

Saintly Journeys: Intersections of Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Faith in Alejandro Springall's *Santitos*

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Introduction

This article analyzes the racialized, gendered and sexualized experiences of immigrants that intermingle with theo(ideo)logical discourses. Particularly within the Christian faith, I engage with the dilemmas and complexities of the consequences of the incarnation, that is, God made fully human in the image of Jesus. I believe the incarnation to be the place where gender, sexuality, religion and theology intersect as they represent key elements of how humanity unfolds-in-the-world. Cultural *artifacts* such as films are the sources for my intersectional queer analysis, especially in relation to the lives and stories of their characters. *Santitos* [Little Saints]¹ is my chosen film for analysis, with the aid of tools provided by queer theory and queer/indecent theology.

My work focuses on the condition of *in-betweenness* that can enlighten other *levels of hybridity/ies*, especially outside the realm of sexuality and theology, such as the everyday life of migrants. I am very intrigued by how people and their lives get modified by living one experience of migration after another, how they are changed by this, how they negotiate elements of their identity within the new environment that hosts them and how this is transitory because it will be modified/re-negotiated in the next experience of migration in a different context.

What is the result of these processes? Who is finally the subject who emerges after multiple experiences of migration? How have assimilated and refused elements of the different host environments affected and even colonized that subject? These are questions that cannot be addressed in a binary way of thinking, as migration has traditionally been understood. In other words, subjects move from one place to the other, but this is only one phase of their life process, as people are not only able to return to their place of origin, but also move on to another different location. However, I also need to state that when using the term “*hybridity*,” I have in mind the problematic that it represents in terms of situating a subject in a category that is not completely *pure* or tied to a normative identity. In other words, hybridity is only constituted in relation to an abstract notion of purity (pure race, pure ethnicity) in which this subject does not fit in. Therefore, “*hybrid*” could be misunderstood as a bad re-production of that abstract category of purity when it is, in fact, a space of negotiation and agency

I affirm throughout this article that incarnation is the *locus* from which I analyze the plot of the film that I engage with here, and which I then extend to everyday life. I hope that in reading this article, the reader will catch a glimpse of the multilayered aspects of the incarnation—this fascinating and central core of the Christian faith—as it interacts and operates from within characters and stories. I

¹ *Santitos*, Alejandro Springall. 99 minutes, 20th Century Fox, 1999. DVD. Springall based this movie on the novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints* by María Amparo Escandón (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

am aware that religion is an area that is visibly discernible in the life of the main character in my chosen film. Anchoring on that main character, I will take the film as my source for discovering the footprints of God in the lives of individuals mirrored in the film plot. I further suggest that God may not necessarily be present in ways that are commonly recognized by institutionalized religions. The traces of God come in ways that sometimes surprise us, as the film will show us later in this article.

The basic question that guides this article is: How have religious institutions traditionally denied the intersectionality of gender/sexuality and religion/theology that actually binds the everyday lives of the faithful? My assumption is that they are portrayed as so exogenous to one another that it is very hard to bring them together. What happens to religion when sexuality and gender come on board as questioning the validity of accepted traditional moral views? We must recognize that feminist theologies and moral theologies have been attempts to deal with this issue, but have mostly argued on the subject of *normalization* instead of opening up spaces for divergences and dissidences on sexual practices. On this matter, Aline H. Kalbian cites John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), in which the pope "uses maternal images to convey a series of messages about moral theology."² This evidently draws from a classic sexual division of labor where women are confined to motherhood as their "normal" role. D'Costa has also deconstructed this issue in his book *Sexing the Trinity*, where he also critiques the feminization of the Divine as mechanism of the same dynamic: "The feminine divine meets the same fate as the human women: they are domesticated within the phallic order. Divine and human female genealogies are eradicated."³

Still, many questions remain open: How is it possible to reconcile prayer before going to the bed with a client who is paying for sexual services? How does one remain faithful to God while being a sex worker? These questions persist and are intermingled in cultural artifacts—films, books, songs—which mirror social realities where a clear-cut bad/good binary is simply not sufficient to describe the complexities of life's realities.

