore images of women kissing; lesbian women wore men kissing. It felt queer and it felt good to be surrounded by thousands of people amplifying a conviction (or obsession) that gender and sexuality divides just won't do. It was a queer moment of queer movement, witnessed in the overflow of simple identities that (literally) wear one another. The respective and mutual stability of all sexual identities was called into question.

Relationships of solidarity trouble the ordering of bodies and their possibilities, including the most basic ability to live. This belongs to a type of experience that Sedgwick finds relational, strange, and very important. The liberative troubling of queer crossings cannot be extinguished. I quote the passage defining this concept of queer in full:

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word “queer” itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root -*twerkw*, which also yield the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*. Titles and subtitles that at various times I've attached to the essays in *Tendencies* tend toward “across” formulations: across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across “perversions.” (The book itself would have had an “across” subtitle, but I just couldn't choose.) The queer of these essays is transitive—multiply transitive. The immemorial current that queer represents is antiseperatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), viii.

Desire at the threshold of possibility for theological language and theological writing can only be queer in this sense. It draws theology and writing to move across languages, genres, genders, sexualities, perversions (and so much more) to welcome whomever God might be, whenever we meet. It is this troubling, cycling, and re-iterative dynamism of queer that moves through these pages. We discover ourselves in God's eternal embrace—not before or after.

The question that we need to ask is how queer lovers write theology: "They wander into each other's spaces, digress at points of desire, position and reposition themselves amongst themselves and amongst others and, eventually, participate in some creation of new (partial) conceptualizations of love and God."<sup>3</sup> This is our task. In Althaus-Reid's words: "our intention is to see how much we can get defamiliarised with the hetero-normative God, and how to recognize God as 'the stranger at our gates.' We shall keep walking in the path of a hermeneutics of defamiliarisation."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

**Part III:**  
**The Queer God**

## 5: Hospitality

*A foreigner prepares to speak to the foreigner. Without knowledge. Without the knowledge, the knowledge of the place, and the knowledge of the name of the place: where he is, where he is going. Between the profane and the sacred, the human or the divine.<sup>1</sup>*

### Law

*The curtain rises to show the guest bedroom described by Pierre Klossowski in his *Roberte ce Soir*. The centered bed boasts a tired, but fresh, coverlet with a subtle chevron pattern; the lighting uneven in the way ordinary rooms can be. Hanging on the wall, just above the bed, appear framed and hand-written pages. Protected from damage and direct access by a layer of glass with “a spray of fading wildflowers drooping over the old-fashioned frame,” the pages dictate a set of laws concerning hospitality.<sup>2</sup> Visually, the laws organize the stage: the lines formed by props, light, and characters draw our eyes there. Yet, their framing and position render them visually unassuming—like an old wrinkled monarch slumbering on his chair, who long ago lost all (but the obvious pretense of) authority. They are seemingly and curiously avoidable. Yet, they are not.*

If this chapter were a script, it would begin with the above stage note. The laws that hang above the bed determine what can and should transpire on that stage. They command our attention, request our meditation, from a place of honor, where the line of sight includes all the common places bodies will move in the room. Yet, above the bed, the laws are sealed distant and dismissible—pages behind glass in an old frame under fading flowers.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Roberte ce Soir and The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Marion Boyars, 1989), 12.



The laws of hospitality not only hang above a fictional bed; they hang at the outset of a text. They proclaim what can and should transpire in the pages that follow. They call to account the activities of bodies, their identities, and the languages by which people known and unknown will gather in the guest room, the text, and our interpretations. The laws of hospitality are at once question and claim. Klossowski's story, *Roberte ce soir*, opens here. So too does his argument and demonstration. I mirror this beginning of *Roberte ce soir*. I welcome Klossowski's opening into my text, hanging the laws at the outset of my study. The old frame is Klossowski's; the spray of wildflowers will be Althaus-Reid's.

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*Roberte ce soir* begins with a promise to tell a story that reveals itself to be a dialogue, theological argument, morality tale, and tutorial plan. Because I am concerned with Klossowski's opening paragraphs, I let it suffice to note that the story is told in the first-person. A young fellow named Antoine opens the text as narrator.

Antoine occupies slippery space somewhere between family and guest, boy and man, and disciple and adversary. At the age of thirteen, Antoine had been adopted by Octave, a professor of theology, and Roberte, his wife. Octave and Roberte took Antoine's cultivation as their concern, and we learn that a series of tutors have been entrusted with his education. Antoine provides the ostensible justification for the scenes of education to follow; yet, in the role of narrator whose perspective guides the reporting of events and dialogue, Antoine is the teacher. We might describe him as both the subject and object of the educational activities. As he remarks: "My aunt treated me like a brother, and the professor had turned me into his favorite disciple; I served as a pretext for the practice of hospitality which was practiced at my aunt's expense."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9.

Nothing Klossowski writes offers itself for easy or singular interpretation. *Roberte ce Soir* is no exception. Althaus-Reid's reading and rewriting proceed to stretch even this text's flexibility. In his meditation on hospitality, which is also a meditation on *Roberte ce Soir*, Derrida notes that hospitality "is always about answering for a dwelling place, for one's identity, one's space, one's limits, for the ethos as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home."<sup>4</sup> Boundaries mark both the demand for hospitality and its im/possibilities. A host must be inside his own territory to welcome those from the outside. Likewise, a guest, foreigner, or alien must be outside their proper territory. The guest does not belong in the sense that the space is foreign to her and she to it. Yet the laws of hospitality require that she be made welcome *as if* the host's home is her own. As the guest ceases to be guest to the host, the boundaries of the home extend beyond the thresholds of territory to the blurring of identities. Hospitality troubles who it was that we met at the gate, as she becomes to us someone whom she was not. The guest ought to be welcomed as if she were not alien, but rather family. Indeed, when fully welcomed, the guest ceases to be a 'guest' according to the definition of 'guest'. In Klossowski's terms: the guest becomes the host; their relationship becomes that of "one with oneself."<sup>5</sup> Derrida puts it this way: "The guest (hôte) becomes the host's (hôte) host (hôte)."<sup>6</sup>

The difficulties here appear and disappear again at the moment of occurrence; it is "over in the twinkling of an eye."<sup>7</sup> For a brief moment in the encounter and welcome of a guest, everything shifts: we can become someone who we are *and* are not. Yet once the

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, "Of Hospitality," 149-150.

<sup>5</sup> Klossowski, *Roberte ce Soir*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, "Of Hospitality," 124.

<sup>7</sup> Klossowski, *Roberte ce Soir*, 11.

guest becomes host, identities, belonging, and space re-solidify. “After all, one cannot at the same time take and not take, be there and not be there, enter a room when one is already in it,” Antonio writes. “My uncle Octave would have been asking too much had he wanted to prolong the instant of the opened door...”<sup>8</sup> Yet this is what Klossowski does do in *Roberte ce Soir*. He experiments with prolonging a moment that cannot be prolonged—the moment of the act of hospitality. In doing so, he exposes its promise and terror to analysis and theological consideration.

What Octave hand-wrote under the title “Les Lois de l’hospitalité” on sheets framed under glass and hung over his guest’s bed articulates how this can occur. He explains that the master of the house has no greater joy or task than to welcome whomever appears at his gate to his house and table. Indeed, “he waits anxiously at the gate for the stranger he will see appear like a liberator on the horizon.”<sup>9</sup> He waits with impatience for the stranger to accept his invitation to come inside, so that as host and guest they might move beyond an accidental encounter into an essential relationship. The master of the house realizes himself as host only through the relationship he shares with the guest: his essence as host *is* hospitality. Accordingly, only the stranger at the gate can liberate him from his existence as master of the house so that he can realize his essence as host. Here we see why what transpires between them is of such importance. Because the master of the house and the stranger now share an essential relationship, when he does so he translates himself as a guest, just as the guest actualizes the possibility of the host. Their relationship appears as that of one with oneself.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12.

When the hostess enters our cast of characters, the story gets weird, troubling, offensive, obscene, pornographic, violent...—and interesting. Octave writes: “The host’s most eminent gratification has for its object the actualization in the mistress of the house of the inactual essence of the hostess.” The host becomes the guest, when the guest *qua* host manages to actualize the essence of hostess in her fidelity to the host (who is the guest). The fidelity of the hostess entails simultaneously the infidelity of the mistress of the house. The host (*qua* guest)’s essence—an essence that *is* hospitality, remember—becomes present as the absence of jealousy or suspicion. But “learn, dear guest, that neither the host, nor yourself [the guest], nor again the hostess herself, yet knows the essence of the hostess,” Octave teaches.<sup>10</sup> The essence of the hostess is known “to none but him who beyond all being knows.”<sup>11</sup> Knowledge of the essence of the hostess belongs only to God. Thus, the host awaits the visitation of an angel at the gate—or so writes the theologian professor, Octave.

