Do Queer Theologies Need an «Option for the Poor»?: Blurring Lines Between Sexual Decency and Economic Practice

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Do Queer Theologies Need an «Option for the Poor»?

Blurring Lines Between Sexual Decency and Economic Practice

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Resumen

Este artículo revisa la «opción por los pobres» de la Teología Latinoamericana de la Liberación a la luz de la contribución teológica de Marcella Althaus-Reid. La teoría queer y las teologías queer han ayudado a criticar a los «pobres» idealizados y la «opción por los pobres» en gran parte de la Teología Latinoamericana de la Liberación. Este artículo toma en cuenta esas críticas, pero a su vez pregunta si la teoría queer y las teologías queer más ampliamente deberían incluir una «opción por los pobres» en sus propias metodologías.

Palabras clave: Marcella Althaus-Reid, Teologías queer, Teología Latinoamericana de la Liberación, Opción por los pobres, Metodología de la liberación.

Resumo

Este artigo revisita a «opção pelos pobres» da Teologia da Libertação latino-americana à luz da contribuição teológica de Marcella Althaus-Reid. A teoria queer e as teologias queer ajudaram a criticar os «pobres» idealizados e a «opção pelos pobres» em grande parte da Teologia da Libertação latino-americana. Este artigo leva em conta essas críticas, mas, por sua vez, questiona se as teorias queer e as teologias queer mais amplamente deveriam incluir uma «opção pelos pobres» em suas próprias metodologias.

Abstract
This article revisits Latin American Liberation Theology’s «option for the poor» in light of Marcella Althaus-Reid’s theological contribution. Queer Theory and Queer Theologies have helped to critique the idealised «poor» and «option for the poor» in much of Latin American Liberation Theology. This article takes on board those critiques, but in turn it asks if Queer Theory and Queer Theologies more widely ought to include and «option for the poor» in their own methodologies.
Keywords: Marcella Althaus-Reid, Queer Theologies, Latin American Liberation Theology, Option for the Poor, Liberation Methodology.
From Lemon Vendors to Leather Wallet Sellers or replacing women with no underwear with colonised penises

It is all about the lemon vendors.

The image of the indigenous women on the streets of the city of Buenos Aires is amongst the most iconic in contemporary queer theology. Marcella Althaus-Reid —the first ever women professor of theology at Edinburgh University— wrote about poor indigenous women selling lemons on the pavements in central Buenos Aires. The women knelt in their colourful skirts, without underwear, and with their babies sleeping on their backs wrapped in an apron.

The poor indigenous women kneel in churches, too. They carry their lemons in baskets and children on their backs. They kneel under their colourful skirts, without underwear, and the smells of their bodies — the sweat from their work, the odours of their sexuality, mix with their prayers.

It has always been about the lemon vendors for Althaus-Reid and queer theologians. Theology begins with bodies, and in this first and most iconic of examples, it begins with poor indigenous women’s bodies on the streets in Buenos Aires. The poor bodies, the indigenous bodies, the women’s bodies are all part of a theology which seeks to «uncover», «unmask», and «unclothe» broad assumptions in decent theologies. Thus, Althaus-Reid (2004: 84) describes decent theologies as those theologies which pervade and domesticate ideas and experiences of God, including liberation theologies which embrace workmen with naked torsos but not women without underwear. The poor indigenous women selling lemons on the pavements in Buenos Aires are figures from contemporary capitalism. Capitalism is an «economic religion» which manages to fascinate people with both promises and its demands for sacrifices (Sung, 2007: 12). The same poor indigenous women praying without underwear in churches are
also features of a contemporary queer theology, and an indecent theology.

However, capitalism’s fetishes change; do theology’s? If, for Althaus-Reid, it was all about the lemon vendors, for Hugo Córdova Quero, it is all about the leather wallet sellers. Córdova Quero has revisited the streets of Buenos Aires and found that African immigrant men have now replaced the poor indigenous women lemon vendors. The lemons, the colourful skirts, and the bodies with no underwear have been replaced with West African immigrants, blankets on the pavements with their wares—watches, jewellery, and leather wallets—for sale, and a new erotoscape (Córdova Quero, 2016). The West African men who sell leather wallets on the streets are also commodified by the porn industry in Buenos Aires, hired to cater specifically to the gay community. Argentina—ideologically a white European country—has sexual fantasies based on stereotypes of black men and their genitalia created during colonial times and through biblical imagery of African men «whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of stallions» (Eze 23.20).