On Queer/Indecent Theology

Permit me first to contextualize queer/indecent theology. On one hand, feminism has developed lenses to destabilize the dominion of patriarchy, that is, the dominion of the phallus in society. However, feminism fails by equating *patriarchy* with *maleness*, as if patriarchy was the exclusive feature of males. Thus, feminism paradoxically risks becoming allied with patriarchalism:

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a *reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor* instead of offering a different set of terms.⁴

Furthermore, when we sexualize that notion of patriarchy, we also note that its matrix is predominantly *heterosexual*.

On the other hand, gay and lesbian studies have denounced the preeminence of *heterosexuality* as the *norm* that molds, polices and censors the different performances of gender and sexuality. For that reason, queer theory critiques forms of feminism that still keep the male/female binary as—in Marxist

² Aline H. Kalbian, *Sexing the Church: Gender, Power, and Ethics in Contemporary Catholicism* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 120.

³ Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 138.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18-19. Emphasis added.

terms—the ‘basic contradiction’ of gender and sexual heteropatriarchy. It also critiques gay and lesbian studies that have maintained the binaries that exist in human relations and have actually reinforced them by calling for a particular notion of equality. Nonetheless, it is from these sources, namely feminism and gay and lesbian studies that queer theory derives its primary tools to develop as a new field in the academy. Thereafter, we deploy it in theology as a way to deconstruct and challenge hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality in religious discourses.

In contrast with “queer,” heteropatriarchalism constantly aims towards normalization through different methodologies, such as the co-optation of queer practices. For example, coming out narratives and gay marriage issues are discourses that have already been institutionalized and have begun to marginalize those who do not fit into the new normativity of gender and sexual performances, as is shown in contemporary hegemonic constructions of gay and lesbian identities. This becomes more evident when we interconnect these issues with those of race and ethnicity. For example, in the case of Pacific and Asian queers, *coming out* narratives imply more than just *being out of the closet*. As David Eng points out: “Coming out for Asian gays involves many irreconcilable choices between aligning oneself with a predominantly white gay community often tainted by overt racism or an ethnic community often marked by cultural homophobia.⁵ Thus, many scholars in Asia have started to use the terms “coming home” and “inviting people in” as more possible strategies for queer individuals to manage the disclosure of their sexual orientation.⁶ Something similar can be said of individuals in Latin America or Africa.

Confronting the coming out narratives, this hetero-compulsive normativity also operates within religious discourses embedded in language as well as ecclesial practices that reify the “deviant characterization” of queer believers. For this reason, if queer theology aligns itself with binary positions, it risks losing its potential to be relevant to actual lives of people. Queer theology could thus engage in a process that would deny plurality, diversity and creativity of identity and desire, and trap individuals and communities in a network of power that would regulate them very narrowly.

Therefore, queer theology embraces queer theory in order to destabilize heteropatriarchy and its power dynamics within the realm of religious discourses and ecclesiastical institutions. Queer theology also represents a challenge to traditional theologies and ecclesiastical institutions by examining the ways in which heteronormativity has constructed subjects and their religious/faith experiences.

Looking at cultural artifacts is one of the many ways through which this examination can occur. Therefore, when we trace heteronormativity in films, we need to queer the film text in order to make heteronormative issues come out of their cultural closets. This process entails a need to look at the story with another gaze, even to see what is not obviously seen, or on the contrary, what is purposely occluded. It may be appropriate here to remember that films, as well as other cultural and artistic artifacts, represent reality by *imitation*. This is an important point, as their function is double. On the one hand, they frame and re-produce stories/characters that combine diverse elements from everydayness. In this

⁵ David L. Eng, “*The Wedding Banquet*: You’re Not Invited and Some Other Ancillary Thoughts.” *Artspiral* 7 (1993): 9; quoted by Mark Chiang, “Coming Out into the Global System: Postmodern Patriarchies and Transnational Sexualities in *The Wedding Banquet*,” in *Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 377.

