

Voyeur Bodies, Liberating Identities

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“If you visit my city, Buenos Aires, please try and go see the women lemon vendors who sit in the streets of some neighborhoods.”¹ No, rather, I welcome you now to Buenos Aires. In your theological imagination, I welcome you. I, Marcella, will be your guide for a few sentences. Here is the marketplace of Constitución, where my mother would buy chickens still warm. Do you see those stray dogs over there sleeping quietly in the door of the abandoned building? This is my barrio, San Telmo. Shall we sit for a few minutes over cortado? It is a good place to think – to think about postmodernism, liberation, the destruction of grand meta-narratives.

The first few pages of *Indecent Theology* invite us into Marcella Althaus-Reid’s world. She tantalizes our senses: sights, sounds, tastes, and smells. Bodies come to life. Places materialize. Histories swirl with their tangled and complicated interplay. Our eyes roam. We not only see women selling lemons in the marketplace; our journey continues under their skirts, into their baskets. We hover in the midst of their interactions. Women without underwear, whose musky smell mixes with the scent of lemons and market. Skirts lifted: exposed, smelled, seen - by Althaus-Reid. Skirts lifted: exposed, smelled, seen - by us.

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Liberation theologies arise within and amongst the material fleshiness of located, local bodies. Indeed, the dynamism of liberation theologies erupts out of the material cries of embodied suffering experience. These cries disrupt and declaim dominant ways and forms of knowing; the cries catalyze personal and systemic transformation. Formulated strongly, theology not only must not, but cannot, render injustice invisible if its knowledge is produced by suffering communities brought together by the conditions under which they live.

Without doubt, this is a good thing. Theology must not be separated from the bodies and material conditions through which the transformative cries of liberation are given voice. The poor must speak. The marginalized must theologize. Theological knowledge occurs in - yea, belongs in and transforms through - the conversations, relationships, and praxis of communities that are most affected by the harmful systems of our world. Historically, these are often identity located communities: the oppressed, the poor, women, the 3/5s world, and so on.

Perhaps then the introduction to *Indecent Theology* reads traditionally: Althaus-Reid places her theology as contextual and material, well within the tradi-

tions of liberation. She locates the people, conditions, and experiences with whom she theologizes. She privileges complex experiences on the underside of systems of oppression, experiences that are hers as much as they are others’. Few readers of *Indecent Theology*, however, would allow the ease of this characterization to rest untroubled. Viscerally, Althaus-Reid brings about something disconcerting in these opening pages. Something tangibly different is underfoot.²

This essay first seeks to express one way of characterizing what occurs in the early passages of *Indecent Theology*: Marcella Althaus-Reid introduces and deploys the role of voyeur. The voyeur, she proposes, attains a sexual knowledge that arises through an indecent performance of power. Second, the essay reflects constructively on what her analyses and performances of voyeurism might suggest for liberation theology: by transgressing decency, the voyeur’s gaze illuminates a productive ambivalence in ‘identity’ as a liberative construct. Ultimately, the essay suggests that Althaus-Reid consciously scribes, and thereby inscribes in us, a sexual knowledge of the voyeur’s indecent and guilty gaze.

Why does this matter? Because it establishes the possibility of destabilizing, and thereby dismantling, reified boundaries of identity without losing an ability to aggregate the enfolded and particular experiences of those suffering. In other words, Althaus-Reid shows us one way to enact a queer critique of identity in order to forward a liberationist project.

“Voyeurism dislocates power and identity” Althaus-Reid writes. “The voyeur looks and sees in the other what the other cannot look at.”³

In *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid proposes that “one kenosis of a libertine God, which may occur, is that of the Voyeur God.”⁴ Immediately thereafter, she draws out insights that surface when the voyeur is allowed as a libertine theological resource.

It might be helpful to pause momentarily to recall that, for Althaus-Reid, “queer theologians are the ones who consider to what excesses God takes God’s love for humans.”⁵ Subservient to heteronormative ideologies, theology has “tamed or limited these [Divine] villainies.”⁶ Thereby, theologians have falsely, and

2 Althaus-Reid’s position within, and relationship to, liberation theology is complex. She is deeply committed to liberation theology, but a liberation theology that can confront the sexual ideologies and marketplace economies at the heart of its own theological thinking and knowledge production. Althaus-Reid strives for a liberationist theology engaged with the power analyses of postcolonialism and the recognition “that theology has been and will remain a sexual praxis” (*Queer I stand*, 100). This essay does not explore this broader issue, but instead works to characterize one indecent element Althaus-Reid employs, namely voyeurism. To read Althaus-Reid on the question of liberation theology, see for example: Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, and “Let Them Talk ...! Doing Liberation Theology from Latin American Closets” in Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*.