On the streets of Buenos Aires, the scent of lemons has been replaced with the smell of leather wallets. The uncovered vulva—sweaty from a day’s work and/or pleasure—has been replaced with a penis that has been commodified on a film set. The scents and smells are different, the uncovered vulva and penis are different, but the migrant nature of survival inside capitalism’s voracious fetishes resonates in economics and theology. Poor indigenous women lemon vendors are not, as Althaus-Reid (2004: 30) reminds us, rich white women who do not walk, but then neither are the West African men who have been commodified by the desires of rich white women and men.
Buenos Aires —and indeed other cities throughout Latin America— swallow up migrants. But they also hierarchise migration —the poor indigenous lemon vendors and the West African men— in colonial narratives that place white European migrants at the top and others at the base, «minoritising» them. Immigrants to Latin American cities are variously included and/or excluded depending on the appetites —desires and fetishes— of capitalism, of ideologically white countries and of rich white women who do not walk. If there is no longer a need for women without underwear selling lemons on the streets and praying in churches —partly because the women have organised themselves into co-operatives and now sell lemons at markets and in shops (Córdova Quero, 2016)— then West African men bring their wares to the streets and their bodies to the film sets to supplant the lemon vendors. Both indigenous women and African men provide exotic colour to the streets and churches.

The subaltern peoples described by Althaus-Reid and Córdova Quero, although queered, are also economically determined. Their sexual indecency is exposed by their economic decency in classic Marxist definitions. The lemon vendor and the leather wallet sellers migrate for greater economic opportunities and exchange their goods and services —even their bodies— for money, even if it is an exchange at the margins of the capitalist system. The supplanting of the lemon vendors by the leather wallet sellers demonstrates both capitalism’s fickle nature and the opportunities it provides to maximise market potential. The lemon vendors now sell their lemons in shops by marketing them in traditional —campesina— ways, using traditional handwoven baskets capturing the «rustic or home grown» market inside retail outlets. The leather wallet sellers have learned that, in addition to their leather wallets, their bodies are marketable with (white) men and (rich) women in Buenos Aires.
Liberation theology, capitalism’s fetishes and the «option for the poor» or where did the naked workmen’s torsos go?

The observations from Althaus-Reid and Córdova Quero have significance not only for queer theologies but for liberation theologies. Ivan Petrella (2006: 69) has argued that Latin American Liberation Theology has conceptualised capitalism in three very particular and limiting ways. Firstly, he notes that liberation theology emerges at a time that Latin American intellectual landscapes —and erotoscapes?— were dominated by dependency theory. This locks liberation theology into a project of national liberation led by the state. Secondly, and following dependency theory and linked to it, world systems theory globalises the struggle for alternatives and draws liberation theology into a project not only to overcome an economic system through a national project of liberation, but to reject the Western system and supplant it with projects of resistance to a hegemonic Western capitalism and system. National liberation led by the state is no longer enough. Thirdly, because Latin American Liberation Theology is drawn into generalities about capitalism through its use of dependency theory and world systems theory, it then begins to distance itself from the use of social and political theories in the construction of historical projects of liberation and it turns its concerns to more traditional theological themes like ecclesiology or spirituality.

In practical terms this can be presented in Latin America as, firstly, the Christian Church, including basic Christian communities, committing wholeheartedly to the struggles to re-democratise states under military rule; secondly, the Christian Church, including basic Christian communities, engaging in searches for Latin American solutions to Latin American problems and rejecting ideas and models imported from Europe or North America; thirdly, the Christian Church, including basic Christian
communities, turning in on itself to clearly define itself to survive in a ferocious religious marketplace.