⁶ Carolyn Poljski, *Coming Out, Coming Home or Inviting People In? Supporting Same-Sex Attracted Women from Immigrant and Refugee Communities* (Melbourne, Australia: Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health, 2011).

sense, the plots of films, in most of the cases, can be similar to experiences that everyday people live/experience. On the other hand, this closeness to daily life engages the viewer in a process of mirroring herself/himself in the plot of the film, reflecting back to her/him the re-remembering of experiences previously lived by the viewer. In other words, there is a dramatic catharsis in the viewer that keeps her/him inter-related to the film device and its plot. Representations enhance the experiences of everyday life in order to produce a catharsis of those events. In the same way, the story which is analyzed in this article enhances the everyday life performances of people that are extrapolated into a film. It might be in those extrapolations and enhancements that viewers identify themselves with the plot of the stories represented before them. Thus, to queer the film text is also to queer daily life.

Nonetheless, the examination of cultural artifacts such as films cannot be performed at the level of mere opposition. Rather, the examination has to aim towards a deconstruction that can then make it possible to re-construct alternatives to a traditional construal. With this concern in mind I turn to theo(ideo)logical discourses. Tension remains as performances of gender and sexuality are hardly ever connected to the event of the incarnation of Christ, the core tenet of the Christian faith. Ecclesiastical institutions have regulated and molded sexuality and gender performances to such a reductionistic level that it is almost impossible to access the mystery of incarnation in relation to those issues.

Religious discourses, particularly in Christianity, appear to be predominantly based on stereotyped constructions of gender and -sexuality. What rests at the base is the coveted assumption that heteropatriarchy incarnates *the* correct vision of the Divine,

a fact that is assimilated into the hierarchy of power within religious institutions. Given these situations, queer theology seeks to contribute to the formation of a new approach in theology/religious studies as a contestation of hegemonic/institutionalized heteronormative theo(ideo)logies. *Indecent* theology is the term that Marcella Althaus-Reid uses to call queer theology. She says:

I called it *indecent* because this is a theology the main function of which is to destabilize the decent order, that is a constructed political, social and sexual order which has been ideologically sacralized, and whose moralizing objective is based on the dyadic reflection on a dyadic god. I am using here the metaphor of 'indecency' as it comes from my own Latin American context, in order to start a reflection on queer theology as a sexual and political theology with an option for the poor. Indecency is part of the dialectic of the 'decent/indecent' which regulates the individual and community lives of women in my continent by a strict codification of sexual and gender understandings. It circumscribes and supervises carefully the delimited areas of public and private lives delimiting the territory of the proper and the improper, which unveils by default the Christian sexual construction of society and politics in my continent. The fact is that Christianity more than a theology has a sexual programme.⁷

It is this sexual program that queer theology wants to dismantle. When I talk about queer/ indecent theology, I am not talking about a *top* theology that *penetrates* the realms of creaturely existence with a homogeneous/univocal understanding of God, and thereby sanctioning/punishing deviant activity outside its canons. Neither am I talking about a *bottom* theology, which passively *receives* the ordinances/dicta of colonial ideologies that co-opt theology as an instrument to oppress and legitimize that oppression through a narrow image of the Divine. Rather than thinking of those

⁷ Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 101. Emphasis added.

missionary positions, I am thinking of a doing of theology that does not seek to dominate/oppress diverse religious discourses or allow itself to be used as a discourse to oppress in the name of God. Instead, queer/indecent theology seeks to be a *versatile* theology, disrupting the binaries and the closeting into which classical theology and Christian denominations have been com/pressed. Perhaps it is even a *swinger* theology, happily sharing and exchanging its contributions with other disciplines as a way to enflesh justice and the reality of those who have been left aside by decent theologies. Therefore, it seeks to actively liberate theology by outing it from the closet of tradition and power dominance while canvassing to restore the dignity of those who still remain under oppression.