3 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 42.

4 *Ibid.*, 38.

5 *Ibid.*, 23.

6 *Ibid.*, 2.

1 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

harmfully, contained the excessiveness of Divine love, just as we have falsely and harmfully bounded the possibilities of our desire and love for each other. In other words, the visions of love allowed by heteronormative theologies fail to encompass the possibilities of love. This includes not only our human love for one another and for God, but also God's love for us. God's love exceeds decency. Divine love overflows heteronormative relationships, patterns, and interactions. God's love embraces us; it touches us indecently.

Heteronormative theologies have refused the excess of Divine love in preference for the decent. Indecent theology, on the other hand, refuses to tame the excesses of Divine love, however villainous the excesses might appear. In dancing with scandal, queer theologies recognize that to limit the possibilities of love makes for not only a sexual problem (which it is, to be sure) but also political, economic, and theological problems. Indeed, Althaus-Reid argues the four intertwine, and they do so inseparably. Take, for example the character of the villain. Historically, the villain represents an evil and a poor person. The villain is "what we would call today the dangerous stranger at our gates."⁷ Morality, economics, theology, and politics are held tightly – and complexly – together. "By taming the villainous vocation in theology, we have made of poverty and sexuality strangers, evil strangers."⁸ Theology, she insists, needs to recover the possible: the excess of love that stands outside the gates of heteronormative decency. For this reason liberation theology needs the libertine.

The libertine, Althaus-Reid explains, moves into spaces beyond social and political approval. She resists the normalization of sexuality, especially the limits of binary heterosexuality. She attends to any and all political powers that non-consensually map the territories of the decent and the indecent. Not once or every now and then does she do this, but over and over again. Each time the libertine transgresses into illicit space, bodies are rearranged and variations of interrelation are set into motion. This continues until the scene becomes saturated and its possibilities are exhausted. The scene then dissolves so that a new scene, with new arrangements of bodies, can and will be established. The libertine begins again. A new scene commences replete with new variations and new interrelations.⁹ Each scene is revelatory, but also arbitrary and exhaustible. This is Althaus-Reid's repetition and variation of Hénaff's repetition and variation of Sadean libertinism.¹⁰

It is a scene in this sense that Althaus-Reid establishes when she writes: "We can expect the kenosis of a libertine God, and we are going to explore this in different forms in this book. One kenosis of a libertine God, which may occur, is that of the Voyeur God."¹¹ The Voyeur God is a libertine God who transgresses decency in order to inhabit the illicit relational positioning of the voyeur. The

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 24.

9 For more on libertine hermeneutics see especially Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, pgs. 26-30.

10 Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

11 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 42.

Voyeur God rearranges bodies and puts into motion a particular set of varied interrelations. In doing so, the Voyeur God establishes a scene as described above, one that is theologically revelatory but also arbitrary. The scene will continue until its possibilities are exhausted. When exhausted, the scene will dissolve so that a new one can be established.

Take note: this Voyeur God is neither ultimate nor originary. Epistemologically, the Voyeur God allows neither a comprehensive overview nor an essential point of access. Rather, with the Voyeur God, Althaus-Reid welcomes her readers into a scene, just one scene amongst the many various variations of many possible possibilities. I want to stress this lest one confuse this scene with an illusion of a whole, or lest one mistake its unnecessary positioning with an illusion of a teleologically ordered series. This is simply and only one transgression; it enlivens for theological consideration one possible indecent kenosis of a libertine God. That is it. This is enough.

One last remark: Althaus reminds her readers that, "if we are going to use the libertine's constructions of the voyeur as a theological resource, we must realize that there are different options here."¹² Sade, Freud, Lacan, Foucault, DeCerteau, Mulvey, scopophilia, the camera's gaze. There are many interpretive frameworks by means of which to think about voyeurism. Even amongst those who read this essay, I imagine that a range of possibilities are very much alive. For the next few pages, however, our interest belongs solely within the space of Althaus-Reid's scene, the space that she initially inhabits with Bataille and his Madame Edwarda.

