

Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots

Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid

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the gender fuck 'Song of Songs'. Reflecting on and somewhat modifying the words of Gillian Rose¹⁷ we can say that such activity is ethical – indeed theological – she tells us it may not be marriage but it is sacramental.¹⁸ It is a way of putting bodies back in theology and, most particularly, of putting the sex of women centrally in the creation of theological discourse and understanding them as the real presence of the divine. We have been removed from our lusts for so long we may take some time to become acquainted with them again, which is why the becoming in the arms of another that Rose refers to is a precarious business for women who for generations have done anything but become in the arms – be they the theological, religious or physical ones of patriarchal others. This is then the place to rethink, to make indecent the traditional resurrection theology we have all received; the resurrection of our lust and deep desire will surely make us reflect differently on the doctrines that have done anything but bring us to abundant life and joy. Rabbi Akiba declared the Song of Songs to be the holiest of all holy Scripture; we who follow an incarnational theology should then perhaps engage in an enfleshed hermeneutic, a sensuous revolution, tested by the passion that lies within us and placed at the service of a world so in need of it.

Marcella was not alone in describing theology as an act of love and we can only hope that part of her theological legacy will be that lustful lovers, and those they hold in their arms, will engage with theology and enable it to speak more fully, more moistly, than the dry doctrines of elusive fathers have so far allowed.

¹⁷ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

¹⁸ Rose, *Broken Middle*, p. 122.

Corporeal Visions and Apparitions: The Narrative Strategies of an Indecent Theologian

MAYRA RIVERA RIVERA

To see oneself one needs a reflection and a hiddenness, a way to apprehend the slippery, ghostly reunion of thingness, spirit, and love.¹

Women selling lemons without underwear: this must be one of the most startling (and memorable) opening scenes in contemporary theological texts. For those who might still be distracted, Marcella Althaus-Reid adds a sly comment: 'The lemon vendor sitting in the street may be able to feel her sex; her musky smell may be confused with her basket of lemons . . .'² The unexpected sensual excess perturbed me – and still does, I admit – not quite able to keep the 'proper' distance between the text and myself, as if the text had reached out (and touched me!), forcing me to imagine what one does not think about while theologizing. I rushed past the image to get to more familiar rhetorical styles, to recognizable critiques and expositions of theological ideas. Yet the lemon vendors haunted me, and eventually I returned to this and other such scenes, unexpectedly inspired by an excursion through the 'decent' field of ancient Christian history. Indeed, readings about saints and relics brought me back to lemon vendors. The rhetorical strategies of late ancient writers, seemingly obsessed with strange bodies and potent objects, inspired me to revisit the images and unique narrative style of Althaus-Reid's texts as they relate not only to her theological critique but also to her constructive contributions for theologizing with/in flesh and matter.

¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism: The Scent of a Latin American Body Theology', in Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (eds), *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 142.

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

Indecent exposures

Althaus-Reid stands out for her consistent – and insistently transgressive – attempts to place bodies at the centre of theology. She grounds her theology of the body in a basic tenet of liberation theology, namely that ‘Latin American liberation theology is based on the search for the materiality of transcendence’. That search leads liberation theologies to people’s stories, to everyday experiences, ‘because they reveal the falsity of the border limits between the material and divine dimensions of our lives’.³ It is committed to foreground the concrete experiences and material struggles of marginalized people: the struggles of the poor and the disappeared, of those in pain and hungry, of those persecuted and tortured.⁴ What Althaus-Reid called a ‘theology of the spiritually concrete and the materially spiritual’ is an attempt to reclaim and extend that liberationist pledge.⁵ For the bodies in Latin American liberation theology ended up being too neatly organized, too readily sorted according to accepted political, economic and theological categories, and reclassified ‘under the heading of the redeemable’, Althaus-Reid contended.⁶ In that neat and ‘decent’ organization, liberation theology neglected rebellious, unruly and queer bodies, thus missing the God who reveals itself among them. Furthermore, in the interest of concrete representations, these theologies lost a certain ghostliness that is also part of embodied life: the unseen, the ungraspable and the no-longer-living in and among us.⁷

How can theology address the limiting organization of bodies without producing yet another set of categories and new organizational structures, without treating bodies as objects for intellectual manipulation? Althaus-Reid’s work sought to move beyond such models of orderliness by attending to common things and to rejected, disruptive bodies. In theology, ‘it is not stability but a sense of discontinuity which is most valuable’, she argued.⁸ Perhaps she was moved by what Laura Pérez calls ‘the spirit of disorder’: a spirit that leads to ‘conversing with images that “sane” folks don’t see’.⁹ Clearly, Althaus-Reid did not shy

away from disorder. Her texts are populated by unruly bodies and body parts: dirty feet are carefully observed in ‘Feetishism’ and numerous sexual organs are (fetishistically?) presented throughout *Indecent Theology*. These intensely carnal images coexist in her writings with other ghostly presences: rebellious corpses that refuse to disappear, and poor, displaced people who haunt the living cities only in the shadows of the night – as fleeting presences.¹⁰ Their appearances at the limits of representability disturb the boundaries of corporeality.