By contesting and challenging hetero-patriarchal binaries, queer theology disrupts and distorts the dicta of society and their counterparts in religious institutions. Nevertheless, these third spaces are not always welcome, as seen in the case of bisexuals who cannot be pushed into *either/or* terms, or drag queens who embrace and disrupt the binary by hyper-performing it. Nevertheless, queer theology is not only the contestation of dominant theo(ideo)logical discourses, but also the recovery of the discourses of those who have been ostracized due to the effects of dominant theo(ideo)logical discourses. More on queer theology will emerge in the following section when I analyze the film *Santitos*.

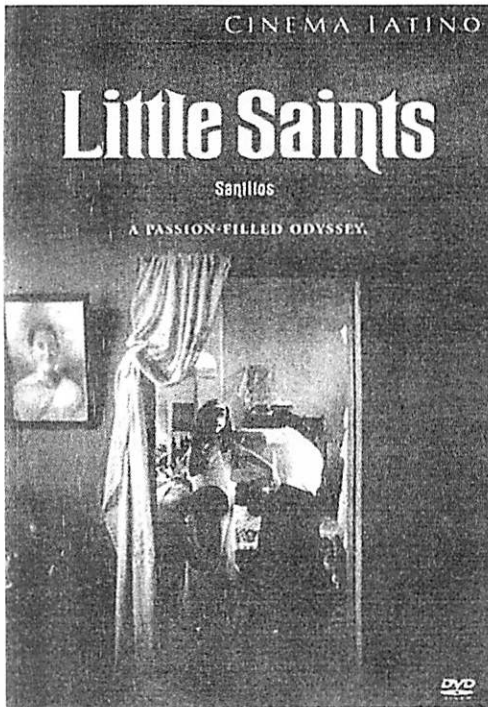
Faithful Sexuality in Everyday Life

The scene begins with the camera focusing on a pair of red high heels. A woman is wearing them. The camera slowly goes up, taking the scene to a very sexual realm, first showing the legs of the woman that is suddenly covered by a very short red dress. When the camera reaches the woman's arms, we realize that she is standing in front of a mirror. She is finishing her makeup. The camera zooms out to show a broader picture, and the door of the room suddenly opens. A man dressed in black slacks,

and a black and pink silk shirt enters the room. He exclaims: "May I?" And looking at the woman he continues, "So you're into customs, sweetheart? All right, then." He walks toward the woman, takes her arms from behind and leads her to another mirror next to the door. While walking he speaks again, "I meant what I said about killing... But only the first time is tough. Then it becomes a habit."

By that time, they have reached the second mirror. The camera shows the woman, reflected in the mirror; the man standing behind her—not reflected in the small mirror; and both sides of the mirror. On one side we see a picture of the woman's husband and her daughter. On the other side we see statues of Saint Jude and the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the middle of this, the virtual image of the woman in the mirror connects both realms. Suddenly the man starts a lecture on prostitution. As he begins touching her breast, she covers the picture of her dead husband. The man exclaims, "In this profession there are basic rules you've got to learn. And the first one is called intimacy." Before ending this last phrase, he blows out the candle, the only source of light in the scene. As he does this, everything blurs: the woman and her virtual image, the light/darkness divide, the clear delineation of every realm represented in this scene—family, religion, partnership, moral values, prostitution business and others. From the shadows of the scene, the film suddenly takes us to the grayness of everyday life, to the life of someone who has just become a prostitute but still firmly orients her life according to the love of her family and her faith. What remain at the end of the scene are the image of the woman and the statues of the saints in the shadows of the room.

This scene, entitled "A Lesson in Prostitution," is part of Alejandro Springall's movie *Santitos*, which narrates the story of Esperanza [Hope], a widow whose teenager daughter was declared dead. Nonetheless, because she never saw the body, Esperanza, the main character of the film, suspects that her daughter did not die, but was



"Sanillos" (1999). Image source: <http://sparks-mexico.com/OtherWebs/blogs/movies/santitos.jpg>

sold as a teen prostitute. From here, we are led to Esperanza's own story of prostitution from Mexico to Los Angeles.