*Roberte ce soir* welcomes the arrival of *troublant* possibilities of “many relevant issues such as the vocation of the theologian, the relationship between the theologian and God, claustrophobia and the existential basis of God as the Trinity”<sup>12</sup>—all of which implicate theological writing in the activity of hospitality. Antoine narrates the laws written on the pages in the guestroom to “give a better idea of [his] uncle’s mentality” that causes him to seek ways to surprise his wife Roberte with moments when the embrace of a guest and his own embrace become confused. Klossowski, in turn, gives a better idea of the “difficulties” of the laws of hospitality by reveling in the moments in which Roberte’s skirts are burned, lifted, or otherwise disrobed and she appears exposed for embraces. As Antoine notes: “I

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 63.

don't know how else to describe the awful tangle of carnal and spiritual desires... But that part of the story seems to me of only limited interest; on the other hand, since the professor's behavior demonstrates what kind of pitfall language can lure even the most lucid intelligence, I have thought it worthwhile to note certain of his digressions and to reproduce them in the context of this extraordinary experience of my student years..."<sup>13</sup>

Like Antoine, I am interested in the behaviors, activities, and life that follow language's tempting promises and its attendant secrets. In *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid queers theology with a discursive hospitality that is as *troublant* as the laws that Octave posted. When she references Klossowski's text by name, she reduces "Les lois de l'hospitalité" to "La Loi de L'Hospitalité."<sup>14</sup> Her attributive slip writes evidence into her text of the contradictions that belie law's singularity. As Derrida notes, this law is plural, inevitable (*inévitabile*) and avoidable (*évitabile*): it slides across the contradictions of language, writing, and authority.<sup>15</sup>

Writing presents an insistent singularity, even when saturated with plural terms, which leads to an interesting dynamic: disruption fulfills the multiplicity of law written as either laws *or* law. Law is at once inevitable and avoidable. When calls for justice in love disrupt authority, laws can be undone, but they will be repeated or re-placed. This, however, can be troubled. For those of us used to traditional forms of theological writing, the troubling likely will prove disconcerting affectively and epistemologically. 'Is there not

<sup>13</sup> Klossowski, *Roberte ce Soir*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 66. Wainhouse translates the section head as "Rule of Hospitality," which might have cued Althaus-Reid's use of the singular "la loi." There is an interesting question here about the unnoted transformation of names that parallels Althaus-Reid's rewriting of Kathy Acker's title *Pussy, King of the Pirates* as "Pussy, Queen of Pirates."

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 83.

love outside the law?’ Althaus-Reid asks.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, she continues, “considering a point from Derrida, we may say that there is no possibility of justice in love unless the law is transgressed.”<sup>17</sup>

Above the bed hangs a single writing of the laws of hospitality, which Antoine’s sharing re-places in that same textual space on behalf of the reader. The acts that follow in the scenes to come, again write these laws over and over again. As Althaus-Reid notes, writing too can be replaced. “Love always exceeds the limits of words (and the Word) and also the limits of law.”<sup>18</sup> The task is not to (re)write an authoritative ‘queer’ version, but to facilitate different productions of God’s intimately liberative (textual) embraces. Queer writing will keep welcoming the strangers at the gate—whomever, whenever, and however they appear.<sup>19</sup> Althaus-Reid’s per/versions manifest the iterative practice of queer hospitality. She welcomes the stranger at the gate into the home of our theology with faith that sometimes the stranger who appears in the distance arrives as She who is, our Liberator.

The queer theologian waits anxiously at the gate for the arrival of strange discursive possibilities that speak with foreign languages. Who (or what) will knock on theology’s door? The guests the theologian welcomes may or may not be Godly, C/churchly, or creaturely—no one knows outside of God, who may herself be our guest, who is our host. Perhaps especially so—it is essential to the host that she welcome the one who arrives. She

<sup>16</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Althaus-Reid references Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” in *Acts of Religion* ed. by G. Anidjar (London: Routledge: 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 79.

actualizes herself in doing so; the essence of the host is hospitality.<sup>20</sup> What happens to theology when a theologian not only invites strange languages into her home, but practices radical hospitality that allows the guest to become host and the host, guest? What happens in the act of hospitable writing? What does her writing look like? It may be that the stranger, for whom we open the gate, occasions the theologian being actualized as God's guest for the first time in a very long time.

Althaus-Reid pushed theology into strange places and there are still more strange places to go. "It is only from the body of aliens in the history of theology....that hermeneutical avenues brings us new promises to old theological practices," she writes.<sup>21</sup> Indecent theology wanders excluded spaces in the margins of the margins to pirate theological knowledge of and for strange camels whose love cannot and will not be contained. In *The Queer God*, the language shifts: "this may not be called a theology from the margins any more, but a theology from recognisable, legitimised (if not approved) and visible centres which have been rendered invisible."<sup>22</sup> Rather than articulating queer liberationism, the task at hand is to write *libertinaje* theology. Libertine theology liberates by welcoming the surprising embrace of excluded instantiations of Holy love.

At one point in *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid offers two images of the queer theologian: "the Queer theologian can be seen in the confessionalary [i.e., confessional], strategically and sexually located in relation to the phallus of the church, but in a departing mode."<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, the Queer theologian can be seen putting her hands under God's

<sup>20</sup> "The master of this house...waits anxiously at the gate for the stranger he will see appear like a liberator upon the horizon..." Klossowski, *Roberte ce soir*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

skirts. In doing so, she locates her desire for the flesh and her transcendental desires for God. She finds sites of specific pleasures, which manifest epistemological sites where the encounter with God's embrace exceeds any decent imagination.<sup>24</sup> The queer theologian of this image seeks the unexplored reaches of displays of divine and human love. In her words: "Queer theologians are the ones who consider to what excesses God takes God's love for humans, that is, which are God's transgressive desires and how we have sadly tamed or limited these villainies."<sup>25</sup>

To do so, Althaus-Reid invites admittedly dangerous voices into a primary structure of academic theology: academic writing. This chapter explores this experiment in terms of writerly hospitality. As with all my chapters, I note again that this is but one approach to a text that welcomes many readings that are contradictory amongst themselves. I choose this one because of the provocation it provides to trouble the assumed authority of laws that determine the discursive territory of academic theology. Rather than contests over and for power, we need theology to move in the world as activity of love. This means that we need to write theology as an activity of love. The activity of radical hospitality offers a praxis of loving God and neighbor, both near and far.

To explore the twists of the dynamics of language that let writing occur as the practice of hospitality, I join Klossowski and Octave in prolonging what cannot be prolonged: the moment of encounter when the identities and place of host and guest become blurred and strange. Eventually, I want to show that Althaus-Reid's experiment with hospitable queer writing turns on a fulcrum of faith in the kenotic love of God that

<sup>24</sup> "In a time when Third World theologians have made contextuality a hermeneutical key, it is sad to notice how contextuality has remained linked to the geographical more than the epistemological. By epistemological context we mean the fact that ways of knowing relate to each other." Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 25-26

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 23.



motivates our kenotic desire for God. Without the confidence of faith in God's arrival, the transgressions of villainous writing would bring nothing other than horror to theology. With God, however, we feel the embrace of divine love where it is too dark to see even who we ourselves are. Thus, after considering the methodological questions of the Sadean hermeneutic proposed by Althaus-Reid, I turn to the doctrine of kenosis, specifically kenosis at the gate of villainous possibilities.

Many alternatives vie for attention. Some undoubtedly will seem to some readers as more conceptually central, provocative, or entertaining than the ones I bring here. In any text, we must choose which invitations we answer, just as we must be honest (both at the time and after the fact) about which guests surprise us by entering the writing without an invitation. We also must be honest that doing so does not resolve or negate our responsibility to those who continue to approach our gate. There are always further knocks at the threshold to be answered. My implicit claim here is that, in turn and over time, the arrival of all these guests could (perhaps, should) be welcomed—whomever or whatever knocks.

I want to learn from Althaus-Reid "how to recognize God as 'the stranger at our gates.'"<sup>26</sup> I want to take her advice that theology ought to "keep walking in the path of a hermeneutics of defamiliarisation."<sup>27</sup> Imagine that Althaus-Reid is my Octave; I am her student, Antoine. The mistress of the house is the object of our shared attraction, 'Lady Theology' (the gendering and classing matter), who like Roberte considers herself emancipated—yet whom the theologian scandalizes. Echoing Antoine's words, I have thought it worthwhile to note certain of Althaus-Reid's per/versions and to reproduce them

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

in the context of this study. This is the scene that sets my reading of *The Queer God* here, and it proceeds with the Marquis de Sade.

### Villainies

Sade arrives in *The Queer God* by way of Marcel Hénaff's study on Sade's writing: *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*. Here, I begin at Hénaff's end. Reason, Hénaff concludes, constantly births irrationality and evil. If we are now better—or more willing—readers of Sade than before, Hénaff continues, it is because “Sade is no longer in front of us, but *we* are *in him*.”<sup>28</sup> Sade writes the libertine body as an extreme performance of reason, and he writes the mechanized and dismember-able bodies that capital demands. In doing so, Sade “made reason acknowledge that horror is not its opposite, but rather its most consistent result.”<sup>29</sup> The economies of reason found the principles that organize our social relationships. Indeed, the economies of reason *are* the economies of industrial capitalism, exploitation, nation-states, torture, and the massacres of war.

While acknowledging the temptation to read Sade doctrinally, Hénaff suggests that we will do much better to read Sade as *a writer*. It is the “thinking-of-the-text” that matters—not the texts' representations of thinking about acts, ideas, or statements. Sade the writer manifests the logic that structures his characters' speech and activity. His writing appears an activity of thinking about “the staging [of reason], with its conditions, organization, emphases, workings, and slips of the tongue.”<sup>30</sup> Sade does not describe the economies of reason—and therewith the economies of sex, sexuality, money, and power.