In Althaus-Reid’s view a revaluation of corporeality entails a profound transformation of theology – of its role and its methods. Theological imagination was for her a creative endeavour – an art, an aesthetic performance, which has material effects.¹¹ It is thus a ‘passionate and dangerous business’; passion joins the theologian and the world; it flows between the text and the reader, too. Indeed, she argued that the ‘methodology of Liberation Theology should always be worked around elements of passion-arousing style’.¹² In her work, such a ‘passion-arousing style’ becomes apparent in the interruption of the orders of idealistic theologies with the chaos of corporeal desires – where theology, economics and sexuality are not neatly divided – as well as in the intensely sensual aesthetics of her narratives. But disrupting privileged discourses is only part of the project, for it also seeks to perform and teach new ways of seeing. ‘We need to learn to see’, seeking not only to assert the materiality of transcendence, but to see it and, furthermore, to experience its viscosity – viscerally.¹³ The goal is a transformation of our perception of ourselves and the world around us. The task is a challenging one and the results are necessarily elusive. How are we to perceive materiality and bodies within the framework of textuality? Can words carry the burden of materiality? How can bodies be touched by textual performances?

³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 148.

⁴ Althaus-Reid, ‘Feetishism’, p. 144.

⁵ Althaus-Reid, ‘Feetishism’, p. 137.

⁶ Althaus-Reid, ‘Feetishism’, pp. 144–5.

⁷ Althaus-Reid, ‘Feetishism’, pp. 144–5.

⁸ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 14.

⁹ Laura Elisa Pérez, ‘El Desorden, Nationalism, and Chicana/o Aesthetics’, in Carmen Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Mino Moallem (eds), *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnationalisms, and the State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 19–46, at p. 39.

¹⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, ‘El Tocado (Le Toucher): Sexual Irregularities in the Translation of God (the Word) in Jesus’, in Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (eds), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 393–406.

¹¹ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 92.

¹² Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 125.

¹³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 126. This entails no less than ‘obscenity’, defined as ‘dis-covering, and the way to transcendence. Obscenity does not renounce the viscosity of materiality’: Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 111.

Literary performers of the holy¹⁴

Let no one tell you that this body of ours is a stranger to God.¹⁵

Althaus-Reid does not explicitly debate the problem of textuality as much as she practises alternative modes of representation.¹⁶ The multiple body images in her texts do not add up to an organized, whole, unified body – or to a systematic theory of embodiment – but they do produce aesthetic effects that are theologically significant. The rhetorical strategies and the aesthetic effects pursued in her work place Althaus-Reid in relation to – oddly enough – a collectivity of ancient writers for whom the body and materiality had become pressing theological concerns.

In *The Corporeal Imagination*, Patricia Cox Miller explores the textual practices that developed during the fourth century, when the marked ontological separation that had characterized the second century diminished. At a time when Christianity gained a more favourable social and political position in the Roman Empire, its relationship with the world around it changed, and so did its attitudes to physicality and the senses.¹⁷ Benefiting from theological discussions about the incarnation and its broad sanctifying effects and responding to cultic practices such as the veneration of relics, influential Christian writers pursued a revaluation of the meaning of materiality and of the religious significance of sensory perception and corporeal symbolism. There was, for instance, an ‘increase in appreciation for colour’, a theorization of smell and its ontological significance, discussions about touching and kissing objects, as well as a literary interest in the visual representation of holiness.¹⁸ This period saw the development of what Miller calls ‘corporeal

¹⁴ I borrow this phrase from Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Homilies* 4.22, cited in Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 186, n. 23.

¹⁶ Her references to the theoretical works of Julia Kristeva on art, Judith Butler on performativity, and Jean Baudrillard on narrative structures suggest their influence on her textual strategies.