The plot of this film is similar to the everyday life stories of many women and men who walk similar paths in Latin America and elsewhere in the world. Esperanza embraces the life of an immigrant through sexual work, thus paralleling and mirroring countless forced migrants in Latin America surviving by offering sexual services. However, those stories are usually untold and tied to negative moral judgments, especially when they convey issues of gender and sexuality in relation to religious experiences. It is fair to say that, whether heterosexual, bisexual or queer, society segregates daily life experiences of people into cultural closets, and allow only certain stories to come out. Like daily life experiences, films are not free from cultural closets, especially

when they are actively involved in re-presenting those daily life experiences.

In the case of the film *Sanillos*, the queerness of the issues contained therein emerge from the simple fact that Esperanza, despite engaging in prostitution, retains her closeness to the saints and her faith. Not only does she pray, have visions of saints and receive their messages; she even carries them with her when she runs to save her life. She has an altar in her room at the brothel where she works. She does not experience the prostitute's life by herself, but in the company of her saints and in the plenitude of her faith.

The queerness of the plot is uncannily similar to the situation of many prostitutes in Latin America and elsewhere. As the movie itself suggests, it seems strange to imagine Saint Jude or the Virgin of Guadalupe in a context that proclaims the opposite of how these pristine figures have traditionally been represented. It is particularly in popular religiosity that the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe has exemplified the Christian ideal of womanhood and motherhood. Moreover, she has traditionally been represented as a clear-cut exemplar of *decent* as opposed to *indecent*. For centuries, women in Christian contexts have been judged, condemned or approved according to their conformity, or lack of conformity, to the image of the Virgin Mary. Consequently, theology/religion and gender/sexuality are two categories that have hardly come together for centuries. When they do interlace, they do so under the heavy surveillance of hetero-patriarchal powers. However, this is not the entirety of the process, for as Foucault expresses, "as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance."⁸ Therefore, resistance to heteropatriarchalism is an interlacing process, as this resistance brings together issues that hardly ever come together in institutionalized Christianity. Nevertheless, the places where

⁸ Foucault, *Politics*, 123.

this “bringing together” occurs are not the buildings of churches and other ecclesiastical institutions. Brazilian theologian Mario Ribas explains that:

... in Latin America the iconography of saints is not confined to churches or religious environments. Such icons are often found in public places, schools, government offices, courts of justice and homes. They can also be found in bars, cabarets and brothels as well as in garages, displayed alongside pictures of naked women. The icons, therefore, in popular religion are part of the daily life, mixed with the profanity of every aspect of human life ... Sacred and profane are mixed up in popular expressions: the statue of the Virgin Mary or a crucifix can be placed on the wall above the same bed where sexual activities take place.⁹

The connubiality of everyday life and faith as described by Ribas may seem strange, and difficult for institutionalized Christianity to acknowledge. It seems to me that it represents for traditional Christianity a challenge that has to be controlled or a deviance to be corrected. I say this in light of many examples from Church history whereby the reality of the flesh, passions and “human nature” becomes problematic. This reality becomes problematic when issues of the flesh, passions and “human nature” cannot be confined to categories of either/or choices, or to normativities that do not stand in accord with the complexity of everyday life. Judged by normativities of traditional Christianity, the film *Santitos*, in which Esperanza brings together faith and prostitution, would probably not receive positive reviews from traditional Christian viewers. The paradox is that although Christianity has tried to understand what lies behind the mystery of the incarnation for centuries, it has constantly denied and policed the power and materiality of the *locus* of

incarnation: the human body. The body is the geography where the battles over normativities, prohibitions and resistance have been fought; and yet, it remains the chosen place in which God became fully human through Jesus. Esperanza becomes a Christ-like figure because she does not only incarnate her faith amidst her life as a prostitute but also because—as in the case of Jesus—her journey in seeking salvation for her daughter puts her in contact with the fullest and deepest parts of humanity.