<sup>28</sup> Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body* trans. by Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 289. (emphasis original)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

Rather, he *writes* the economies of reason. We should not miss that he does so in the guise of fiction.<sup>31</sup>

As Hénaff writes: “Odious and atrocious as Sade’s world may be (and it certainly is), that says absolutely nothing about his thinking in the texts that describe its horror.”<sup>32</sup> What matters for understanding Sade as writer is the logic of reason that the logic of his writing exposes for readers. Sade’s abhorrent universe, as a fictional creation, “is never offered as either truth or an object for imitation.”<sup>33</sup> Even if and when the texts give an impression of an author in cahoots with his characters (such as through didactic speeches and excurses), the relation always remains ambiguous. The alliance between writer and character can only be trusted as a textual effect crafted by the writer to vivify his fiction. It has no accessible reference; it cannot be read back onto the writer himself. Our desire to do so says more about us as readers than it does about the writer.

I want to emphasize this. We need to be careful not to confuse textual effects that suggest a writing pen’s discursive loyalties with the commitments of the writer herself. Sometimes, they overlap and, indeed, are the same. Other times, the textual effect is produced in order to create space to welcome readers into a different sort of engagement. Neither Sade nor Althaus-Reid submit their texts to demands for confessions of which is the case when. When Althaus-Reid extends Hénaff’s study of the economy of reason in Sade’s writing to the economies of the Trinity in theological writing, she falls under Hénaff’s rehearsal of the well-stated caution. “What interests us now is to consider what we may call the libertine theological landscape,” she writes. “Technically, the libertine’s speech is to be

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 284.

found not in theology but amongst the studies done in the field of literary studies.”<sup>34</sup>

Althaus-Reid invites literature (especially *troublant* literature such as that of George Bataille, Kathy Acker, Hilda Hilst, and Pierre Klossowski) into her theological writing. These texts are her linguistic creatures. They teach and communicate through staged interactions facilitated by Althaus-Reid. In her words: “We are dealing here with what Hénaff...made very clear: reading stories/texts/dogmas for what they are – ‘linguistic creatures’ trying to express the inexpressible of transgressive acts, by a poetical and economic reading.”<sup>35</sup>

Following Hénaff, Althaus-Reid suggests that Sade opens a hermeneutic with five key elements. First, Sade’s writing resists normal relationships and the normalization of sexuality; bodies transgress the limits of assumed—as well as actual—heterosexuality. Second, Sade writes programmed scenes devoid of romanticism or spontaneity. Every detail is carefully orchestrated and enacted with covenanted precision. Third, to find the excess of the narrative, Sade combines bodies and their interactions in a series of slight variations. Slight iterative changes capture the excess of difference desired by readers within an overarching logic of the same. They “tend to work as mini-mirrors for different people to keep seeing and re-creating themselves in their relationships.”<sup>36</sup> In doing so, the

<sup>34</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 35. The distinction that Hénaff makes between poetical and economic readings, to which Althaus-Reid here alludes, matters for the question of how transgressions in writing affect lives lived. For Hénaff, the poetical and economic readings of Sade mirror one another with inverse limitations. What he terms the ‘economic’ reading is the ethical or political reading that dismisses the textuality of Sade’s writing to focus on and judge the ethical substance and implications of the text. The economic reading, as a political reading, recognizes and attends to the manifestations of power and authority instantiated in the text. The ‘poetic’ reading, on the other hand, sidesteps the ethical questions as inconsequential to the narrative, intertextual and poetic considerations of Sade’s writing. Sade’s text is a text, only a text. These two readings “meet in broadside collision, unreconcilable in their assumptions, but united in their denial, their conflictive unity may give them the look of a creature with two heads” (Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, 9). Hénaff engages in both readings, because in his view the one needs the other and vice versa.

<sup>36</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 28.

permutations expose the limitations that foreclose the excesses of possibility beyond the frontiers of any narrative order. Fourth, Sade builds delay mechanisms into the narratives that contradict the urgency of passion while intensifying desire. Fifth, each of these elements comes together in what Hénaff calls “combinative reduction”: meaning is reached through the combination of slightly varied variations. Once this happens, the scene becomes saturated. Its meaning achieved, the scene dissolves, and another scene begins subject to the same resistances, variations, covenants, and delay as the previous one.

The point is not to describe or evaluate the persons, ideas, or actions. Rather, Althaus-Reid welcomes these linguistic creatures—with all their complexity—into academic theology: she practices written hospitality. What happens, for instance, when Sade’s boudoir meets Tillich’s unwritten enjoyment of bondage or the multiplicity of Barth’s committed relationships? How might the scenes unfold? What does it teach about the economies of theology and their effects? A theologian who writes these scenes does not become Sade, Tillich, or Barth, even if she writes one, two or [...] various combinations of them into the page with a remarkable affinity to their person or their ideas. She also does not become Hénaff—even if she explained at the outset that she uses his blocking (read: theory or method) for the staging. Hénaff puts it this way: “mimesis submits everything to the law of the simulacrum and makes every position indeterminate. When we solemnly give a demand that mimesis give an accounting of itself, we cause ourselves to be drawn involuntarily into the realm of mimesis — we take the stage, but in the role of buffoon, as happens sometimes at the theater when a too-literal member of the audience joins with the actors and talks back to them.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, 291.

Sometimes a buffoon is necessary to a scene, and I recommend considering when and how Althaus-Reid encourages us to step into this role. Right now, however, she tells us that we need a different character. “What we need to recover, paraphrasing Klossowski on ‘Sade, the Philosopher-villain’, is the theologian-villain, who can be ‘villain to the core’ (Klossowski 1995:36), thus making political and sexual transgressions a presupposition of doing theology.”<sup>38</sup>

Villainy offers Althaus-Reid a category with both moral and economic valences. She explains that villain is an old word for “what we could call today the dangerous stranger at our gates.”<sup>39</sup> The word ‘villain’ names a criminal who transgresses the law, including laws of decency, economy, and reason. In other words, a villain was a dangerous economic, sexual, and political foreigner. By denying the villain room in our theology, we turn our backs on the stranger at the gate. In doing so, we turn our backs on a life that experiences the dangers of poverty and sexuality. We allow the logic of laws—those that condemn the villain to economic, sexual, and political exclusion—to remain unchecked and unquestioned. It only takes a quick elision of economic lack and sexuality with danger to make villains of sexuality and poverty themselves. Indeed, the poor sexual stranger who refuses to pledge uncritical allegiance to sovereign law becomes *the* villain. We can do better.

Theology needs to recover the possible. We can, Althaus-Reid suggests, if we become theologian-villains. The transgressions of the theologian-villain expose possibilities of different forms of existence, which theology has eliminated from its praxis.<sup>40</sup> Althaus-Reid takes this phrasing directly from Klossowski’s “Sade, or the Philosopher-villain.” By

<sup>38</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. Althaus-Reid is here directly paraphrasing Pierre Klossowski, “Sade, or the Philosopher-villain” trans. by Alphonso Lingis in *SubStance* 15, no. 2 (1986): 5-25.

welcoming his words she instantiates a certain logic of Sadean transgression.

Transgression, Klossowski explains, is “an incessant recuperation of the possible itself—inasmuch as the existing state of things has eliminated the possibility of another form of existence.”<sup>41</sup> This is the sense in which I suggest that Althaus-Reid hosts the transgressions of villainous ‘linguistic creatures’ as a mode of writing. The creatures recuperate ‘unthinkable’ possibility within the strictures of decent academic writing.

Klossowski clarifies that transgression presupposes the norms of an established order under which an energy of what is possible accumulates—and which causes outrage when enacted. For instance, Klossowski notes that in order for prostitution to transgress, there must be an idea of the moral ownership of an individual’s body.<sup>42</sup> The attraction of prostitution depends on the norm’s effective power *and* its potential to be transgressed. Without both the act would be without particular interest: either, it would be ordinary and accepted, or the idea of prostitution would be meaningless.

In Klossowski’s telling, there is more. Because Sade transgresses norms that belong to the structure of reason itself, they persist even as they are transgressed. These norms occur in the logic of language and thought: the logic that must itself be used to judge the success of the transgression calls it into question. With a circular motion, one transgression leads to another, and to another still yet again. It continues to recuperate what is possible (but excluded) in the logic of reason—the same logic that adjudges the success and extent of the transgression. Thus, transgression fails to catalyze a state of affairs in which we no longer need transgression. However, it does open the door to further, and more helpful,

<sup>41</sup> Klossowski, “Sade, or the Philosopher-villain,” 10.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Sade my Neighbor* trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 19-20; Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 24.

transgressions to recover excluded possibilities. “The transgressive pleasure...aspires after nothing, save to renew itself.”<sup>43</sup>

We do well to sit with this claim to see it through. Transgression does not belong to the strategies of progressive science or history; it will not ‘lead us’ anywhere.

Transgressions fail to ‘increase’ or ‘change’ the structures of knowing. They cannot in themselves move us toward a liberative goal – though they can illuminate otherwise hidden paths that will do so.<sup>44</sup> By transgressing, we illuminate the territory in which knowing occurs. For Sade, the territory that matters is the logic of reason. For Althaus-Reid, the transgressions of a Sadean hermeneutic illuminate the epistemological staging of T-theology, which includes “the conditions, organization, emphases, workings, and slips of the tongue” that comprise its exclusionary logic.<sup>45</sup> Each transgression can continue until it has saturated the possibilities of its logic. Then a new transgression continues the dynamic.