¹⁷ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*; Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 18. The significance of smell will be particularly important for my reading of Althaus-Reid’s work. For instance, the restoration of human identity by Christ was argued to entail also a recovery of its distinctive pre-lapsarian smell. Isaac the Syrian argued, ‘For [the beasts] smell from him the smell which spread from Adam before his transgression, when the beasts were gathered near him and he gave them names, in Paradise – the smell which was taken from us and given back to us anew by Christ through his advent, which made the smell of the human race sweet’: Homily 82, cited in Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*, p. 1.

imagination’, that is, a broad range of ‘techniques used by Christian authors to achieve the conjunction of discourse, materiality and meaning that marked their turn toward the material’.¹⁹ They ‘elaborated a view of material substance, understood as the sainted human body, that relied heavily on a *poetics of matter* in order to redirect, indeed to form, sensuous apprehension of the presence of the spirit in the material world’.²⁰ In the material turn, the aesthetic qualities of the language were used to provoke sensible responses in order to transform the imaginative and thus the perceptive abilities of readers.

The rhetorical techniques deployed included the development of an ‘aesthetics of the fragment’ that ‘emphasized the visual and tactile immediacy of the part – a piece of bone, a single mosaic tile, a word in a poem – at the expense of the whole’.²¹ Just as a piece of bread could contain the whole body of Christ, the fragment of a saint’s body, though divided and multiplied, was regarded as whole. Standing on their own, outside of or against completed frameworks of meaning, such objects acquired ‘surplus value’ as ‘sensuous and metaphysical’ presences with their own power. Yet these fragments were not simply located. Relics were spatially in heaven and earth, and thus their perception entailed a sense of disjunction – of perceiving something that was here, tangible, but also beyond. For their theological/theoretical supporters, relics disrupted the assumed dichotomy between matter and spirit, which in turn could potentially unsettle the terms that defined the problem of idolatry.²² The relic was a part of an undeniably human body, and yet was a spiritual thing; a sign as well as a vehicle of divine presence.²³ Its ‘nature’ as relic connected not only the material object with the divine, but also with the person who could see the object as relic. The veneration of relics was then not a simple acknowledgement of a true nature of things completely independent from the person, as mere object; instead it implied an ‘active interpretative imagination’, and thus the thing-in-relation.²⁴ Miller’s phrase ‘poetics of matter’ suggests the more-than-representational nature of the discourses that ‘deformed ordinary

¹⁹ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 7.

²⁰ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 9, italics mine.

²¹ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 42.

²² Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 64.

²³ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 62.

²⁴ Miller observes, ‘Despite – or perhaps because of their awareness that the specter of idolatry was a menace to be taken seriously, those who participated in the veneration of relics recognized that they brought a necessary mindset to their participation in this form of worship. Christian celebration of material expressions of divinity demanded the cultivation of new forms of expression’: *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 65.

perception'. Theologians sought to help the readers develop the cognitive skills required for the apprehension of holy things.²⁵

Christian writers and artists used visual and tactile representations in order to elicit a corporeal, synesthetic response from the reader. Material things made perceptible spiritual things, and writing attempted to mirror that aesthetics with 'thingly' language.²⁶ Spiritual seeing thus took a new meaning due to an appreciation of all the senses. Texts offered vivid pictorial images and exceeded them by simultaneously evoking other senses and inviting the readers' imagination and corporeal response. Such texts 'induced a stance for the beholder to occupy, a stance in which the senses had cognitive status and in which the intellect was materially engaged'.²⁷ They aimed to provoke 'visceral seeing', drawing the readers 'into the images by virtue of their very bodies'.²⁸ Miller argues that such sensory realism was aimed at teaching 'the reader how to see that the everyday life is saturated with the palpable' presence of the holy.²⁹ Theological discourse was thus a means to shape the world of readers, 'attributing corporeal qualities to inscrutable objects' as well as 'attributing spiritual qualities to corporeal objects'.³⁰

The 'theology of the spiritually concrete and the materially spiritual' that Althaus-Reid invokes seems intriguingly consonant with the project just described, as well as with the aesthetic sensibilities and rhetorical strategies that Miller finds in those late ancient texts: displaying 'ambiguous corporealities', bodies that are both ephemeral and tangible, both fragmented and whole.³¹ Could such similarities suggest a persistent problem intrinsic to Christian body-talk, even across such a vast historical and cultural divide? Evidently Althaus-Reid's work is not sparked by a concern with saints or relics in cultic settings but rather with the embodied practices and views of materiality in contemporary life. Furthermore, Althaus-Reid's work does not approach corporeality with the same kind of ambiguity of those writers, for whom the body was the sign of being both 'transfigured into its true status as image of God' and limited by its very fleshliness in its capacity to fully attain that goal.³² The ambiguity for her emerges from the body's relationship with both divine love and sociopolitical