For example, in one of the scenes of *Santitos*, Esperanza is confronted by her “transgression” of being a prostitute and praying when one of the clients jokes with her by asking, “What have you come to do here? Pray?” However, some scenes later, the owner of a high-class brothel where Esperanza is working calls her to address this issue by saying: “You need to take more clients. The news has spread about the altar in your room and everyone wants to go with you. You have to take more clients now.”¹⁰

The film *Santitos* portrays these struggles by pointing to a concrete, visible body—Esperanza’s—in relation to faith. However, heteropatriarchalism re-appears in the film at the moment when Esperanza stops her journey to look back at her life, paradoxically when she encounters one of the most powerful symbols of her faith: the Virgin of Guadalupe. It is in this last section of the film that Esperanza has to make the final decision of her life: to continue this journey as a prostitute or to go back to what is expected of her, that is, remain as a widow or find another husband. Yet, it is this dramatic shift in her life that will also give her clues about the global meaning of her journey.

That this section of the film would start with a very powerful image is something predictable. The scene begins with Esperanza running in

⁹ Mario Ribas, “Liberating Mary. Liberating the Poor,” in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 126.

¹⁰ *Santitos*, Scene 18 “La Limpia de Maldad” (Cleansing the Evil).

the middle of the night to save her life. She has run away from the brothel where she used to work, after beating her boss. She runs through a very dark street in downtown Los Angeles, towards the suburbs. She finally stops at a corner of a street, in a place surrounded by a wired fence. She carries with her some statues of saints wrapped in a blanket that she grabbed quickly on her way out of the brothel. After a few seconds there, she turns her head and sees a red traffic sign that reads "Stop." Suddenly, on the red background of the sign, a green and yellow silhouette of the Virgin of Guadalupe slowly appears. Tracing the source of the silhouette, Esperanza is led to an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe that is painted on the wall of a house that is under restoration behind the wired fence.

Suddenly, that mural, a product of popular devotion and street graffiti art, becomes the center of a religious experience. Making the sign of the cross, Esperanza kneels in front of the Virgin of Guadalupe as one does in front of an altar at a regular church. With her hands joined together as a sign of prayer, she speaks to the Virgin: "You ended up all the way up to here too? It's amazing what one will do for one's children, isn't it?" Taking the statue of Saint Jude out of the blanket, she continues, "Saint Jude, please tell me if I've understood your messages. We've gone a little too far, haven't we?" Then taking the statue of Saint Anthony, she tells him, "Saint Anthony, I guess you'll have to wait. I'm sorry." Finally, back to Saint Jude, she concludes, "Little Saint Jude, I'm going back home. And you better be there, eh?"¹¹

I find that this scene, in which two overlapping narratives appear in relation to Esperanza, her sexuality, her faith and the Virgin of Guadalupe, quite powerful. On the one hand, she has a religious experience in front of the

street mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The way the scene is set up and the way everything that has been put together points towards a profound, mystical moment. In this sense, Esperanza has a face-to-face encounter with her faith in the image of the religious symbol *par excellence*, the Virgin. The fact that a Mexican Virgin is painted on a wall on the street and in a land that has been "taken over" by the United States clearly points towards issues of colonialism and of oppression—a very powerful message in itself. Furthermore, the mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes a prophetic icon for resisting and denouncing injustice. Laine Meredith Harrington points out that:

... some of today's evangelists may be our graffiti and mural artist communicating this message of social justice through contemporary public art. Too, it is important to remember that there exists biblical foundation for the argument of the evangelistic nature of the street mural and voice of the oppressed ... Finally, we have been given these murals as formulas for personal and public inspiration. It is difficult not to be inspired by some of the work on these street murals for they call for conversion. Though the transformations may or may not occur, they remain evangelistic in nature.¹²

The scene depicts the mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a dark street of Los Angeles as an inspiring icon for Esperanza. On the other hand, the plot of the film also harbors traces of the heteropatriarchal matrix in the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Therefore, a symbol that proclaims liberation and resistance can be, in place and through context, co-opted as its opposite. As mentioned earlier, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe has been co-opted as *the* symbol for normalization of women, and becomes the confrontational element for Esperanza to re-consider her way of life.