"In Bataille, and specifically in Madame Edwarda, it is as if God demands the voyeur. God manifests herself only to the voyeur and God relates to the one who searches for the divine as a voyeur too."¹³

Madame Edwarda recounts an erotic theophany. The first sentences narrates Pierre Angelique's anguished late night walk through the streets: "I feel I have got to make myself naked, or strip naked the whores I covet."¹⁴ Slipping off his pants, he "coasts on a wave of overpowering freedom," but "not wanting trouble" he dresses again and heads into a brothel.

Here, Pierre finds himself returned from darkness to light and in the midst "of a swarm of girls."¹⁵ Madame Edwarda stands utterly naked, exposed, and bored. Pierre sees her, chooses her, clutches her, kisses her, shares a moment of "shattering" and "terror" with her. Pierre tells us that a terrible pressure of immanent grandeur pushes down a dark stillness, which wraps him in an all-encompassing forsakenness, a painful unhappiness. The forsakenness is, Pierre reports,

12 Ibid., 39.

13 Ibid., 39-40.

14 Georges Bataille, *My Mother; Madame Edwarda; The Dead Man*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 148.

15 Ibid.

as when “one is in the presence of GOD.”¹⁶ Pierre tells himself that he is being ridiculous. No words have been exchanged.

All this in the first six paragraphs. All this from Pierre. Then, a short break: confusion for Pierre, a shift in narrative for us. Now, Madame Edwarda speaks and acts.

You want to see me, she says. She lifts her leg; she exposes herself fully to Pierre, to all of his senses.

“Why are you doing that?” Pierre stammers.

“Because, as you yourself have seen, I am God,” she replies.¹⁷

Indeed, as Pierre has seen. As Pierre has already seen, but now sees again.

This saturated scene of God’s self-revelation accompanies Althaus-Reid throughout her writings. Here, she draws our attention to an erotic relationship of seeing and being seen: God (literally) exposes herself to Pierre’s gaze. In Althaus-Reid’s words: “Through voyeurism, the protagonists understand and God speaks because, demanding the voyeur, God also shows God’s voyeuristic vocation.”¹⁸

To be fulfilled, the complex relationship occurring between the seer and the seen requires the participation of both. When Pierre walks in the room, he sees Madame Edwarda, and he identifies her as God. Pierre the voyeur determines the identity of those around him, most importantly the identity of Madame Edwarda. While he refuses to acquiesce to the knowledge that she is God, he experiences this fact as surely as he sees her as an object of his desire. This might seem to privilege Pierre’s activity while relegating Madame Edwarda to passivity. The story, however, does not stop here. Madame Edwarda exposes herself to Pierre. In doing so, she demands his gaze – a voyeur’s gaze that was already active but which, through this repetition, is rendered explicitly mutual and dialogical.

The voyeurism that interests Althaus-Reid implicates both the seer and the seen as mutually active participants in the indecent performance. In this scene, God calls on Pierre, and he responds. The voyeur is divinely commanded. Patterns of desire and erotic relationality connect Pierre to Madame Edwarda as seer and seen, voyeur and voyeured. Althaus-Reid argues that when God is located in these erotic relationships as either seer or seen, the violent sexual exclusions of power are disrupted; sexual salvation becomes possible.¹⁹

What transpires with the voyeur’s gaze? Per Althaus-Reid, a dislocation of power and identity. In her words: “The voyeur looks and sees what the other cannot look at. The voyeur masters the people, conditions, and interactions of the body in location. From what perspective does the voyeur understand? From all the perspectives of watching with impunity, adding the pleasure of new angles, of all

16 Ibid., 149.

17 Ibid.

18 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 39.

19 Althaus-Reid draws on Foucault to make this argument. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

the angles and non-authorized points of view.”²⁰ Note the interaction of materiality, context, bodies, positionality, and location in this description. A voyeur is concerned with material, fleshy bodies that are located, contextualized, and actively in relationship.