forces that limit their flourishing. Yet the commitment to abide by the most radical implications of a broad incarnational cosmology persists. Seventeen centuries later, theology still struggles to find adequate, effective ways to express the significance of an incarnational theology for our ways of perceiving, being and acting in the world – often against Christianity's own attempts to 'manage that incarnation by controlling its awkward implications'.³³ By displaying starkly carnal images and ambiguous corporealities, Althaus-Reid's texts seem to aim at inciting visceral reactions in their readers, challenging the assumed boundaries between corporeal, spiritual and sociopolitical forces – and to teach other ways of perceiving the world.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that a significant part of Althaus-Reid's work reads less as a systematic treatise than as a performance, the aim of which is not simply to capture something in discourse, but to provoke a reaction through her own 'poetics of matter'. The reader cannot easily keep her distance from the text and the things it represents. Quotidian images are often the starting point for Althaus-Reid's theological analysis; their depictions expound not only to the visual characteristic of the scenes, but also appeal to other sensual qualities. Touch and smell figure prominently in the experiences offered as sites of revelation. 'God has become in Jesus part of the order of sensuality by *tact*, by birth', and the people follow suit, massaging, kissing a person or a car, impregnating the air with their smells.³⁴ The representation of smelly shoes and sweaty feet about to receive a lingual massage exemplifies such sensual images, portrayed as sites of religious knowledge. Focusing on a body part – feet observed as if on their own terms – allows them to become sites of intense passions, gathering the pain endured by those doing physical labour for extended periods of time as well as the sensual pleasures named by fetishism and conveyed through the (seemingly deferred) expectation of a massage. Insistent allusions to sweat, moisture, viscosity, smell and lingual touch seem aimed at touching off the readers' sensibility.

The sensuality of such images links the reader to the text viscerally – and often disturbingly, not least because the observer of shameless exposures becomes exposed to shame. As Virginia Burrus argues, shame, an affect which produces uncontrollable bodily reactions, powerfully connects us with others and may even lead to the subversion of the very standards

²⁵ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, pp. 63 and 67.

²⁶ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 51.

²⁷ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 8.

²⁸ Patricia Cox Miller, 'Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12.4 (2004), p. 392.

²⁹ Miller, 'Visceral Seeing', p. 9.

³⁰ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 8.

³¹ Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 137.

³² Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, pp. 4–5.

³³ Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Press, 2004), p. 84.

³⁴ Althaus-Reid, 'El Tocado', p. 395.

that produce it.³⁵ 'Shamelessness is always at least as ambivalent as shame itself,' she observes, 'balanced between a refusal and a willful embracing of shame . . . Shamelessness also engages self-humiliation, transforming it into a poignant, even defiant, acceptance of human finitude and vulnerability.'³⁶ I surmise that, as the characters in 'Feetishism' expose their smelly feet, the shamefaced readers may imagine themselves not simply as beholders but also as potential participants in such a shameless exposure of their own blessed corporeal vulnerability. The smell of those feet might not be the sweet smell that ancient writers would associate with redeemed humanity; it is the smell of hard labour and it is also where God dwells.³⁷ Conversely, 'sacramental excess clings like smell', she proposes.³⁸ However, although the expectation of pleasure is a central aspect of the narrative, corporeality remains as much a site of un-veiling class structures inscribed on the bodies of the workers as of divine revelation.³⁹ It calls attention not only to material objects, but also to material forces in social relations.

The perception of an object as relic required an 'active interpretative imagination', a vision of the spirit in the material world; attending to the material forces in social relations likewise calls for particular modes of sensing. A poetics of matter that 'deforms ordinary perception' seems aptly to describe a discourse that seeks to push the boundaries of dominant cultural conceptualizations from within. Such a capacity to perceive what is not quite representable within prevailing frameworks of intelligibility is what Judith Butler calls 'apprehension': 'a marking, registering, acknowledging, without full cognition'. This 'form of knowing . . . is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but not always – or not yet –

35 Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). The topics in this essay beg to be expanded through this book's fascinating discussion of the role of abjection and shame in late ancient representations of flesh.

36 Burrus, *Saving Shame*, p. 3.

37 Althaus-Reid refers to 'the smell of ethnicity and class and the smell of transcendence': 'Feetishism', p. 139.

38 Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism', p. 147.