¹¹ *Santitos*, Scene 24 "Preguntándole a los Santos" (Asking the Saints).

¹² Laine Meredith Harrington. *Secular Evangelism in Contemporary Public Art: A Selection of Street Murals in Los Angeles and Oakland and Their Calls to Meaning*. Master's thesis, (Berkeley, CA: Pacific School of Religion, 1993), 113-114.

It is at this moment that Esperanza has to face the social mandate of being a wife and a decent woman *vis-à-vis* her life as a prostitute searching for her apparent missing daughter. As Harrington notes:

While many artists believe themselves to be participating in a process of the demythologization of reality, what may occur instead is merely the call for a new status quo ... It is essential that we are aware of this, for many murals may begin in a spirit of marginalization only to end up in the place of conformity.¹³

It is thus not surprising that after this decisive point in the film, Esperanza goes back to her place of origin and to her *comadre*. While in Los Angeles, she meets a wrestler whose nickname is "Angel Justiciero" [Angel of Justice]. It will be this Angel who will bring Esperanza back to a *normal* life, that is, to fulfill her duty as a wife. The last scene of the film portrays Esperanza and Angel on a truck on their way to Los Angeles to live together.

In this sudden change of the plot of the film, Esperanza represents the constant struggle to deal with a binary division of sexual roles in Latin America. Women are seen either as wives or as prostitutes. Let me expand a bit on this statement. In her article which relates nationalism to sexuality, Donna Guy highlights an important issue in analyzing how the decent/indecent binary has galvanized the policing of women in Latin America. Guy provides two opposing performances in her analysis: wife and prostitute. By looking at the case of Argentina, Guy indicates how this normalization of women in society has been carried out. She states that:

Prostitutes determined the limits of socially-acceptable female sexual behavior so that self-

identified female prostitutes lost the right to move freely within cities, work without medical inspection, and live wherever they pleased. In contrast wives, by law and religion sworn to remain sexually faithful, enjoyed all those privileges taken from prostitutes though they still suffered other civil restrictions.¹⁴

My analysis suggests that the sexual division in Latin American has distinguished between behaviors and attitudes that are tolerated (acceptable/decent), and not tolerated (unacceptable/indecent). However, these distinctions carry within themselves the material forces to enhance and make effective those distinctions. The use of the law and social pressure has been the methodology *par excellence* to maintain this divide. On this power play, Foucault states:

Delinquency, controlled illegality, is an agent for the illegality of the dominant groups. The setting up of prostitution networks in the nineteenth century is characteristic in this respect: police checks and checks on prostitutes' health, their regular stay in prison, the large-scale organization of the *maisons closes*, or brothels, the strict hierarchy that was maintained in the prostitution milieu, its control by delinquent-informers, all this made it possible to canalize and to recover by a whole series of intermediaries the enormous profits from a sexual pleasure that an ever-more insistent everyday moralization condemned to semi-clandestinity and naturally made expensive; in setting up a price for pleasure, in creating a profit from repressed sexuality and in collecting this profit, the delinquent milieu was in complicity with a self-interested Puritanism: an illicit fiscal agent operating over illegal practices.¹⁵

In this quotation, Foucault denounces the liaison between performances of gender and sexuality and the social normativity which

¹³ Harrington, *Secular Evangelism in Contemporary Public Art*, 20-21.

¹⁴ Donna J. Guy, "'White Slavery,' Citizenship and Nationality in Argentina," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker et al (New York: Routledge, 1992), 204.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 279-80. Emphasis in the original.

not only conditions those who live out those performances but also the sub-networks that operate behind the social dynamics to keep the unjust system on track. At this juncture, I would like to relate the different understandings on prostitution, especially the debate between Abolitionist and Reformist positions. On this matter, Lucinda Joy Peach writes that:

According to Abolitionists, commercial sex is *inherently* demeaning, degrading and humiliating to women. In this view, prostitution involves a violation of the inherent dignity and moral worth of women who have essential identities and inherently real 'rights'... According to Reformists, commercial sex work involves women whose essential identity is as autonomous (non-gendered) individuals bearing an inherent capacity to consent to prostitution, which gives them their moral integrity and dignity regardless of the work they engage in."¹⁶

Bearing in mind the nuances of sex work as proffered by Peach, I would like to highlight the connubiality of law and religious values which divides people into different groups with different functions in society.

