

# INDECENT THEOLOGY



THEOLOGICAL PERVERSIONS IN SEX,  
GENDER AND POLITICS

MARCELLA ALTHAUS-REID

# Indecent Theology

All theology is sexual theology.

Indecent Theology is sexier than most.

What can sexual stories from fetishism and sadomasochism tell us about our relationship with God, Jesus and Mary?

Isn't it time the Christian heterosexuals came out of their closets too?

By examining the dialectics of decency and indecency and exploring a theology of sexual stories from the margins, this book brings together for the first time Liberation Theology, Queer Theory, post-Marxism and Postcolonial analysis in an explosive mixture. *Indecent Theology* is an out-of-the-closet style of doing theology and shows how we can reflect on the Virgin Mary and on Christology from sexual stories taken from fetishism, leather lifestyles and transvestism.

The point of departure is the understanding that every theology implies a conscious or unconscious sexual or political praxis, based on reflections and actions from certain accepted social codifications. These are codifications which configure our Christian visions of life and mystical projections relating human experience to the sacred. In theology, and in revolutionary theology, it is discontinuity and not continuation which is most valuable and transformative, so the location of excluded areas in theology is crucial. For instance, poverty and sensuality as a whole has been marginalised from theology. Why does a theology from the poor need to be sexually neutral, a theology of economics which excludes their desires? And what do those desires tell us about Christ in Latin America? The gap between Liberation Theology and Postcolonial Theory is one of identity and consciousness, but the gap between a Feminist Liberation Theology and an Indecent Theology is one of sexual honesty.

*Indecent Theology* is based on the sexual experiences of the poor, using economic and political analysis while unveiling the sexual ideology of systematic theology. Theology is a sexual act and Indecent Theologians are called to be sexual performers of a committed praxis of social justice and transformation of the structures of economic and sexual oppression in their societies.

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# **Indecent Theology**

Theological perversions in sex,  
gender and politics

**Marcella Althaus-Reid**



London and New York

. . . a young camel deviating from her path; a wild she-ass accustomed to the wilderness, sniffing the wind in her lust. Who can repel her desire? . . . And you said, “No! I love strangers, the different, the unknown, the *Other* and will follow them.”

(Jeremiah 2: 23–25)

. . . the words זָרָה (“strange”) and נִכְרִיָּה (“unknown”, “foreign” . . .) have to be explained according to their particular context; they may mean “strange” but also “different”, “unknown”, “foreign”, “Other”, and even any combination of these meanings.

(Heijerman 1994: 26)

### **This Book is Dedicated to Young Camels who Love the Different**

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# Introduction

## The fragrance of Women's Liberation Theology: odours of sex and lemons on the streets of Buenos Aires

The police cars arrived and the policemen started to criticise me for (what I consider to be) my right to dress without using underwear.

– I am a sexy woman. What would you like me to do about it?

– This is a lack of respect to morality – said one of the policemen.

– If you say so . . . Fine, I'll promise then never to leave my house again without my pants on.

(Estrada 1996: 19)

[Ironic] Preach the Gospel! . . . How has the Gospel been preached, till now, I wonder? [Serious] As a missionary in Peru, I tell you that these (*Coya*) women were taught to pray to the saints but have not even been taught to dress themselves or behave in a moral way in the streets. They sit for a second and . . . Can you imagine? No underwear, the streets are their toilets. . . . [laughter].

(From a sermon heard in a radio programme, Radio Colonia, Uruguay, in the 1980s, referring to the fact that *Coya* women do not use underwear and perform their necessities by squatting in the streets without even lifting their long skirts.)

Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not? Shall she remove them, say, at the moment of going to church, for a more intimate reminder of her sexuality in relation to God? What difference does it make if that woman is a lemon vendor and sells you lemons in the streets without using underwear? Moreover, what difference would it make if she sits down to write theology without underwear? The Argentinian woman theologian and the lemon vendors may have some things in common and others not. In common, they have centuries of patriarchal oppression, in the Latin American mixture of clericalism, militarism and the authoritarianism of decency, that is, the sexual organisation of the public and private spaces of society. However, there may be differences too. The lemon vendor sitting in the street may be able to feel her sex; her musky smell may be confused with that of her basket of lemons, in a metaphor that brings together sexuality and economics. But the Argentinian theologian may be different. She may keep her underwear on at the moment of prayer, or whilst reflecting on