39 A comparison with the rhetorical strategies of Franz Fanon helps illuminate the distinctiveness of Althaus-Reid's moves. Fanon's work exemplifies a style of writing that performs the corporeal dimension of racism by drawing readers viscerally. 'What else could it be for me', he writes memorably, 'but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood?': Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 112. Whereas Althaus-Reid's rhetorical practices similarly perform the enfleshment of heterosexism and classism, her work also attends to corporeal practices that exceed such organizing structures. They are thus unveiling structures of discrimination, but also life dynamics that such structures fail to account for – and could learn from. Bodies are not represented as objects for observation, but rather as agents in labour and pleasure.

conceptual forms of knowledge'.⁴⁰ Perceiving the *cartoneros* who haunt the city at night may be as hard as perceiving the elusive movements of ghosts, which is how they are represented in 'El Tocado'. The socially ephemeral, like the spiritual, may appear in the midst of everyday life as 'ambiguous corporealities'.⁴¹

Some of the characters in Althaus-Reid's scenes are such ghostly apparitions, that is, material bodies rendered barely perceptible by economic forces; others are the dead who reappear animated by the people's witness to their persistent power – 'a ghostly race of rebellious corpses'.⁴² The majority of the bodies in these texts are bodies that refuse their places within the ordering structure of the socio-economic system – however partially or temporarily. They are not a pure mimesis of the discriminating gaze, although they cannot fully escape its effects. In the scene of fetishism, for instance, humiliation and power coexist with pleasure, transgression with sacramentality.⁴³ 'Transgression opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world,' observed Michel Foucault.⁴⁴ In the midst of oppressive structures, people appear in the scene as subjects displaying disavowed corporeal pleasures. Material things are part of the economic forces that contribute to their oppression, but they are also at play in corporeal enjoyment – and such 'fetishistic' enjoyment is as stigmatized as their poverty.

The matter of passions

Late ancient practices of veneration of relics aroused anxieties about idolatry, which theologians addressed by, among other things, calling attention to the dynamic relationship between religious imagination and the materiality of the relic. For some of those writers the practices of veneration revealed a way of seeing a 'material cosmos exploding with its

40 Judith Butler, 'On this Occasion . . .' lecture at 'Becomings, Misplacements, Departures: Butler and Whitehead as Catalysts for Contemporary Thought', Claremont, CA: Claremont University, 3–5 December 2009.

41 Laura Pérez finds in Chicana art a similar emphasis on the ghostly in the midst of the concrete, as that which expresses both the spiritual and the socially ephemeral elements of life: Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

42 Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism', p. 144.

43 Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism', p. 135.

44 Cited in Karmen MacKendrick, 'Embodying Transgression', in André Lepecki (ed.), *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 141.

own self-exceeding transcendence'.⁴⁵ Althaus-Reid's work responds to a starkly different Christianity. While relics were regarded as holy material presences, in a post-Enlightenment world-view materiality seems to have become dead matter. Religious scholars often reflect on the startling difference between these views. Tomoko Masuzawa states:

As we attempt to take stock of the situation, we are left to wonder why the matter-spirit relation has come to seem so problematic, so permeated with the smell of death. When did matter become so dead, and its animation so ghoulish?⁴⁶

A way into the exploration of such questions is to follow the fetish. Indeed, Althaus-Reid's deployment of the term 'fetishism' brings to the fore the complexity of the matter-spirit nexus when explored through post-colonial queer lenses. For the history of the concept of the fetish betrays a strong desire for and the difficulty – perhaps the impossibility – of producing a socioreligious depiction of the world that stabilizes the difference between Europe and its Others in terms of the 'proper' relationship between humans and materiality.

In the context of Portuguese and Dutch merchant trade in the West African coast, where the discourse on fetishism emerged, it named the problematic of the value of material objects across different social systems.⁴⁷ The fetish was an object that resisted the European logic of trade, and thus the value it was given would easily be deemed as a symptom of irrationality. As many scholars of religion have observed, subsequent uses of the term translated the problem of mercantilist exchange – inherently also a problem of intercultural communication – into a particular mindset of the Africans. Thus fetishism eventually became a designation of the assumed religious difference of the Africans, one that implied a kind confusion, a failure to maintain the proper boundary between spirit and matter/economy. This religious interpretation grounded the deployment

45 Virginia Burrus, cited in Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 61.

46 Tomoko Masuzawa, 'Troubles with Materiality: The Ghost of Fetishism in the Nineteenth Century', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42.2 (April 2000), pp. 242–67. David Chidester similarly wonders: relics 'were not regarded as corpses, dead bodies, or inanimate matter. Instead, relics were animate objects, living material presences . . . Similarly, religious relations with icons and other sacred artifacts – touching and being touched – suggests an exchange in which materiality is not dead at all but the presence, like the relic, of a living presence. So how did we ever get the modern idea of inanimate matter?': 'Material Terms in the Study of Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.2 (June 2000), p. 377.