Following Petrella’s observations, Latin American Liberation Theology’s «option for the poor» is diminished and diluted precisely because that theology no longer has an adequate theological methodology which embraces and includes the use of social sciences. The «option for the poor» was initially rooted in a class consciousness within a revolutionary socialist framework. As capitalism takes on a more generic form in writing from Latin American Liberation Theology and national projects of liberation led by the state are abandoned by liberation theology, the role of trade unions, basic Christian communities and workers’ co-operatives is less important in its theorising. In critiquing Latin American Liberation Theology, Althaus-Reid (2000) would talk about a spiritualisation of this, namely, an «aseptic poor» that rarely reflects the manifold levels of poverties present in the daily lived experiences of one single person. Thus, the «option for the poor» no longer reflects a class dynamic and no longer bears a direct relation to the social and political struggles of trade unions, basic Christian communities and workers’ co-operatives.

This perhaps also explains why the lemon vendors once moved off the streets to retail outlets because of their organisation into co-operatives, means they slip from theology — until Córdova Quero revisited the streets of Buenos Aires. The «option for the poor» becomes the «option for the marginalised» or the «option for the victims» of a general theory in Latin American Liberation Theology. It is disconnected from contemporary social science analysis of capitalism and projects of liberation, and it is alienated from questions posed by poor indigenous women lemon vendors or West African economic migrants selling leather wallets or colonised penises in the dark alleys or in the film sets.
Gustavo Gutiérrez (1993) has staunchly defended the «option for the poor» as a «central position in the reflection that we call the theology of liberation» (p. 235). The «option for the poor», while perhaps the most iconic and visible consequence of doing liberation theology, is perhaps the concept that has come under most pressure from the shifting generalisations of Latin American Liberation Theology as it has retreated from engagement with the social sciences. It has not been without its detractors amongst liberation theologians with Juan Luis Segundo, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Jung Mo Sung all contributing different opinions on its validity and use for Latin American Liberation Theology. Gutiérrez (1993) does significantly write that the «option for the poor» through the «irruption of the poor» refers to a «new presence of those who had actually been absent in our society and the church» (p. 235).

The lemon vendors and leather wallet sellers are the «irruption of the poor» that invites reflection from Latin American Liberation Theology. Lemon vendors with no underwear and leather wallet sellers with colonised penis’ problematise the «option for the poor» because they do not necessarily participate in, or draw on imagery from, the traditional organised groups like trade unions, basic Christian communities or workers’ co-operatives. The tradition organised group are important to Latin American Liberation Theology because they both signal the absence of state and church, and highlight the methods for liberation projects. In other words, the lemon vendors and leather wallet sellers force Latin American Liberation Theology to make a different kind of «option for the poor», one that recognises the consequences of capitalism’s fetishes and at the same time manages the social and political differences of those peripheral to state and church.
Migration, Itinerancy and Sexual Histories or *boom boom the tourists and lorry drivers are here*

The presentation of street landscapes and *erotoscapes* in Buenos Aires begins a new «irruption of the poor». However, it is the work of André Musskopf (2012) who most clearly draws out the voice of sexual and economic indecency, making an «option for the poor» that exposes capitalism’s fetishes and theology’s poverty. Like Althaus-Reid and Córdova Quero, Musskopf focusses on migrants on the streets of big Latin American cities. The «theological faggots» that he introduces us to are found in the sexual histories of people at the base of the pyramid: Maria Florzinho, Júlia Guerra and Lolita Boom-Boom (Musskopf, 2012).

The image that he presents may not be as arresting as that of Althaus-Reid’s lemon vendors or Córdova Quero’s leather wallet sellers, but the sexual histories are rooted in capitalism’s fetishes, theology’s decency, and migration. Musskopf (2012) draws out the migratory sexual stories of Brazilians. Maria Florzinha who is from Recife —and therefore a *nordestina*— migrates to Salvador, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, Vitoria, São Paulo, Curitiba, Porto Alegre, and all in a period of seven years. These are all places with a strong African heritage, adding the ethnoracial component to the analysis. Furthermore, her story echoes broader narratives of migration in Brazil and the «irruption of the poor» in Latin American Liberation Theology. The *nordestinos* and *nordestinas* are drawn south to the big industrial cities —mainly São Paulo— for economic reasons. They arrive in such numbers that there is no infrastructure to receive them and *favelas* accelerate their growth in large urban centres in Brazil. The *favelas* —the peripheries— are dominated by rural popular culture of the northeast as people cling onto rural landscapes in urban centres. It is the place of basic Christian communities and the «option for the poor» of Latin American Liberation Theology in the latter twentieth century.
Maria Florzinha’s sexual history, however, problematises the «option for the poor». Maria does not move south to São Paulo to find a job. She is not driven by economic necessity or determinism. She works —she almost always works in the queer scene— but this is not the motivation for migration. Indeed, her story of living in at least eight state capitals in seven years demonstrates that rather than an economic migrant she is better described as a sexual itinerant. Her loves —on the highways with lorry drivers, in picturesque squares with foreign tourists, and the developing drag act— are developed through her sexual itinerancy. Her economic needs —survival inside capitalism’s voracious fetishes— are fed by her sexual indecency.

