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Elaine A. Peña. Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe

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Elaine A. Peña. *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 219 + xiii pp. Paperback \$24.66. ISBN: 978-0-520-26834-0.

Vibrant acts of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe create sacred space across national borders, in public streets and on deserted highways, through brief prayers and exhausting marches, from rural villas to bustling urban spaces. Such devotion cuts across divisions. It links male and female, public action and private faith, “official” Catholicism and “popular” religion. Elaine Peña illustrates this in her insightful book, *Performing Piety*.

Peña delivers an ethnographic, transnational analysis of three sacred spaces and their corresponding practices. Chapter 1 explores the devotions and political activism surrounding the “Second Tepeyac” in Des Plaines, Illinois, near Chicago. This shrine serves as a critical site of identity formation for an increasingly diverse crowd of devotees. In chapters 2 and 3, Peña participates in two Mexican all-female pilgrimages to the original Guadalupe shrine at Tepeyac, Mexico City. She details the cultural, spiritual, and economic impact of these intense journeys and highlights the ideological perspectives of their organizers. She depicts ways in which these pilgrimages transcend boundaries and empower women, as well as ways in which disagreements and socioeconomic distinctions fracture the community of pilgrims. Chapter 4 looks at a small shrine at a Chicago neighborhood bus stop, where devotees used to celebrate their belief in a miraculous apparition, a (rough) image of Guadalupe that appeared on the bark of a tree. Peña details this community of devotion’s continual struggles with vandalism, discontented neighbors, and mounting internal distrust, which led to the shrine’s dismantling.

Peña argues that “devotional labor” at these locations produces a symbolic “devotional capital” in terms of the “regenerative effects of the ineffable” (9-11). Devotional practices themselves, not merely their political and social consequences, serve as vehicles of social improvement, by which “adherents communicate ways of remembering, knowing, interpreting, and coping. . . that affect not only the quality of life for these religious communities but also the legacies they leave behind” (11). Apart from any *reductive* pragmatic or theological justification, devotional action is *productive* for the sake of the community. Sacred spaces are not merely constituted by apparitions or ecclesiastical approval, but by the self-justifying “regenerative” action of devotees.

Although accessible, Peña’s conceptual apparatus utilizes a vocabulary and style that may present difficulties for first-time readers of ethnography. Utilizing performance studies after the pattern of Dwight Conquergood, Peña believes that a deeper understanding of religious practices comes from “co-performative witnessing or placing our bodies in the immediate context of devotional practices” (150-51). Accordingly, perhaps the greatest strength of Peña’s work is the degree to which it involves her own voice. This is very much a story about Elaine Peña’s encounter with *La Morenita*. Peña frequently engages the reader with personal anecdotes that range from interesting to inspiring to hilarious. At times, as Peña herself admits, she has difficulty holding in her emotional reflex-responses to statements that go against her own heartfelt convictions (88). It would have been good to see Peña converse more with other devotees concerning such issues. The predominance of Peña’s own assumptions leads, moreover, to an overly antagonistic portrayal of the relationship between official ecclesiastical Catholicism and lay devotions. Still, these issues do not diminish the depth and meaningfulness of Peña’s perspective, nor the significance of the book’s vocalization of devotees’ voices.

The limitation of this book is its expansiveness. The author could easily fill an entire volume on any one of the three shrines. For example, her intention to show how Guadalupan devotion is empowering for the women who participate in the pilgrimages could be complemented by an in-depth comparison with male pilgrimage practices. Additional interviews could provide an expanded understanding of how devotees perceive their own practices, especially along gendered lines. Do women perceive Guadalupe more as an object of adoration or as a model for imitation? Such material would provide important thematic connections for theological reflection.

Nevertheless, this book is valuable to students of sociology, Latinx studies, women's studies, and theology alike. It provides important material for nascent theological appropriations of Guadalupe. Likewise, its presentation of the richness of devotional performance, whether institutional or "popular," offers important considerations for liturgical theology. Peña's work substantiates an important theological intimation: that devotion itself, beyond its obvious pragmatic and catechetical purposes, has a *practical* worth grounded in the ineffable.

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