47 For an influential theoretical history of the concept, see William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', *Res* 9 (Spring 1985), pp. 5–17; and 'The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish', *Res* 13 (Spring 1987), pp. 23–45.

of the concept of the fetish in other fields. According to William Pietz, the eighteenth-century text by Willem Bosman, *Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, 'provided the image and conception of fetishes on which Enlightenment intellectuals based their elaborations of the notion into a general theory of primitive religion'.⁴⁸ Thus the 'problematic of the social value of objects' – and its foreclosure – silently inhabits Enlightenment theorizations of religion, history, economics and sexuality.⁴⁹

As a category of religion, the concept of fetishism implied the lack of an external or universal signified.⁵⁰ The assumed lack of signifying intent – and thus of representational claims – distinguished it from the idol, which was defined as retaining the reference to the deity it resembled, even though the idol still failed to maintain the proper distinction between the image and the signified deity.⁵¹ The fetish resisted the assumed logic of meaning through representation. The distinction between fetish and idol helped produce a discourse of stable colonial difference. Masuzawa observes that

positioning fetishism as a third category in addition to polytheism and monotheism – in addition to 'idol' and 'icon/symbol' – helped clarify and justify the often difficult-to-sustain distinction between the illegitimate and legitimate uses of material objects in religious practice.⁵²

The differentiation also located the practices named as 'fetishistic religions' (and their practitioners) in the emerging hierarchy of peoples figured in terms of temporal lag.⁵³ Masuzawa speculates that

by positing the fetish as the opposite external in contrast with the iconic/symbolic representation, one can render idolatry as something of a transitional stage in the development of religion, a midway point between materiality and true spirituality.⁵⁴

48 Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', p. 5.

49 Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', p. 5.

50 For Hegel, 'The peculiarity of the African character' is that it lacks 'the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas – the category of Universality': Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', p. 7.

51 Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I', p. 7.

52 Masuzawa, 'Troubles with Materiality', p. 248.

53 Anne McClintock describes this common colonial mindset: 'imperial progress across the space of empire is figured as a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory . . . Geographical difference across *space* is figured as a historical difference across *time*': *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 40.

54 Masuzawa, 'Troubles with Materiality', p. 248.

Thus the fetish functions as a name for a stance toward materiality construed as the inverse reflection of spirituality – but not quite.

Fetishism was a term of differentiation, or better, a concept through which European Christianity could be constructed as transcending materiality – epistemologically and ontologically – and as carried on by autonomous subjects. Yet the concept would ironically gain notoriety in theorizations of European capitalist and sexual practices. For Marx, capitalism entailed the occlusion of the human–thing relation that in turn allows things to become reanimated, as commodities, by the mysterious forces of capitalist exchange. In other words, it is ‘because of our alienation from our social production under capitalism that material beings qua commodities come to seem at once inert (dead) and animated (possessed)’.⁵⁵ The process also entails the potential conversion of persons into things – or, in extreme cases, into ghostly presences.⁵⁶ ‘Deep in the plantation, comrade/Shadows: that’s what people are/shadows and nothing more,’ proclaims Rubén Blades in his song.⁵⁷

For Freud, it is a personal experience that leads to a substitution of a ‘normal sexual aim’ with an ‘unfit object’, a substitution that in his view is ‘not unjustly compared with the fetish [*sic*] in which the savage sees the embodiment of his god’.⁵⁸ If for Marx the problem springs from the alienation between the person and his social production, for Freud the behaviour is pathological only ‘when the fetish becomes disengaged from the person concerned and itself becomes a sexual object’.⁵⁹ While diagnosing a particular type of attachment, these discourses also point to the problematic disavowal of other types of subject–object relations. Such fluctuations between attachment and disengagement haunt these theoretical discourses as much as they do the fetishisms they describe.⁶⁰

In Marxist and psychoanalytic discourses, fetishism generally retains the connotations of inappropriate fixation. Fetishism has thus become a

⁵⁵ Masuzawa, ‘Troubles with Materiality’, p. 262.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of reification and reanimation in relation to the persisting spectre of slavery in the United States, see Bill Brown, ‘Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny’, *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006), pp. 175–207.

⁵⁷ Rubén Blades, ‘Plantación Adentro’, my translation.

⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud, ‘Sexual Aberrations’, in A. A. Brill (trans. and ed.), *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), p. 566.

⁵⁹ Freud, ‘Sexual Aberrations’, p. 567.