Júlia Guerra problematises further sexual histories of opting for the poor. She is from São Leopoldo in southern Brazil. She is not nordestina and does not fit the broader Brazilian narratives of economic migration. In fact, she does not migrate north to south, or even south to north. She migrates her sexual identity from heterosexual man at 24 to out gay man to transvestite to transgender. Her migration is corporal and sexual. Her story reveals that economic determinism —work to pay for a lifestyle— is progressing but it is precisely because of her sexual and gender itinerancy. Her itinerancy is also reflected in theological options which include Afro-Brazilian religions, the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches. Júlia Guerra’s sexual itinerancy reintroduces us to one of the important observations from Althaus-Reid’s lemon vendors. While the lemon vendors participate in the capitalist economy without underwear they also participate in prayers at church without underwear. Córdova Quero does not tell us enough about the leather wallet sellers’ prayers. Musskopf’s (2012) sexual histories —and particularly that of Júlia Guerra— brings liberation theology back to the church: «It was wonderful [to be seen at the altar]. I wanted everyone to notice that I existed» (p. 375). To return to Gutiérrez’s words cited earlier, the church gives «new presence of those who
had actually been absent in our society and the church» (1993: 235).

Lolita Boom-Boom is a transvestite from southern Brazil who migrated to Bahia and returned south. Again, her story problematises the economic migration narratives in Brazil. She migrates and perfects her drag act to different publics, becoming a sex symbol. She also births other sexual itinerants — Kalindra and Débora. And she recognises that her most lasting relationships —with Claudio and Edson— have survived because there is no longer any sex and it is held together by economics.

Musskopf’s sexual itinerants migrate for sexual and gender liberation. Their economic situation is a consequence of life in a capitalist system. It does not determine their migration or itinerancy which Musskopf successfully queers. It is the sexual and gender itinerancy that introduces liberation through their sexual histories from the base of the pyramid. In this sense, Musskopf’s theology and his sexual itinerants make an «option for the poor» and reflect an «irruption of the poor». This irruption challenges stories of Brazilian economic migration, disrupts Latin American Liberation Theology’s decent «option for the poor» and explores capitalism’s fetishes — and its fickle nature and the opportunities it provides to maximise market potential.

Musskopf also brings forth the voices of sexual itinerants in a way that neither Althaus-Reid nor Córdova Quero’s street vendors do. Musskopf’s methodological step —constructing a queer Brazilian theology from sexual histories of itinerancy— follows a similar path to some of David Halperin’s (2014) influential work which is published in English in the U.S. in the same year as Musskopf publishes in Portuguese in Brazil, although Musskopf does not directly reference Halperin.
How to be gay? or exciting places with queer people

Halperin (2014) begins with a story that has a very different setting to the streets of Buenos Aires and the sexual itinerancies of queer people in Latin America. There are no lemon vendors, leather wallet sellers or migratory bodies. Instead, Halperin describes a university course which through a department of English language and literature examines and teaches students how to be gay. The consequences of such a teaching course make the local and national media, and even become a factor in state politics and the U.S. Presidential election in 2000. This elite setting—the university in North America—distances Halperin from Althaus-Reid, Córdova Quero, and Musskopf.

The Latin American theologians all begin in a place recognisably within Gutiérrez’s «option for the poor» even if it is a queered «option for the poor» which problematises and provokes liberation theology’s iconic category. They also all begin «on the streets» outside the structures of state and church, the beginning place for any liberation theology. For example, Córdova Quero’s first ministerial position was working on the streets of Buenos Aires with homeless people—especially with queer homeless teenagers—, a fact that later brought him into trouble with the establishment of his church. The reason behind was that the denomination understood its mission as one directed to the «richest» classes and not to the «poorest» of the poor in Argentina.