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salvation; and maybe the smell of her sex doesn't get mixed with issues of theology and economy. Writing theology without underwear may be punishable by law, who knows. An act of gross indecency such as that of the prostitute woman described by the Mexican novelist Josefina Estrada seems to be, in the words of the policeman, an action against the moral order of the country. Yet, an Argentinian feminist theologian may want to do, precisely, that. Her task may be to deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality, which organises not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too. The Argentinian theologian would like then to remove her underwear to write theology with feminist honesty, not forgetting what it is to be a woman when dealing with theological and political categories. I should call such a theologian, indecent, and her reflection, Indecent Theology. Indecent Theology is a theology which problematises and undresses the mythical layers of multiple oppression in Latin America, a theology which, finding its point of departure at the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking, will reflect on economic and theological oppression with passion and imprudence. An Indecent Theology will question the traditional Latin American field of decency and order as it permeates and supports the multiple (ecclesiological, theological, political and amatory) structures of life in my country, Argentina, and in my continent.

The issue of lemon vendors without underwear has never been a theological issue in Latin America, yet a whole theological story and history may be revealed through them – for instance, a criticism which ranges from the *Conquista* of Latin America to militarism and theology. But first, before coming to the discussion on theology (which needs to be on Liberation Theology and which will set the basis for our Indecent Theology), we need to reflect on aspects of the genesis of Latin American theology. We need to consider the end of the Grand Narratives in Latin America, or at least the end of the first one. Allow me to start by considering you as a prospective tourist to Buenos Aires. Allow me to advise you on that, as the *Porteña* that I am (a woman from the port of Buenos Aires).

### **In Buenos Aires**

If you visit my city, Buenos Aires, please try to go and see the women lemon vendors who sit in the streets of some neighbourhoods. Go, for instance, to the old marketplace of Constitución, where my mother used to buy a chicken still warm, with its feathers, and apples which had not yet lost the dust of the Patagonian trees. Please go for a walk around the sunny streets of my *barrio*, San Telmo, where stray dogs sleep in the doors of abandoned buildings, and prostitutes buy their newspapers at siesta time under the intense heat of summer. There is usually a sweet smell, that mixture of street garbage at the junctions of the Avenue Nueve de Julio, which mixes with the smells of flowers and baskets of lemons, onions and fresh herbs sold by the

women who sit on the pavement. In summer they sweeten the air with parsley and lemons, but can you smell the odours of their sex? Perhaps they do not have underwear while they sit there with lemons and children, and give you change while wrapping parsley. Look at their long, lustrous black plaits and their delicate indigenous faces. Hear the song of their voices calling the passers-by to buy their merchandise. They have singing voices with polite accents: *'Ay señora me compra unos limoncitos, que están bien lindos qué . . .'* ('Madam, please buy from me some nice lemons, they are so good . . .'). See if they have their babies wrapped in cloth, hanging at their backs, as is traditionally done, or if the children sleep in a fruit box, protected with blankets and knitted shawls. Then, go to one of the many coffee shops of the city, where people from my country traditionally discuss politics, philosophy and religion. The places where they feel free to say *'curas de mierda'* (priests are shit) and *'este es un gobierno de ladrones'* (the government is full of thieves). These are two of the most popular expressions of my people, almost proverbial. Go to these places where Argentinians exercise public catharsis and vernacular confessions amongst friends and strangers. The coffee shops of Buenos Aires, where revolutions have been planned, liberation theologians discussed Christology and Borges wrote his poems. Go and sit at one of the old marble tables and ask for a *cortado*, the traditional dark coffee with milk served in small white cups, and think. Think about what you thought. Impressions in foreign lands are so deceptive. Those lemon vendors can tell you a few things about postmodernism, for instance. Perhaps they have not heard of Liberation Theology but they know about the end of the Grand Meta-narrative, and not from reading Lyotard. You have just seen the lemon vendors in the streets of Constitucion or San Telmo. You have seen the witnesses, moreover, the subjects of one of the most important postmodern phenomena of fragmentation and dissolution which happened 500 years ago in Latin America. These women may still speak their indigenous language apart from Castilian Spanish and may also still respect the faces of *La Pachamama* (the Goddess Earth of the Incas) in their lives, but their epistemological and theological universe collapsed centuries ago. It lost its public credibility with the *Conquista* of Latin America, with Christianity and European rule. Other discourses of the sacred had come to sustain other laws and justice, and forms of love in their countries. On the small cards they keep in their pockets, or beside the baskets of fruits and vegetables, there is no place for The Mother of Cosmic Time of the Incas (although *La Pachamama* never had a physical representation; she is the earth). The daughters of the Inca Empire lost their narratives. They now worship the medieval dressed figurine of the Virgin Mary with its oversize crown and God-prince in its arms. Few of them may be able to decode the intricacy of the Virgin Mary's ancient European dress and mantle. Besides, the Virgin Mary is a fashion figurine, a dress and a cloak, decorated with a face and two hands (the hands are useful to sustain a rose, or some beads or a child). The Virgin Mary is overdressed, and contrary to