⁶⁰ Brown observes, in Freud’s work, a repression of the object–world relation, ‘which psychoanalysis compulsively translates into the human. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, like *The Introductory Lectures of Psycho-Analysis*, may be chock full of objects, but each is a symbol for the human body, in whole or in parts’: ‘Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny’, p. 198.

shorthand for what is wrong or false about capitalism.⁶¹ Ironically, such denunciations may end up repeating the modern disavowal of human relations to materiality – even though for Marx such a relation was crucial for the subject. ‘Marxist-inspired Theologies of Liberation’, Althaus-Reid observes, rejected the transgression of boundaries implicit in fetishism, leading ‘to a condemnation of the idolatrous process of replacing the animate with the inanimate’, that is, of the animate God with the inanimate ideology. However, she contends, ‘this assumes an original hegemonic definition of what should be considered animate’, which implies also a definition of animate sexual organs and inanimate ones.⁶² In contrast, Althaus-Reid’s approach is rather to question the ‘neighbourhood fences between fetishism and Christianity’ as a border created by colonial Othering.⁶³ Her tactic is partly a satirical performance that mocks the anxieties of Christian discourses and claims the rejected fetish to show the failures of an always incomplete occlusion of the economic, political and sexual dimensions of the properly spiritual.⁶⁴ Yet, as I read it, Althaus-Reid’s invocation of the fetish suggests, quite seriously, that the ultimate aim of the performance is more than a simple reversal of its underlying metaphysical structure.

For instance, in a scene centred on Eva Perón’s car – entitled ‘Kissing Evita’s Car: How Liberation Theology Lost the Body’ – class, gender and political relations are made clearly visible. In a context marked by those relationships, however, Evita’s car acquires incalculable value based on its capacity to temporarily relieve tired workers waiting for a bus under the rain. It inspires extravagant responses: the workers kiss the car, just as the faithful would kiss a relic or an icon.⁶⁵ The spiritual dimension of the encounter is not debased because it takes place in the midst of clearly stratified social relations or in relation to such an ordinary object – one that is also clearly a commodity. While Pietz argues that the fetish is essentially ‘untranscended materiality’,⁶⁶ Althaus-Reid’s deployment of

⁶¹ This association also informs postcolonial theory. Drawing from psychoanalysis, Homi Bhabha uses the term fetishism to theorize the problem of the racial stereotype and its investments: *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁶² Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, pp. 151 and 149.

⁶³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 149.

⁶⁴ Peter Pels argues that ‘any merely intellectual attempt to go “beyond” fetishism fails to recognize that fetishization is both “false” and functional, a form of misrecognition as well as recognition of reality’: ‘The Spirit of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact, and Fancy,’ in Patricia Spyer (ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 102.

⁶⁵ Althaus-Reid, ‘Feetishism’, pp. 143–8.

⁶⁶ Pietz, ‘The Problem of the Fetish, I’, p. 7.

fetishism rejects the dichotomy between matter and transcendence; transcendence here does not entail the escape from materiality. She argues that fetishism 'is a form of art that gathers together the commonplace and the transcendent experiences in a unique way', thus transfiguring the commonplace and bodies.⁶⁷ As a discourse that seeks to elucidate the powerful role of things in human life, she argued that fetishism contributes to a theology of the body by opening a space for a discussion of 'the ideological naturalization given in Christianity to the body, as prior to the body encountering thinghood'.⁶⁸ The fetish is then not an Other object outside of the 'normal' operations of socio-economic, sexual or theological relations – which would confirm the status of the 'normal' – but rather what troubles the assumptions about such operations. It is perhaps an object seen otherwise, betraying the complex fluctuations between attachment, disengagement and disavowal that characterize material relations. The invocation of fetishism is part of a broader performative questioning of the divisions between religious, economic and sexual discourses; of the strict boundary between subject and objects; and the split between matter and spirit, all of which unveil the failures of dominant metaphysical systems and the need for reimagining corporeality otherwise – indeed a new poetics of matter.

Poetics of matter otherwise

To be sensuous, that is to be real, is to be an object of sense, a sensuous object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself, objects of one's sense perception. To be sensuous is to *suffer* (to be subjected to the actions of another). Man [*sic*] as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a suffering being, and because he feels his suffering, he is a *passionate* being.⁶⁹

The sensuous exposure of Marx's subject to actions of another clearly differentiates him from the autonomous Cartesian subject. Not only does the subject shape the world around it, it is also affected by it. The subject suffers through its sensual exposure, which cannot be reduced to ideology, although sensuality cannot be neatly separated from the ideological or discursive forces shaping it either. The senses do not belong

⁶⁷ Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism', p. 135.

⁶⁸ Althaus-Reid, 'Feetishism', p. 137.

⁶⁹ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingston and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 390.

or give access to a 'natural' realm and they are constantly changing in relation to things, including the technologies that we invent to approach the world. Nonetheless, when it avoids the illusion of having escaped the realm of discursive influence, an appeal to the senses may call attention to the porosity of the boundaries of our bodies to other bodies and to the non-human – not least to women selling lemons without underwear.