However, Halperin offers some observations about a gay way of being which are helpful to understanding the queering of the «option for the poor» in Latin American Liberation Theology. Halperin suggests that gay people do not migrate for jobs but for a culture, and for a culture that is not singular. This «distinguishing feature» (2012, 11) is described by Halperin, based on the work of sociologist Richard Florida, as
[...] a new class of creative workers», with «hi-tech jobs», «in an atmosphere of “lifestyle amenities”, coolness, “culture and fashion”, “vibrant street life” and a “cutting edge music scene” [...] it also signals “an exciting place, where people can fit in and be themselves” (Halperin, 2012: 11,12).

The distinguishing features sound impressively descriptive of San Francisco and West Coast elites in the U.S. There are no lemon vendors or leather wallet sellers on the streets in an economy of hi-tech and virtual jobs. However, in the spaces occupied by immigrants the situation is different. For example, in San Francisco, Central and South American men and women sell socks, leader belts, and pirate DVDs on the streets. Thus, the street landscape of Latin America has taken diminished neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area and accommodate them to global trends from the underside. The smell of their sex do mix with these products but their reality remains hidden from high-tech world-views! In the cases of Althaus-Reid and Córdova Quero, it could be said that these new variations of the «lemon vendors» and «leather wallet sellers» would also contribute to a vibrant street life, highlighting a fusion of cultures and fashions, eroticising the streetscapes.

However, it seems there are not any sexual histories of itinerants —no Maria’s, Julia’s, or Lolita’s— in this exciting place. We do not learn about family rejection and violence, nor about life on the highways with lorry drivers and in picturesque squares with foreign tourists. Nor do we see people transitioning in and through queer public spaces —although Halperin does mention the importance of this in a later example— and religious rituals. We are not exposed to the manual labour in a hi-tech economy: the hairdressers, the nightclub owners, the West African men in porn films. The torsos are still revealed, but not in the context of workmen, labour unions, and shift-ends at the factory.
Halperin’s pioneering work needs to dialogue with more than rich white men and women who do not walk. The queer subjectivity that he tries to sketch and the connections that he makes to transnational culture — particularly its «pop culture» of films and music — are insights that deserve to be queered further by an «option for the poor». The lemon vendors, the leather wallet sellers, and the sexual itinerants from Latin America’s big cities are absent from Halperin’s gay subjectivity and transnational gay pop culture.

Musskpoftime’s sexual itinerants come closest to offering «the underside of history» to Halperin’s work. It is the subjectivity — the narratives of their itinerancy in their own words — which comes closest to articulating not a gay subjectivity but a queer subjectivity that liberates queer people and queers migrant narratives in Latin America. The insights from Maria, Júlia and Lolita introduce us to queer pop culture. But it is not a singular pop culture. The music and dancing in Recife, Salvador, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Curitiba, and Porto Alegre has links to transnational culture. But it is also linked to the homegrown cultures of Carnaval and Festas Juninas. Carmen Miranda plays as important a role in queer pop culture in Brazil as does Bette Davis in transnational culture.

**Conclusion or blurred lines**

Can sexual itinerants replace economic migrants in Latin American Liberation Theology’s «option for the poor»? Can Maria, Júlia and Lolita contribute a queer subjectivity that challenges the exciting (queer) places of north American elites? Can a woman with no underwear, a colonised penis, and a drag act find liberation?
This article has invited reflection and dialogue with these questions by focusing on the work of four queer theologians or theorists and four liberation theologians. There are seven theologians or theorists who appear in this text, so you can do the queer maths!

The erotoscapes traced by Córdova Quero, and Althaus-Reid and Musskopf, not forgetting Halperin, meet with the econoscapes of Petrella, Gutiérrez, and Sung. All are profound influences shaping Latin American Liberation Theology, queer theory and queer theology.

Notwithstanding, more profound are the voices and experiences at the base of the pyramid: the lemon vendors, the leather wallet sellers, and the sexual itinerants. They are the ones who queer the text and blur the lines between sexual decency and economic practice. And for that theology and its liberation are grateful.

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