That is, transgression participates in a cycle—a circle that cannot escape its own curves.

<sup>43</sup> Klossowski, *Sade, my Neighbor*, 21

<sup>44</sup> The dynamics of transgression as outlined here stand in tension with liberationism. Poetically: transgressive writing exposes the hidden and visible geographies of language and knowledge by exploring, claiming, and mapping strange connections and paths. It does not make any judgment about these paths in themselves, other than to value the activity of mapping. Accordingly, you end up with problematic constructions. In Althaus-Reid, we see this, for instance, in the notion of the voyeur God. Economically: By playing with the power configurations that organize bodies in theology, transgressive writing can be taken for proposing libertine liberation in the same way that Sade can be taken as a writer of sexual liberation. Of course, this falls apart as soon as one asks what this liberation would look like. The dynamics of uncontained transgression quickly move into the more abhorrent, dehumanizing, and hierarchical orders of human relationality and possibility—because this is where the logic of knowledge needs fresh air—but as transgressions expose these orders they also affirm them by recalling and making use of them differently. There cannot be meaningful liberation in this, but it can lead to liberation by broadening our imagination and preparing us for a move to a truly queer alternative.

<sup>45</sup> T-theology is a markedly slippery term in Althaus-Reid’s writing. The ‘T’ can suggest totalitarian theology, traditional theology, ‘capital T’ [Truth] theology, testosterone theology... and so on. These slips resonate with Hénaff’s description of Sade’s writing: “This is not to say that there is no Sadean thinking, but it is a thinking-of-the-text: not a thinking about its explicit statements, or even about the assumptions behind them, but rather a thinking about their logic, that is, a thinking about their staging, with its conditions, organization, emphases, workings, and slips of the tongue.” Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, 291.



With every iterated revolution, the logic is exposed, transgressed, and affirmed in which – and by which – the transgression occurs. By exposing the logic to our awareness, we broaden our imagination and perceptions. We start to see that God is (has been and will be), where God should not be. We prepare ourselves to “be able to move to a Queer Theology of alternative reflections and actions,”<sup>46</sup> one that is open to the surprising and transformative love of God, however-when-ever-wherever it appears.

Libertine theology fuels more than the binarism of lesbian and gay theologies. By manifesting the instability of patterns by which people take advantage of their freedom to meet and touch one another, we attend to how and why we covenant to be the sorts of people that will interact with one another in determined ways. We manifest the authority of different instantiations of power in these covenants and we pursue the ways in which our desires exceed the possible variations of covenantal arrangements. Libertine transgressions may be homosexual, bisexual, adulterous, polyamorous, pan-sexual, incestuous, dominating or submissive. Libertines may be into cross-dressing, cuddling, whips, partner exchanges, or furies. Or it may be the libertinism of daring to campaign to vote when the vote is disallowed or gathering with others to dismantle the official story by learning to think together in community from their own experiences. Indeed, as Althaus-Reid notes, the term libertine was used by Latin American churches and dictatorial regimes alike to name that which they fear: “They fear the freedom manifested in the praxis of bodies gathering together in rebellious ways, outside the signposts of their opaque and limited discourses.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

*“Consider the text as a libertine theater of desires”<sup>48</sup>*

“There would be no knowing what is happening if one were to know nothing of the extremest pleasure, if one knew nothing of the extremest pain.”<sup>49</sup> In searching for the love of lovers, Althaus-Reid risks a radical movement of mind, body, and liturgy. “Borders of thinking are crossed. Borders of prayer are crossed. Body-borders. God may cross God’s own borders too.”<sup>50</sup> There are dangers in this movement. Rather than being paralyzed by them, Althaus-Reid embraces the risks.<sup>51</sup> Like Octave, she awaits the arrival of her guest and the liberation she might bring. The stranger at the gate may be a villain. But the stranger, who is a villain, may also be an angel—or God herself.

I am interested in what happens when Althaus-Reid writes the encounter with these strangers in *The Queer God*. These meetings fill the pages of the book, because, as she writes: “Queer Theology does theology with impunity.”<sup>52</sup> The encounters herald the revelation of an indecent, libertine God and her incarnate embrace. We meet the voyeur God, God the Whore, and God the Orgy, as well as a demonology that manifests the Queer Holiness of those who fail the branded identities of capitalism. In each instance, it is as she writes: “the Queer God may...show us God’s excluded face, which is the face of a non-docile God, a God who is a stranger at the gates of our existent loving and economic order.”<sup>53</sup> God interrupts

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>49</sup> Georges Bataille, “Madame Edwarda” in *My Mother ; Madame Edwarda; The Dead Man*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 139.

<sup>50</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> “Danger paralyzes; but, when not overpoweringly strong, danger can arouse desire.” Bataille, “Madame Edwarda,” 140.

<sup>52</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 153.

the terror of Sadean scenes, revealing them instead as sites of loving embrace—a divine embrace that will find and hold us, however dark and perverse the places we move.

Although Althaus-Reid provides numerous iterations to study in *The Queer God*, clarity about the particulars of an encounter with the non-docile faces of God proves elusive. Her writing sabotages attempts to stabilize an explanation, justify an analysis, or (even modestly) clarify intermediary narrative arcs. Paragraphs tumble on top of paragraphs as she jumps from theorist to revolutionary to theologian and back again. Each character appears (and disappears) too quickly for the ideas they represent to take solid form, much less for the thoughts to be digested by readers.

The inaccessibility proves particularly sharp for readers with substantive knowledge of what she writes. Rarely does Althaus-Reid position her interpretations within wider conversations. She infrequently contextualizes or justifies her reading. She also experiments with the techniques and convictions of modernist writing—including techniques for blocking comprehension and creating an opacity of language. If I stop reading to fill in the gaps of these conversations—for instance, to flesh out the assumptions or transmission that underwrite the ideas—the knot of the argument unravels; the threads loosen to fall into a tangled pile of undeveloped and contradictory conceptual possibility. What *The Queer God* seems to say it is, often enough proves to be what it is not. About all of this, there is much to be said, but not here.

If I move with *The Queer God*—if I allow Althaus-Reid’s text to perform for me with its own timing and logic—I leave her queer theater entertaining strange theological possibilities. When her text succeeds, some readers leave thinking about *why* we have not considered these possibilities; we wonder what other possibilities await us. At times, this awakens the hunger of a queer theological desire. Some find themselves repulsed and affronted; others enjoy the attractions of the repulsion. Still others experience something

else altogether. All of these responses warrant sustained consideration on their own terms. To a large extent they not only shape the meaning of *The Queer God*, they supply its meaning. The text affects those who pick it up. This is a primary form and mode of the knowledge that the book contains and puts on offer. Again, there is much to be said about this, but not here.

In *The Queer God*, we find a staged outpouring of transgressive scenes that flood the text with variations on licentious theological possibility. Each variation positions a set of characters in a determined situation. The characters range from figures representing texts and ways of thinking through people living their lives. For instance, there is a Deleuze who moves through *The Queer God* with an impunity that few others enjoy. He appears as a synecdoche for a vocabulary of epistemological becoming and possibility. In the process of establishing expectations for a horizontal dynamism of multiplicity, this Deleuze authorizes Althaus-Reid's scenes as academic with the philosophical authority of *his* language. Concepts that are incomprehensible outside of a rarefied academic conversation provide the architectonics of an academic space within the text. His appearance instantiates academia, which allows a juxtaposition with other spaces, such as Sade's boudoirs.

Deleuze is an imminently useful academic libertine in creating scenes of theological transgression. Whether or not there is an integral agreement between Althaus-Reid, as she writes, and the concepts of this Deleuze does not matter. I would go so far as to say it is irrelevant. What matters are the previously excluded interpretive possibilities that open with his inclusion. That is, to return to Hénaff, Deleuze appears as one of Althaus-Reid's 'linguistic creatures.' Like the didacticism of Sadean monologues, Deleuzian concepts contribute to carefully staged interactions that expand the theological imagination.

Take the discussion of Deleuze in chapter 4, "Libertine Disclosures," which, not accidentally, is the chapter that features Klossowski and his *Roberte ce Soir*. The index

highlights this as one of Deleuze's primary 'places' in *The Queer God*. Indeed it is. The chapter opens with Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of de/territorialization and transversality as paths to questioning of the name of God. When God abstracts Godself from the heterosexual matrices that formed His context, God can become a multiplicity. Put into conversation with Eve Sedgwick's critique of dyadic social bonds, this suggests that: "God can be free to experience transitions and oscillations and to become multiple may mean only one thing: to disown the name of the Father ...."<sup>54</sup>

In the 750 words of this section, Althaus-Reid does not substantively contextualize, explain, or interrogate the version of Deleuzian concepts that she deploys or their relation to wider conversations or theological interpretation. Nor does she demonstrate their basis, implications, or relation to her. It is not given for us to know Deleuze's relationship to *The Queer God* otherwise than as *this* Deleuze appears at the threshold of the text. What we anticipate from past meetings may or may not pertain to this Deleuze. Like the stranger who appears at the gate carrying a travel bag, this Deleuze arrives with all that he already carries, including a set of concepts. Althaus-Reid, the theologian, welcomes him. She shares her theology with him, just as "Octave, the theologian, wants to share Roberte—his wife—with *strangeness*."<sup>55</sup>

With hospitality being the host's essence, the theologian's identity as host will be actualized in the prostitution of her theology with strangers. In this case, the stranger is Deleuze, who in taking theology as his own made of God a (highly esoteric) lobster. The chapter continues by recounting encounters between the theologian, Deleuze, Klossowski, and a cast of supporting characters. Not only does the text not offer explanations, the

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 63.

development of its arguments may not make analytic sense. It likely should not. The logic being made manifest is that which belongs to the motion of the interactions between characters, not the substance of the ideas themselves. As Althaus-Reid writes of biblical interpretation: “Queer analysis destabilizes and releases incoherence by a strategy of coalition readings.”<sup>56</sup> Each of which must in turn also be destabilized through new interactions. The radical hospitality that welcomes a stranger into writing opens a text to the possibility of knowledge that belongs to justice — not that which the law can or will recognize (Derrida). The promise, if it exists, belongs to the activity of hospitality itself.