What undergirds the plot of this film is the strong undeniable connection between religious discourses and social normativities, and religious discourses and faith experiences. Esperanza incarnates in herself the wide spectrum of performances of gender and sexuality which are in constant connection with her faith. As McFague has affirmed, sexuality should not be absent from theology.¹⁷

The queerness of Esperanza's life story is the distortion of assumed heteronormativities of

decency that deny a profound spirit of faith to the powerful expressions of gender and sexuality. However, heteropatriarchalism is constantly present, and reminds us—as Butler would say—that it is impossible to live outside the matrix. Nonetheless, it is possible, exactly by living within the matrix, to disrupt its mandates and to produce performances that counter their assumptions and dicta. In this sense, the contribution of the film *Santitos* is the defiance and transgression of those dicta by blurring the divide between religion and sexuality, as depicted in Esperanza, a female prostitute who lives simultaneously in both realms.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the film *Santitos*, I have provided a contemporary example of how the heterosexual order can be distorted or queered through repetition and performativities, and also through the *disruption* of the dicta of heteronormativity in the context of oppressive religious discourses. Nevertheless, where this disruption lies is ambiguous. There are always extremes and in-betweenness in daily life. In talking about the experience of displaced migrants, Rodriguez defines their situation as the "interstitial space of the Refugee."¹⁸ I wish to apply her term to the experience of the main character in my analysis of *Santitos*. It is not out of place, therefore, to state that Esperanza is trapped in the interstitial spaces of daily life. As Rodriguez would say, this is a "place that is neither here nor there but is nevertheless mired in narratives of North and South."¹⁹ In this liminal situation, such spaces represen

¹⁶ Lucinda Joy Peach, "'Sex Slaves' Or 'Sex Workers'? Cross-Cultural and Comparative Religious Perspectives on Sexuality, Subjectivity, and Moral Identity in Anti-Sex trafficking Discourse," in *Culture and Religion* 6, no.1 (Marc 2005): 123. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987) 131.

¹⁸ Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 35.

¹⁹ Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 35.

the constant struggles that every human being has to face in order to just live. People reside at the intersectionality of many layers of issues and dynamics that are in constant movement, modification and re-accommodation. People are discursive subjects that interlace with other subjects to produce a dialogue that brings flavor and enriches daily life.

In the life of the main character and plot of the film I have analyzed, I have "found" knowledge that can encourage and strengthen our own daily life experiences. Performances of gender and sexuality, as well as religious discourses and experiences of faith can become, through their interlacing, a point of entry to daily life and its complexities. By focusing on Esperanza, a Christ-like character, this interlacing process implies the denunciation of hetero-patriarchal dicta that attempt to mold and monitor the daily life of human beings. As such, they are also—and simultaneously—kernels of resistance and hope for a better world. Through my analysis of *Santitos*, I have expounded on the need for theology to be challenged, in order to respond and relate to the experiences of daily life on a more effective level.

Queer/indecent theology steps up in order to respond to this task and embrace the materiality which embodies and incarnates it. In the brothel, Esperanza testifies that the indwelling place for God's love and presence amidst us transcends the sanitized/sacralized spaces where religious institutions have traditionally confined the Divine. In so doing, the heteronormative matrix is distorted/queered in order to make way for liberation and to offer new approaches for relationality. As films and other cultural artifacts will continue to pose questions and portray issues that are related to the complexity and diversity of human lives, so too will queer/indecent theology continue to (re)create spaces where dialogue, sharing and mutual enrichment can happen. We should not be surprised at this. After all, it was Jesus himself who revealed God's incarnational

love when he said: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." (Matthew 21:31).

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Artist: Maica Delfino.
Courtesy: Isis International Manila.