A voyeur watches with impunity, outside the bounds of legitimization, and therefore a voyeur’s gaze can escape the confines of dominant ideologies. Indeed, Pierre the voyeur enjoys (suffers?) a vision of God’s revelation that escapes the ideological confines of decent expectations. Due to its indecency, a voyeur’s identification of the persons with whom she is in relationship – and the ideas and knowledge that stick to them – has the potential to liberate. A voyeur’s gaze can rest upon and recognize what decency disallows. For marginalized communities and individuals rendered invisible, the revelatory possibilities of this indecent relationship matter.

What needs to be asked is whether identities revealed and recognized within the voyeur-voyeured relationship can indeed be liberative. It is frequently protested that the determining quality of a voyeur’s gaze subjects those watched. I wonder though, is there a needed ambivalence, a productive instability between liberation and guilt?

In her response to *Indecent Theology*, Emilie Townes strongly critiques Althaus-Reid’s voyeurism. “From the comfort of my blackness and my sexuality and my economic privileges / i read about these women and was made immediately uncomfortable and angry / i was being cast into the unwanted role of voyeur / unintentionally / but deliberately.”²¹ Remember the Hottentot Venus, Townes warns, whose living black body was displayed for white consumption, or when dead, whose cadaver was laid open, dissected, and catalogued so that its elements could continue to be viewed. Is this what happens with the lemon vendors? Does Althaus-Reid write her readers into a situation where as voyeurs we objectify bodies that are imprisoned to remain simply the object of our gaze – without materiality, history, or interrelation?

Althaus-Reid insists no, and I agree with her to the extent that the voyeur relationship with which we are here concerned is the one performed by Pierre and Madame Edwarda. In Althaus-Reid’s words: “Who defines us re-defines herself too...The identity construction of the voyeur’s gaze has a [dialogic] mutuality.”²² That being said, Townes’ discomfort articulates an essential consideration: the guilt of voyeurism. Indeed, the voyeur’s gaze, as Althaus-Reid herself argues, “is the path to transient desire, but also to guilt.”²³

A voyeur’s gaze is necessarily implicated in patterns of power – sexual, economic, and political. Pierre recognizes Madame Edwarda as God through an experience of taking possession of a prostitute’s body. Pierre’s material knowledge of Madame Edwarda’s divinity is shaped through certain patterns of interaction

20 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 42.

21 Emilie M. Townes, “Panel Response to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s *Indecent Theology*,” *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (January 1, 2003): 170.

22 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 43.

23 Ibid., 42.

even as it is liberated from some theological exclusions of decency. Put differently, a voyeur sees according to the constructed possibilities available to her. These possibilities, like all cultural constructions, will be inescapably problematic. This does not countervail their potential to be liberative, but the potential both for guilt and for liberation must be held in tension.

I submit that this is true for all identities. Identities are illusory products of power, often largely subsisting in the seer/seen relationship because of the extent to which the visual is emphasized. We should be uncomfortable when confronted with them. Voyeurism does not allow this ambivalence to be hidden: guilt surfaces even as identities are reconfigured so as to make the invisible visible or the marginalized recognized. A voyeur's gaze can liberatively transcend decency. A voyeur cannot, however, escape the webs of power formed in and around people's bodies and their interrelationships. A voyeur will be guilty of what she sees, but that does not make what she sees any less important or even –potentially– revelatory.

As readers, we see, smell, touch, and taste Althaus-Reid's lemon vendors. By writing us into an "I see you" relationship with these women, Althaus-Reid inscribes in us the sexual knowledge of a voyeur's gaze. Through desire, a voyeur's gaze renders the invisible visible. And not just visible, but living, contextualized, and interrelated in a fleshy, material sense. In this case, it is communities whose gender and sexuality have been removed from liberationist projects, but whose theological voices and theological knowledge are essential within liberation traditions.

Coming into an "I see you" relationship disrupts this dehumanizing invisibility. But the sexual knowledge of a voyeur's gaze, as a product of libertine hermeneutics, cannot be stabilized; it is fleeting, partial, and only one configuration of bodies amongst many possible variations. When saturated it must be dissolved. It is liberative, and it is guilty. This is an important challenge for liberation theologies, whether or not the voyeur is at stake. Remember: Do not place too much importance on the voyeur. It is only one possibility, but it matters. Identities, and the privileges (and pains) they confer, are material and true, but they are also fundamentally instable, insufficient, and guilty constructions.