### Kenosis

Althaus-Reid experiments with hospitality as a way to write an incarnate theology of the Divine villains at the gate. She writes with a Sadean hermeneutic that opens her theology to the queer kenosis of God incarnate. Here, God appears as a guest seeking our welcome. In her words: “The Queer kenosis of God incarnate, needs to participate in a different theological sense of knowing. It requires strategies of critical bisexual interpretation, the encounter with Queer traditions and the libertine body as sources of theology, and new theological metaphors such as for instance, orgies... We can expect the kenosis of a libertine God, and we are going to explore this in different forms in this book.”<sup>57</sup> Althaus-Reid’s writing fosters the dissolutions of identities that occur when guest becomes host, and host guest by welcoming the stranger into academic theology. I too am anxious to host the villain, who may be our liberation. Frankly, I delight in Althaus-Reid’s transgressions. Yet, like Octave, I want to extend the moment of this encounter. I want to

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 82; 83.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 38.

remain long enough at the threshold of hospitality to see what happens to the villain, writer, and God. This requires repositioning the characters of *The Queer God* into still more variations on a well-rehearsed scene. The work of permutations does not end, and this next one that is already begun will be more traditionally theological. It may not be the only story to tell or scene to watch, but it is an important one.

In *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid holds kenosis and hospitality together. Yet they appear differently. A libertine Klossowski walks through Althaus-Reid's text. She 'hosts' him and, along with him, the complex valences that *Roberte ce Soir* brings to the idea of hospitality. We learn about the doctrine of kenosis, on the other hand, from the voice of the writing theologian, and it is this same voice that insists on its effective importance. Althaus-Reid draws on Graham Ward and Sarah Coakley to explain the teaching, but, unlike the Deleuze, Bataille, and Klossowski, neither Ward nor Coakley appear in *The Queer God* as the same sort of libertine linguistic creatures. Though unmarked in the text, I read them as serving as references for the writing theologian: participants in a chorus. Their ideas contextualize the staging through which the scenes unfold their lessons. Kenosis provokes the libertine liberties of her theological creatures, while hospitable writing provides a way to write the kenotic economy of Divine love that these creatures perform. Interpretation calls forth the freedom of the reader, and the meaning of Sadean permutations occurs in combining iterations with slight variation. It does not matter whether I am 'right' or whether I twist the text to cast Ward and Coakley in this way: the distinction between the two judgments is suspect. Either way, there is meaning to be had.

For Ward, the doctrine of kenosis opens toward an expansive and surprising economy of Divine love that incarnates, reveals, and saves us. More, this understanding of kenosis matters for the shape of theological discourse itself. The three foundational questions—What is theology about? Whose discourse is it? Where does it occur?—open

toward different possibilities. It is all too simple to answer that theology is “our” discourse about God that occurs in “university faculties, seminaries, or church-based activities.”<sup>58</sup>

What if we change the referent? Rather than referring to the doctrines of God and revelation with political and economic contextualization, what if we seek an approach that starts with “a kenotic discourse of love...whose domain is creation itself” – an *allegoria amoris*?<sup>59</sup>

Althaus-Reid takes Ward’s framing and rewrites it. What if, she asks, we embrace an approach that starts with the kenotic writing of queer love — a queer amor that she writes as “*queer amoris*”? What if we embody it by writing it?<sup>60</sup>

Like all doctrine, kenosis has moved through a wide range of meanings, uses, and abuses as centuries of interpretation swirl around its central puzzle. In this case, the puzzle concerns God’s identity and human identity given the telling of God’s incarnate emptying of God-self in Jesus Christ as told by the hymn of Philippians 2:5-11.<sup>61</sup> Over the centuries, power has provided the most consistent language by which theology has attempted to solve this puzzle. Althaus-Reid’s embrace of Ward’s *allegoria amoris* pushes to escape the impossible cycle. In so doing, she pulls up her feminist and liberationist anchors, in preference for the troubling, churning waters of queer possibility. Power will not empty itself of power in order to receive God. We need something else, and we have been given

<sup>58</sup> Graham Ward, “Kenosis and Naming: Beyond Analogy and Towards *Allegoria Amoris*” in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* ed. by P. Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 235.

<sup>59</sup> Ward, “Kenosis and Naming,” 235.

<sup>60</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:5-11, New American Standard.



something else: an economy of disruptive loving that feels the effects of power while denying it any authority or basis across time and space. Coakley guides Althaus-Reid's contextualization of the doctrine. By quickly tracing the contours of her representation, Althaus-Reid's departure will be easier to discern.

Coakley's essay "Kenosis and Subversion" re-complicates kenosis in order to redress caricatured simplifications that Coakley finds in the post-Christian feminism of Daphne Hampson and others. Hampson argues the self-abnegation involved in God's emptying into Christ represents men's problematic attempt to correct for patriarchal power. While abnegation might be useful to lessen the overdrawn sense of self for some men, it has little to offer women.<sup>62</sup> Coakley responds that Hampson has not given a fair reading to the complexity of the puzzle. Rather than displaying sensitivity to the range of historical conversations, Hampson reduces the doctrine to the articulation of certain early 20<sup>th</sup> century British theologians. Just as problematically, Coakley continues, she accepts the same gendered presumptions that trouble her: Hampson aligns weakness with 'women' and domination with 'men'.<sup>63</sup> We probably would do better to walk with Rosemary Radford Ruether and her articulation of the kenosis of patriarchy, produced in Christ.<sup>64</sup> It is a more

<sup>62</sup> Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 155.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing" in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 22. "Hampson's critique scores only against relatively modern forms of kenosis, and in particular those where the 'emptying' is regarded as compensating for an existing set of gender presumptions that might be called 'masculinist.' Thus ...we have detected two fundamental problems....First, it does not apply to notions of human kenosis where masculinist...forms of power are eschewed from the outset by Jesus...; and second...it is begging about gender stereotypes" (Ibid., 32). This version of the essay is a slightly revised version of an essay that was originally published to engage with Hampson in a volume edited by her: Daphne Hampson (ed.), *Swallowing a Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity* edited by Daphne Hampson (Reading: SPCK Press, 1996). Althaus-Reid cites the earlier essay.

<sup>64</sup> For Ruether, kenosis involves the emptying of patriarchy: "Jesus as the Christ, the representative of liberated humanity and the liberating Word of God, manifests the *kenosis* of

creative response to a difficult puzzle, and Ruether renders the importance of kenosis (for women and men) without relying on tired generalizations of gendered identities.

Coakley, however, moves beyond both Ruether and Hampson—and the debate they represent. The essay begins with an outline of six approaches to the doctrine that can be found in the history of its interpretation: 1) God “temporarily *relinquishes* the divine powers which are Christ’s by right”; 2) God *pretends* to relinquish God’s power; 3) God *chooses* not to have certain powers—namely false, worldly powers; 4) God *reveals* that God’s power has always been humble rather than grasping; 5) the Logos *takes on* “human flesh in the incarnation, but without loss, impairment or restriction of Divine powers.”<sup>65</sup>; or 6) God temporarily *withdraws* into potency certain Divine characteristics (and power) in incarnation. After reviewing these options, Coakley emphasizes the arguments for interpreting kenosis as a human, not divine, activity. This leads her to interpret kenosis as a practice of making oneself vulnerable to the Divine through contemplative askesis. Through contemplation, we empty ourselves to expand into God. Prayer conforms our identity to Christ’s: without grasping for it, we allow our humanity to concur with divine power.<sup>66</sup> In contemplation, a new ‘self’ can be born that realizes “the possibility of ‘a strength made perfect in (human) weakness, of the normative concurrence in Christ of non-bullying divine ‘power’ with ‘self-effaced’ humanity.”<sup>67</sup>

Coakley belongs to the theological tradition that finds in kenosis a language by which to rewrite power and its effects. This is why Coakley begins her anthology of essays

patriarchy.” See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 137.

<sup>65</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 14.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 31; see also 39.

*Powers and Submissions* with the essay “Kenosis and Subversions”—and likely at least part of the reason why Althaus-Reid lets her contextualize the doctrine in *The Queer God*.<sup>68</sup>

Reinterpreting kenosis allows Coakley to rearticulate the relation and interaction between divine and human power. Doing so shifts our relationship with power. How can one be both God and man given the differences of divine and human power? In Althaus-Reid’s words, this tradition shaped a “kenotic debate [that] has been based on a tension between ‘The Power’ of God (absolute, imperial) and the power of Jesus (fragile, vulnerable, flickering between Jesus’ outbursts of his ‘I AM’ identity and his failed praxis).”<sup>69</sup> Kenosis challenges theology to reconcile the contradictions of power when the non-coincident identities of God and man conjoin.