If the world and objects can be said to be 'outside oneself' it is not because we may be able to encounter them outside mediation, but rather because we cannot absolutely control them or fully incorporate them to ourselves to assure their contribution to our projects. A stone may make me fall, a tree may block my view of the bay, a bacterion may kill me. I may act on objects – consciously or unconsciously; objects may affect me as a subject by inciting pleasure or revulsion, or they may act on my body as an object by hurting my body through sheer force – and they persist without my awareness or actions. In order to foreground the different aspects of our references to objects, Bill Brown distinguishes between things and objects, where things are objects 'asserting themselves'.⁷⁰ Such nomenclature signals a 'changed relation to the human subjects', where 'the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation'. Quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Brown adds that in these terms 'the body is a thing among things'.⁷¹ It is in this sense of the word that Miller calls relics 'things', since they name a particular subject-object relation in the context of cultic activity.⁷² Similarly, the term fetishism in Althaus-Reid's work calls attention to particular subject-object relations in the context of social negotiations of power. In both cases the things are especially revealing of relationships that are generally ignored. Approaching material things as relations, rather than as objects encountered by fully constituted human bodies, suggests a promising way to theorize the materiality of bodies as well as of things.

As soon as we begin naming materiality alongside ideas or transcendence, however, we are in danger of restating the very dichotomies that we are questioning. As Judith Butler argues, materiality is a term in discourse that too often occludes its own construction, precisely by defining it as that which is pre-discursive.⁷³ The crucial affirmation of materiality

⁷⁰ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (Autumn 2001), p. 4.

⁷¹ Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.

⁷² Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, p. 2.

⁷³ 'This is not to say that the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers. Such a distinction overlooks the materiality of the signifier itself. Such an account also fails to understand materiality as that which is bound up with signification from the start': Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 30.

and the body in theology must resist the tendency either to reify or idealize them, instead theorizing materiality in its dynamic, complex relationality and incompleteness. This includes tracing how bodies are shaped through sociopolitical and sexual discourses, without dissipating the strength of desiring flesh in linguistic transactions; analysing the economic forces that operate in and through objects while avoiding conceiving things only or purely as commodities; admitting the recalcitrance of matter without occluding its malleability; describing materiality as fundamentally relational (rather than substantial) without losing sight either of the density of common stuff or of the ghostly presences that haunt even the most concrete things.

Far from disavowing or repressing any human desire for and enjoyment of materiality, a theology of the body takes those passions seriously, as undeniable aspects of corporeal being. If 'the materiality of human interaction with things is best studied in terms of aesthetics: the material process of mediation of knowledge through the senses', as Peter Pels argues, theological discourse cannot ignore the aesthetic dimensions of its practice.⁷⁴ In analysing the rhetorical strategies of Althaus-Reid's work alongside those of late ancient writers I do not intend to reduce them to intellectual explanation, but rather to suggest that our commitments to rethink theology from the materiality of flesh call for a renewed attention to textual strategies. If the subordination of the epistemological import of material things to the signified ideas was part of the story of the broader dismissal of materiality, unsettling that story entails questioning our practices of signification. Such questioning might entail some 'indecenty'. If we are to avoid losing the body, we may need to let go of the attachment to prescribed theological order, welcoming strange corporeal visions and apparitions as we try to learn 'to apprehend the slippery, ghostly reunion of thingness, spirit, and love'.

74 Pels, 'The Spirit of Matter', p. 100.

Stranger in Our Midst: The Becoming of the Queer God in the Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid

SUSANNAH CORNWALL

The Queer God may . . . show us God's excluded face, which is the face of a non-docile God, a God who is a stranger at the gates of our existent loving and economic order.¹

The Queer God is the God who went into exile with God's people and remained there in exile with them.²

Marcella Althaus-Reid's theology has always been about pushing boundaries and refusing to take platitudes for answers. Her first book to be published in English, *Indecent Theology*, makes clear that the proper project of theology is per/version, that is, deviation or turning in another direction, which might well manifest in 'incorrect', 'unorthodox' interpretation.³ This entails a querying and rejection of discourse which presents salvation as a limited good to be dispensed via those in positions of power, be they priests or politicians – and a querying of theology with a capital T for Tradition. 'T-Theology' is Althaus-Reid's shorthand for Western systematic theology which apotheosizes its own historical outworking, not acknowledging its shifting, unfolding quality or its dubious alliances with capitalist imperialism. She comments:

The main road of T-Theology sooner or later always leads us to the same (forced) agreements, to similar exchanges and values of

1 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 153.

2 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 146.

3 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 87.