

6-2023

Miguel H. Díaz. Queer God de Amor

Jorge A. Aquino
University of San Francisco

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt>

Recommended Citation

Aquino, Jorge A. "Miguel H. Díaz. Queer God de Amor," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 15. (2023) :125-128

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol25/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Miguel H. Díaz. *Queer God de Amor*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2022. 160 pp. \$25.95 Paper. ISBN: 9781531502485.

Though queer social movements have been launching frontal challenges to heteronormativity since the 1970s, the question of sexuality — especially queer approaches to sexuality — has remained an ambivalent locus in Catholic theology. U.S. Latinx Catholics had barely touched the topic before 2003, when James Nickoloff called out an elephantine “queer omission” of reflection on sexuality in our discourse, in a memorable essay in this journal. Only in 2014 did ACHTUS sponsor a colloquium focused wholly on sexuality (“Redressing a Queer Omission: Latin@ Catholic Perspectives on Sexuality”). In all its history, only a smattering of books or panels have taken up the theme of sexuality in any depth.

With Miguel H. Díaz’s *Queer God De Amor*, the spell of silent omission seems definitively broken — and in a most provocative and challenging manner. QGDA offers a queer reading of the spiritual writings of San Juan de la Cruz (1542-1591), particularly his poem, “Living Flame of Love,” which Juan composed with a commentary during 1584-1585. The poem is nothing short of an erotic dedication to God, addressed as if to an intimate lover, before, during, and after a carnal encounter. In vivid language Juan speaks of the tender wound of divine love; of the flirtatious coquettishness between divine and human lovers; of the quasi-physical caress of God’s ineffable hand; and of the spectral lightshow of passion, which dances like fireworks in the mind’s-eye during delicate turns of lovemaking. This is no masochistic, self-abnegating Juan, languishing in the jailhouse of his “dark night of the soul.” Rather, Juan’s “*Llama De Amor Viva*” (“Living Flame of Love”) depicts divine-human relationality on fire with erotic heat. Is Juan’s theo-poetics inscribing carnality as a proper form of divine-human encounter? This is perhaps the most important — and potentially transformative — question Díaz pushes in his reading of Juan.

The book unfolds a proposal to do theology “*sanjuanistamente*,” reconstructing a theology of God, informed by the mystical spirituality of San Juan, through the lens of human sexual experience. Díaz promotes an incarnational approach to Juan by reading him in his native language (Spanish), a reading that ports us back to the pre-modern Iberian literary traditions Juan inhabited, intertwining religious and mundane realities, often with homoerotic accents. Juan does not simply analogize the “profane” experience of sexual love into a purgative and sanitizing spirituality. “Rather, in continuity with his Iberian roots, Juan fuses the two, and invites us to embrace the incarnational and thereby sacramental nature of daily living” (xxii). Thus, a key dynamic of Díaz’s queer theology of divine love is his accent on *incarnation as sacramental*. Yet his notion of incarnation takes us far beyond the analogical imaginary that Díaz affirms he would like to expand.

The book moves from reflections on theological method (chapters 1 and 2), through a theology of divine self-communication and ecstatic human response (chapters 3 and 4), toward a conclusory chapter mapping a queer theology of God (chapter 5). If the theme of *incarnation* indicates the earthbound embodiment of the human, the theme of God’s *apophaticism* is the counterpoint of unlimited and indeterminable divine excess — *un no sé qué* (“an I know not what”) — that touches the human from God’s transcendent identity (44-51). With respect to method, Díaz seats himself in a well-trod Latinx tradition of anchoring theology in *lo cotidiano* — in the experiences and challenges of survival and prosperity in everyday life. QGDA brings sexuality and the sexual life, core elements of the quotidian, to the fore. “In this sense, [Juan’s] classical yet disruptive voice connected to our cultural roots as Latinx theologians, recovers sexuality and the sexual subject as an essential source to think theologically” (9). This is not just sex as analogy, however; Díaz goes so far as to say that for Juan “the union of sexual bodies serves as a theophanic manifestation of the divine presence” (10-11). While he also insists that we not turn “any human experience into God” (11), in effect,

Díaz affirms that one may encounter God in a veritable bedroom theophany, amid the rapturous absorption of carnal union.

QGDA makes a strong case for the theological possibilities that multiply from the genre of mystical poetry. Theology must become more poetical, or sensitive to poetics, inasmuch as poetical language — such as we find in Juan’s writing — exceeds predicative language in its capacity to touch the hem of transcendence. Likewise, God’s divine excess — constantly represented as *mystery* in Christian history — should compel us to mystical theology in a manner that is rare, but most needed, in modern times.

The book rings provocative bells on two key matters: (1) the question and condition of theology’s *analogical imagination*, as hinted above; and (2) crucial, forward-looking questions around the *what* and *how* of undertaking queer readings in theology. With respect to the analogical imagination, Díaz daringly transgresses traditional, jealously kept (asexual) borders between *the divine* and *the human*, by refusing to inscribe Juan’s sexual metaphors as *merely metaphorical*. While Díaz acknowledges that Juan used sexual experiences known to him as a vehicle of analogy, Díaz’s *sanjuanista* reading reconceives sexual encounter as potentially theophanic. This enables him to maintain the distinctions between divine and human, while persuasively arguing that sexual union is more than the profane “sexual act” of two separate beings, momentarily entwined; rather, with the right conditions, sex becomes a liturgical theater, where God’s *ever-presence* is that much more acutely sensed by us cloddish humans. While we remain in an analogical imaginary with this framing of Juan, that imaginary loses one layer of its former dualism after Díaz has finished raising up sex as a mystical sacrament in its own right.

That brings us to the question of what makes QGDA a queer theology — and what it means to queer theology in general. To speak of *queering* is to depart from a critical hermeneutics of suspicion toward heteronormativity, and to challenge that ideologically constructed normality in discourse and praxis. Thus, queer theology is necessarily political and

deconstructive, starting with recognition of the massive role Eurocentric Catholic Christendom has played as the ideological fount of a globalized heteronormativity whose violence and cultural destruction may be too deep for a proper historical accounting. Queer theology may re-read Christian traditions and texts seeking signs of displaced queer subjects, or rethinking theology's anaesthetized sexual metaphors (such as a male-engendered trinity, with all its homoerotic overtones). Both these tasks are ably dispatched as Díaz disrupts prevailing God-talk around San Juan's work. QGDA offers a frontal attack on "gender and sex-based oppression," seeking to set us "free from false ideological constructions" that privilege "heterosexism and gender binaries as normative" (101).

By opting to purge theological errors — errors communicated through God-talk all too familiar within our families, our Church, and our society — queer persons challenge heteronormative and gender binary theologies that have themselves become idols and obstacles to ascending the mountain of love and coming to know the God who is beyond all names and experiences, the God that Juan knows as "un no sé qué." (105)

Queer God de Amor takes a crucial step on the long *camino* of U.S. Latinx theologies toward an overdue sexual liberation. But it also offers very practical reflections on the *dark night of coming out* that will no doubt prove profoundly edifying to those struggling to work out their queer religious lives in sexually stultified Christian Churches.

Dr. Jorge A. Aquino

University of San Francisco

San Francisco, CA