“The issue of the power of the vulnerable has been important in Liberation Theology, and also in Feminist Theology,” Althaus-Reid affirms.<sup>70</sup> By “find[ing] in Jesus the imperial power of a God which is not self-evident,” feminists and liberationists have claimed the marginalized voice that is theirs alone to manifest.<sup>71</sup> This is transformative on many levels. These theologies are political creatures struggling to save lives, and their work should (must!) continue. Even so, the battles that result divert theology from continuing to make space for God’s surprising and radical incarnation. The praxis of Christian love gets lost in struggles over power; our desire maps onto attainable outcomes and recognizable/articulate change. In other words, while kenosis catalyzes alternative

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xv. Kenosis names a practice of becoming vulnerable to Divine power by emptying ourselves of the corruptions of human power, which (in agreement with Ruether’s articulation) includes patriarchy.

<sup>69</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

languages of power to counter the harms of power, these same theological languages create resistance to the dynamic promise of kenotic theological language—and its disruptions. Theology ceases to see God.

—Briefly, a note on languages of power—

It is right that the various guises of liberation theologies tend to become focused on redress and redemption as they mature. Appreciable gains make sense, and they make a tangible difference. The problem is that in order to achieve these results, we build theological infrastructures of political and social change that, like Peter, deny the scandal of God's incarnate presence as the despised.<sup>72</sup> It is epistemologically, as well as politically, advantageous to forget to mention that the vulnerable named by any language, much less any language of power, represent only a tiny, fleeting piece of God's kenotic story.<sup>73</sup> In order for some to benefit, we allow others to suffer (hopefully, just for the time being). Otherwise the narrative becomes too complex, contradictory, and incoherent for reasonable discourse or reasonable politics. The reasons for this are manifold, but the hierarchy of the operative logic singular: power is in power.

Whether one wants to fight power with power by re-placing its 'true' locus to marginalized communities or whether one wants to recast its nature in order to undercut

<sup>72</sup> For instance, in many places in the US, the privileges of marriage now extend to gay and lesbian couples. Two men or two women, willing to commit the form of their intimacy to state-sanctioned capitalist monogamy, no longer risk tax penalties or hospital bed-side refusals. The law recognizes their fealty. So too do Churches that confuse property, procreation, or complementarity with the expansive possibilities of life-committed love and partnership in God's image. The assumed exclusion of nonheteronormative commitments remains in effect in all these institutional structures. Church and state collude to harm those who love differently, as part of the process of gaining "marriage equality."

<sup>73</sup> Any language that did give itself over to manifesting the kenosis of God's love would commit suicide to welcome what comes next. This would not make for a strategic or effective political campaign within our contemporary structures.

its effects, power remains 'in power.' I could draw this out in terms of the law of the Father or of phallogocentrism. I could walk with Foucault's articulations of shifting discursive terrains. Indeed, I could return to my own earlier discussions of Baudrillard, Sartre, Arguedas, Daly, or Acker. The choices for richly insightful ways to explain, demonstrate, or critique power's powers have multiplied over the past century, but to little underlying effect. Though instantiations shift and the living bodies that feel its razor edges trade places with others, for so long as power remains in power, people, animals and our world will suffer horrible things. That is my point—and the trap.

To take power as our object—whether to mark its reach, change its basis, slow its advance, or deny its right—repeats our fealty to it. For instance, we can decenter power with relocated power, attack oppressive power with liberative power, or call on weak powers. Likewise, we can attach the preposition over, under, for, with, or within to power. Any which way, the effect is the same. Rather than expanding the horizon of possibility, such writing forecloses it. Worse, it hides the foreclosure with masks of novelty and success in critiquing the rule of power. Such writing creates fashionable critical theory and theology that kills as it frees and maims as it heals.

Accordingly, I choose not to support what I am here writing. Instead, I offer this note in the form of a digression. It marks with forthright honesty what I hold to be true and hands to you the task of discerning further should you be so inclined—*only* if you are so inclined. I may or may not be suggesting something similar to Althaus-Reid or even to what I take from her writing. I intentionally leave the question open and unaddressed. It is only in this form that I do not undo in writing the meaningful answer before and as I answer it.

—end of note—

*Today, power creates language, and language serves power. Academic theology occurs in and through language, specifically written forms of language. As such, academic theology is a product of and productive of power being in power.*

Those of us committed to shifting how we live together on this planet need to recognize that we write in languages beholden to power's closed system: power combats power to ensure a stylish currency for power's uncontested victory. I want to turn my back, but that is no more possible than direct confrontation. To turn away means to stop using comprehensible languages. Yet, both silence and noise have their complicit impossibilities. Liberation requires constant doing and undoing and redoing of the power of present and absent words. I believe it requires a willingness to empty ourselves of misguided investment in the false contest. This is a question that must be answered anew each day: am I willing—are you willing—can we refuse the authority of power to determine our words, in order to welcome the radicalism of what does change everything: the activities of love incarnated by a God who empties Herself to be with us?

Theology, Althaus-Reid writes, has been engaged in “a study of style in power, the dynamics of punctuation of persona (divine and human) in the theological reflection and the approved conjugation of actions or divine verbs.”<sup>74</sup> This aptly describes Coakley's engagement with kenosis. By reworking verbs, subject, and objects, a different style of power becomes manifest. In the process, she offers an illustrative example of how kenosis catalyzes alternative languages of power to counter the harms of power. In this case, it is a ‘power-in-vulnerability’ that arises when the verb is prayer and the subject is human. In prayer, we conform ourselves to a ‘power-in-vulnerability’ that comes to fruition in “personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, and courage in the face of oppression.”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 56.

<sup>75</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 38.

Contra Hampson's worry about passivity, she argues that the contemplative reception of the Divine upends gender stereotypes "in its gradual undermining of all previous certainties and dogmatisms."<sup>76</sup>

Coakley articulates a radical form of feminism that occurs through the transformations of a very Christian practice, not by argument or activism. The practice of contemplation empties our allegiances to constructions of sex and gender (along with all other identity constructions) and opens space for the creation of a 'new self'. She installs a different organization of power, identity, human, and divine. Her theology escapes—and potentially disrupts—the discursive constraints of contemporary knowledges of oppression. In this way, kenosis occasions a rewriting of a theological language of power that does make a difference. It does not however challenge the corrupting cycle of power's power in language. The authority of power for determining what theology can and should write remains untroubled. Put differently, there is little queer about Coakley's kenosis. Nor does it enter into the activity of writing.

Althaus-Reid frames the alternative pedagogically. Students learn languages more effectively when they observe every day interactions than when they are presented with the grammatical rules for the language. Yet theology continues to teach grammar, rather than opening space for 'ethnographic observation'.<sup>77</sup> What if Coakley had written her essay as prayer, rather than analytics? It seems likely that we would have a different understanding of the relationship between contemplation and kenosis, but also of where and how God appears. God was not content to describe the laws and practices by which we heal our relationships with each other and with God. God came to be with us. In Jesus, God lived a

<sup>76</sup> Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion," 37.

<sup>77</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 56.

human life that felt the terrible effects of power, but yet was un beholden and uncompromised by them. In Jesus, God gifted new life. If we likewise stop rewriting power to contest the harms of power, we might disrupt the logic of power's authority.

Philippians reads: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who although he existed in the form of God, did not view equality with God as a thing to be grasped." We mistake ourselves and our God if we attempt to grasp the Divine. It is God who freely gives Godself to us. But even were God to make it possible, theology that is equal to God would be no boon for humanity. This is the second sense in which equality with God is not a thing to be grasped: it is not a treasure to loot.<sup>78</sup> We need what is appropriate to us and to our struggles.

It is wondrous that God emptied Godself to be with us in being for us—that Jesus risked life for our knowledge of God and the lengths of God's love. In Jesus, God revealed Godself and humanity as we are—that is, as we are in relationship. Yet, we err in interpreting the hymn of Philippians as pertaining primarily to identities or their relative power. Paul exhorts his readers to emulate the attitude, which was also in Jesus Christ, toward the needs of those their ministry serves. The lesson of Philippians concerns our way of doing things. Is theology willing to empty itself into the world, even to the point of death, to teach about God and the lengths of God's love for us? Will we humble our theology to God's wisdom and deny the authority of all other claims on our understanding? Is our theology willing to empty itself of privilege and special knowledge, whether divine or human, to share in the painful injuries inflicted by the world? Althaus-Reid marks the challenge of a kenotic attitude in theology with an echo of Freire's pedagogy. If we learn

<sup>78</sup> *Harpagmos*, ἀρπαγμός



better by observing, and God has given of Godself to be observed in our world, “could a Freirean conscientisation process be a crucial factor in the process of the kenosis of God?”<sup>79</sup>

At the conclusion of a course he taught at the University of Geneva, Freire and the students attempted an evaluative process together. During the evaluation, a student offered a direct criticism of Freire’s teaching: “Look, Paulo, you committed just one mistake, but it is a serious mistake in working with us....You committed suicide as the teacher. Instead of that, you should have exposed yourself to our assassination!”<sup>80</sup> The student explained that Freire had mistakenly assumed that they were ready to take responsibility for shaping themselves in community with him. When he projected his assumption onto them, Freire erred as teacher and as a comrade in learning. He abandoned them. He made orphans, rather than participating in a community of praxis. Had he tested his pedagogical assumption—had he welcomed the students into a shared process of pedagogy and knowing—he would have discovered that they were not ready. Thus, in this case, the teacher’s suicide hindered liberative education. Were the students to have had the opportunity to assassinate their teacher, on the other hand, Freire and students together would have been able to learn together. In the words that Freire attributes to the student: “We would have to kill you as the only professor in the seminar for you to be re-born as a student who is also a professor.”<sup>81</sup>

As Althaus-Reid notes, Freirean pedagogy emphasizes the importance of the teacher’s letting go process to support the empowerment process for students. “We may recognise [this] as a kenotic moment in the life of a dialogical style of education.

<sup>79</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 57.

<sup>80</sup> Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc. 1987), 89. (emphasis original)

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Interestingly, this process is not very different from a divine kenosis.<sup>82</sup> We need to depart radically from historical debates about kenosis as a power-to-power puzzle predominantly concerned with “the historically perceived dynamics of human power, based on a biologising process of God’s ethos,” she argues.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps then, a queer kenosis may be part of a theological project that “aims to lead God astray, that is, facilitating God’s own disempowering act but without presuming to know what original power is there to let go.”<sup>84</sup> The task of writing theology does not concern knowledge of power (with all its attendant questions, conversations, and implications). Rather, the writing of queer theology participates in kenotic activities of love.

Queer theology occurs not by resisting or accepting languages of power, but within the libertine scenes in which queer bodies and their intertwined pleasures become theologically manifest. There is slippage between the prepositions by and within, but that is indicative of the limits of language. Libertine scenes can be more or less directly oriented at power and the characters within may use power-to-power languages with facility. Often, the scenes tell the story of what occurs and how it feels when bodies experience or resist the lashes of power. Because of this, it is all too easy to focus attention here: the contests staged by ‘power being in power’ entice us; they offer ample fodder for funneling the best of intentions into the appearance of critique, but that do little more than shift power around by chattering. We need to move beyond the killing fields of babbling languages of power. That is, we need to write theology as an activity of divine love that moves within, through,

<sup>82</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 56.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

and in excess of the libertine scenes of queer bodies. Queer theology, as framed here, is a praxis of writing love with love.

In this sense, a queer kenosis may be a pedagogically attuned writing of theology that facilitates God's suicide—or, put more strongly, that accepts responsibility for assassinating the self-exposed Master God—so that queer bodies participate in knowing God and ourselves, rather than the false identities propagated by heterosexuality, late capitalism, neoliberalism, colonialism, and so on. Put differently, we assassinate the illusions of divine authoritarianism—and therewith all authoritarianisms—to be welcomed into divine love. Or still: kenotic writing facilitates opportunities for queer bodies to assassinate God, in Freire's pedagogical sense, so that we can welcome the strange, surprising God, who emptied Godself to approach us at our gate in the spirit of unruly and surprising love.

### Queer Amor

Recall Klossowski's explanation of transgression. Transgression is "an incessant recuperation of the possible itself—inasmuch as the existing state of things has eliminated the possibility of another form of existence."<sup>85</sup> It releases the energy of possibilities that are denied by the norms of an established order not to determine or solve the problem of the order but to recover what the order has made impossible.<sup>86</sup> (This is why epistemological transgressions such as those performed by Sade and Althaus-Reid always lead to more, *other* transgressions.) For Klossowski, Althaus-Reid writes, "the kenosis of God does not

<sup>85</sup> Klossowski, "Sade, or the philosopher-villain," 40-41.

<sup>86</sup> It is common, but mistaken, to confuse the energy of transgression with substance of any particular transgression. Transgressions in themselves have little liberative importance. It is the unstable *dunamis* of transgressing that illuminates the constraints in which we live that matters.

seem to be natural. Klossowski was interested in how bodies talk of God, in a way that in his writing we may see traces of a powerful and destabilising body theology which, by default, destabilises God too.”<sup>87</sup> God casts Godself in the role of a villainous stranger to recover the possible from the impossible, in a broken human world. When the villainous divine guest arrives at our gate, we anxiously welcome Her with the hope that she will be our liberator.

“That is the Queer quest: that the master of the house should no longer be the master of the house; that the guest who seems to be so far away from his home should be thought of as if he is not. That the host may be translated into a guest and a guest into a host.”<sup>88</sup> Who is God, who is Jesus, who is theologian, villain, libertine or queer? We succeed theologically when it is neither clear nor stable who is who and who is who he is not. Why? Because for that moment, the possibility exists of knowing the transformations of divine love that escape the expectations of our exclusions. That is, we are welcomed with kenotic hospitality into the intra-Trinitarian love. In Althaus-Reid’s words, “what is at the stake here is not just God devolving itself in Christ but in the Trinity, and in the Trinity understood as an orgy.”<sup>89</sup>

Graham Ward proposes that theological language can “give a true knowledge of God” which is founded “upon the notion of *allegoria amoris* - a kenotic discourse of love whose *dunamis* is the co-operation of an intra-Trinitarian and an anthropological eros, and whose domain is creation itself.”<sup>90</sup> Love makes, unmakes, and remakes identities. In doing so, love brings with it different possibilities of knowing and knowledge. In Althaus-Reid’s

<sup>87</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 64.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>90</sup> Ward, “Kenosis and Naming,” 235.

words, Ward “elaborates an *Allegoria Amoris* to consider a different cartography of knowing based in a different Trinitarian loving.”<sup>91</sup>

For Ward, theology has the discursive task of telling by allegory the stories of God’s intra-Trinitarian love. He shifts theological language and knowledge on the basis of a rereading of kenosis. In his words: “The kenotic economy...narrates a story of coming to know through coming to love — love given, love endured.”<sup>92</sup> What philosophers have articulated as the postmodern crisis of language, the death of the sign, is figured in the hiatus of the death of God, as Christ descends into effacement, silence, aporia on Holy Saturday. Yet, in the midst of the linguistic and divine hiatus, the *dunamis* of Trinitarian love draws our knowledge. “What persists when the continuity of human discourse and reasoning comes to its end or reaches its edge, is the economy of love,” he writes.<sup>93</sup> The kenotic economy of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection communicates, in a way that we are able to share, God’s Trinitarian love for Godself and us. In other words, love offers ways to know and write of God beyond what language ordinarily allows.<sup>94</sup> It escapes the logic of power being in power.

As Althaus-Reid emphasizes, an integral part of Ward’s proposal involves the instability of meaning. The names that theology uses for God do not fix God’s identity, but rather function as performatives.<sup>95</sup> The names act upon us by welcoming us into the kenotic activity of Divine love, where the epistemological grounding for our reflections begins at an

<sup>91</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 54.

<sup>92</sup> Ward, “Kenosis and Naming,” 253.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>95</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 54. “Ward is reflecting that meaning is not fixed, and names (as in the case of the names of God), more than fixing or designating specifically a God’s definition, act as performatives.”

awareness that identities do not always coincide. In her words, “the Trinitarian formula expresses the material reality of the intimate reunion where God is not expected to coincide with Godself.”<sup>96</sup> After all, God called God’s own identity into question to become Christ. To write theology as a kenotic activity of love, we must find the libertine freedom to let our own identities be likewise called into question. The queering trajectory of indecent theology “is not only about destabilizing, for instance, Jesus’s sexuality...but by doing a theology for all the strangers who are entombed in us.”<sup>97</sup>

Kenosis is not about correcting and stabilizing who are God and person. Quite the opposite: kenosis references an attitude that gives God to destabilize and expose Godself to assassination as a pedagogical activity of love. “We are talking...about identity and, specifically, about divine identity,” Althaus-Reid writes.<sup>98</sup> I add that I also include the identity of theology, theological writing, and the theologian. Here, rather than contextualizing, delimiting, and defining the activities of love, identity appears as that which love destabilizes. Queer bodies lead God astray. Their out-of-placeness destabilize God and occasion God’s out-of-placeness. We are involved with the excessiveness of God’s love because the queerness of God attunes to a pedagogical mutuality of engagement. It is easy to welcome God into the writing of theology when God appears as friend or sovereign, but what if God appears as prostitute in a brothel or as a villain at the gate? Or, just as importantly: what if it is we who knock on God’s door as prostitutes or villains? To echo her famous question, what if the theologian writes theology without wearing any underwear?

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Queer I stand,” 108.

<sup>98</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 54.

Althaus-Reid accepts the risk of finding out. Experimenting with writing hospitably, she narrates the queerness of love that is unafraid of darkness, horror, or vulgarity. Indeed, “vulgarity is what qualifies the location of God outside the non-civilised sites of theology, and in the space of the dirty.”<sup>99</sup> The kenotic love of God incarnate greets us in the figure of the villain at the gate. Because of this, the hope for queer theology rests on our willingness to host the strangers we encounter as well as those who are within ourselves. It takes a willingness to risk darkness to do so. We are most likely to encounter the kenotic presence of the Divine where it is too dark to be confident who it is that we have already met or who it will be that we will meet in the future. Moreover, we cannot know who it is that we ourselves will be seen to be. Althaus-Reid argues that it needs to be so, but she also trusts that will be so. “In the law of hospitality what is theologically posited for us is that the Trinity would give hospitality by becoming the stranger and trespassing beyond the border of current theological discourses.”<sup>100</sup>

Paul’s exhortation always needs answering. Are we willing to have the attitude in ourselves which was also in Christ Jesus? Do we welcome the appearance of a God who emptied Godself into a strange body that disdains decent limits for embodied, incarnate love? Even if we quietly welcome the expansiveness of love in our heart, are we willing to write publicly with this attitude, knowing all too well the difficulty, risk, and pain of doing so?

A vast majority of theology that undoubtedly loves God and Jesus with heart and mind cries with the torment of Peter’s denials: No, I do not know the villain who is crucified; I do not participate in his indecent love. These denials take differing forms. Some deny that

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 69.

Jesus was a stranger at our gate; they deny that Jesus appeared as a villain that a few decided to welcome into their lives. Others deny his villainy; they recast what was indecent for Jesus and his context as decent for God and us. The former can say: I do not know the villain who was crucified; I know the God who was crucified. The latter can say: I do not risk indecent love, but love with the Godly decency of Christ crucified. Both deny the transgressive quality of kenosis. Althaus-Reid offers a rare exception. She writes theology that offers hospitality to the villain, who may be our liberator.



## **Concluding Notes**

The dissertation ends here. The words that I inscribe share only a small segment of a long journey. I have written on Althaus-Reid's writing for four years, most of which remains private. Since the summer days on the library lawn, I moved into a protest encampment, university housing in St Louis, a flat under construction in West London, and a family home in Cincinnati. When I return to the scents of Harvard's Widener Library, an existential peace accompanies my sigh: that which is found in returning home to smell a childhood treat cooking in the oven. However, the moment of return flees as quickly as it arrived. I belong to a different time now; the change destabilizes the place itself. It is, however, this home—to which I will continue to return—that enables me to be where I am.

These five studies recall the form of my questions as I let go of a lease in St Louis to accept a period of transience. I needed to move for my well-being; the project needed to be written while moving. People ask me: "where are you these days?" I can only answer: "here and there; right now here." Then they inquire: "where will you be next?" I reply: "I don't know." Often the interchange causes a few seconds of discomfort: 'am being evasive or honest?' hovers unspoken in the air. The answer is honest. Althaus-Reid's theology is nomadic; mine, here, is itinerant.

It seems easy to imagine in hindsight why the image of a hermeneutical labyrinth at the outset of Althaus-Reid's dissertation caught my attention. The idea provided motivation and comfort to me as I transitioned to transience. I asked myself and asked the text: What is

a hermeneutical labyrinth? How does it relate to the hermeneutical circle? How can it teach me about my current journey? What do I have to learn *here*? And so I set forth. I pondered the motion internal to writing and knowing; I worked to write while moving; I struggled to move while continuing to know and write. Which of these comes first can never be parsed. Years before I raised the question of Althaus-Reid's hermeneutical labyrinth, exploring it with others. New is not an accurate description of these thoughts. Between an idea, experience, reading, and writing, there are complex relationships, which are much too intimate and much too erotic to be causal.

If these paragraphs seem a bit like a foreword masquerading as a conclusion, in some sense, they are. The order of textual elements places our writing in time; they orient its motion. I want to close by acknowledging what enabled my writing because its promise and purpose [always] remain in the future. The conclusion will serve as a middle and a beginning of this same text, for so long as a possibility of readers continues. For so long and the possibility of continuing to write persists, the same can be said for my writing in general. The unruly temporalities of writing let it stay alive.

Writing occurs as a special use of language that fosters living knowledge as well as knowledge of life. It does so both inside and outside of what we assume to be ordinary experiences of time. Narratives stretch and condense the time within writing; but so too does the physical structure of a text and the practices of writing which create it. Texts and ideas travel great distances to find their readers. Meaning can take centuries to arrive. All of which makes it all too easy for ideology to work its exclusionary illusions by giving us false temporal coordinates for ourselves and for the communities with whom we walk. These coordinates shackle and imprison us.

We need to lift our own skirts at the time of writing, and we need to lift them over and over again. "In lifting our skirts, we remind ourselves of our own identity at the

moment of doing theology while remaining committed to theological honesty.”<sup>1</sup> Our honesty communicates more than can be spoken; it marks illusions even when we cannot quite escape them—or at least not yet. The voice of honesty promises and provokes a different relationship with the world and to our writing. It clears a path for us to walk in the midst of suffering, whether the struggles are of today, yesterday, or tomorrow. In other words, honesty leads us to where we need to be writing theology. There, heterotopian moments of another world not only are possible, but *are*. Because they actually *are*, we can know inarticulable change in their heterotopian space. We experience transfiguration.

Honesty calls us to risk admitting that sometimes we move within dark or dangerous places, and that sometimes we take wrong turns. Sometimes, in the dark, down an unexpected alley, we find ourselves. Sometimes we find others. Sometimes these others are villains. Most of the time, if we risk honesty, we find ourselves in others and others in ourselves. There is nothing more beautiful than experiencing in the darkest dark—where we terrify even ourselves—that God’s love embraces us all, and all of us. We must keep moving.

Thus, I repeat that my journey continues as the dissertation ends. There are no resting points visible on the horizon. If discomfort with the contradictions of reading liberation theology over picnic lunches on the Cambridge lawn invited me into the puzzle of this reading of Althaus-Reid’s writing, discomfort with the contradictions of academic itinerancy close its pages. I gave up a home and wrote this. In finishing it without somewhere to go, I will rely on the hospitality of others to continue working. This is common. The precarity of both theology and theologians is well rehearsed: all theology is at risk to the extent that academic theology finds a primary home in institutions of schooling.

<sup>1</sup> Althaus-Reid, “Queer I Stand,” 33.

Most of us called to continue writing theology will have to do so without support or security—even the few who write as faculty. Universities are at risk, as are seminaries and schools of all sorts. The work that institutions demand often misaligns with the work to which theologians are called by God. The situation is not new, but today's manifestations newly matter.

Althaus-Reid understood that excluded and precarious voices uniquely articulate the transformative promise of God's love for this world. For the strange camels who stray from their path to embrace the strange or dangerous, the obstacles increase significantly—but so too does the promise. It may be that we will not overcome the exclusionary nature of language until the divinely ordained time when all will be made right. Yet in the praxis of finding ways to write when writing should not be possible, a hope appears that we can disrupt the ideologies that silence God's love in our lives and imagination. Love disrespects boundaries. What we cannot think or do, love does and understands.

Althaus-Reid models a praxis of human community and human love in the activity of writing. She experiments with ways to engage the strange, but essential, relationships between bodies and writing, in order to write into the fleshy ideological fissures of a nomadic "restless weeping wound."<sup>2</sup> Writing *allows* bodies to appear and disappear, but it also *condemns* bodies to appear and disappear. The praxis requires iterative risks and iterative experiments that constantly connect, disconnect, and reconnect in surprising ways.

And so her writing encourages us to press our own flesh against the created promise of human bodies. All bodies are clothed by languages and ideas, but when we press together we feel the warmth of what lies underneath: a bit of softness, a bit of hardness, a quiver, a yearning lean. What will remind us that we love as indecently as we are loved,

<sup>2</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 49.

when the world wants to kill us? What scents will become the memory that serves as prophesy of our closeness with God? Writing must never stop seeking bodies and their impossibilities in language.

When the love of God fuels our writing, we will risk transgression and indecency to live out our love for one another. We will speak what should not be spoken and write what should not be written. Silence that is loud with meaning has its place, but the silence that accompanies (enforced) disappearance must be shattered. Too many idolatrous oblations of linguistic insufficiency going by the name of apophasis deny those who suffer a place in language by demanding that we unsay that which needs to be said—even if it must be said insufficiently. With Althaus-Reid, I insist otherwise. We can write into the expansiveness of God's body, because God gave God's body to the world with the intimate eros of a love beyond understanding. This is a promise of God incarnate, the Word made flesh: when we write the rebellions of our bodies in love, we write the rebellious love of the loving Spirit. We write of God and us. We write theology.

What is language that moves without ceasing, that wanders spaces licit and illicit, offering to give itself up for encounters with strangers? It is theological: a language that thirsts for the outpouring of God's love. It is exilic: a nomad language banned from the protective security of decency's territory for its unabashed willingness to ignore the exclusions on which decency is based in order to find God. It is erotic: a licentious language that hungers for the pleasures and pains of forbidden desires and forbidden touches with as much voracity as it craves licit caresses. Theology moves because God moves. Theology loves because God loves. We love the world when the world is unlovable. We love all of us and us all. Theology finds the possible in the impossible when and where God creates possibility out of impossibility. God dances with transvestites, and God wears latex. God raises her skirt to demand a kiss at the entry to a brothel. God surprises those who love Jesus most on the road to Emmaus. God appears as a stranger at our gate. God's love moves to encounter us in the world. Theology finds God embracing the strangers within us and about us. We come to knowledge in her embrace. God reveals divine intimacies to us in our willingness to embrace her, if we are willing to kiss her. Indecent theologians kiss God. We kiss her publicly even when, especially when, the world, the academy, our family insists that we should not. We feel the pain of that act. We feel the pleasure. We feel the surge of life; ungraspable eternity in shudders of a promise fulfilled. Theology, like God, because it is in and of God, is insatiable.

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