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the lemon vendors the smell of her sex (even if statues were alive) would be difficult to perceive. Probably these women and children sitting in the streets with their merchandise do not remember that they are miraculous survivors of one of the greatest destructions of the Grand Narratives the world has ever seen. It can be dated, marked in history. It happened around the year 1492, with the invasion of the continent today we call *América* (even the name of the continent perished in the destruction) and it signified the concrete, material breakdown of everything their world knew at that time. The outcome of the destruction of the Grand Meta-narratives of Latin American high civilisations can be seen in the everyday lives of women such as the lemon vendors and the women theologians in the streets of Buenos Aires. The everyday lives of people always provide us with a starting point for a process of doing a contextual theology without exclusions, in this case without the exclusion of sexuality struggling in the midst of misery.

#### **The continuation of Liberation Theology**

A living metaphor for God, sexuality and the struggle in the streets of Buenos Aires comes from the images of lemons vendors. A materialist-based theology finds in them a starting point from which ideology, theology and sexuality can be rewritten from the margins of society, the church and systematic theologies. Our point of departure is the understanding that every theology implies a conscious or unconscious sexual and political praxis, based on reflections and actions developed from certain accepted codifications. These are theo/social codifications which configure epistemologies, visions of life and the mystical projections which relate human experience to the sacred. As an Argentinian liberation theologian myself, who received her theological education during the difficult times of the churches' struggle against the dictatorships of the 1970s, I am aware that in theology it is not stability but a sense of discontinuity which is most valuable. The continuousness of the hermeneutical circle of suspicion and the permanent questioning of the explanatory narratives of reality implies, precisely, a process of theological discontinuity. As part of this process, the location of areas of exclusion in theology is one of crucial importance; for instance, poverty and sensuality as a whole (and not as separate units) has been marginalised in theology. A theology from the poor needs also to be a sexual theology, a theology of economics and desires that have been excluded from our way of 'doing theology' as a second act. I am referring here to the exclusionary process of the theology which used to be called *la caminata*, or 'the walking' process of reflecting and acting–reflecting–acting on historical experiences from the marginalised people of God (Althaus-Reid 1993: 31–41). What has been excluded from Liberation Theology has been the result of a selective process of contexts of poverty and experiences of marginalisation in the continent. For instance, Liberation Theology is a rural theology and the context provided by peasant communities has been

privileged sometimes at the expense of the life of the urban poor. The urban poor women of any important Latin American city such as Buenos Aires, Santiago or Sao Paulo live in circumstances which are very different from their sisters in *el Norte Argentino* or the mountains of Perú. For a start, urban poor women do not have the homogenous cultural or religious background, or even the extended family-based circle which provides peasant women with some commonalities in their struggle. The lemon vendors from Buenos Aires may have been peasant women before emigrating to the big city looking for economic survival for themselves and their families but they have then been conformed to a life which resembles more the life of guerrilla women than that of women of the countryside. The life experiences of poor urban women have the toughness of the struggle for survival in the dangerous and chaotic conditions of big cities. Not only does their economic struggle test them every day but there is a mixture of poverty and sexuality which makes of these women sometimes *unusual* poor women, and *unusual* Christian believers too. This unusualness is the condition of their indecency, that is, of the subversion of sexual and gender codes in their lives as a result of their struggle for life and dignity. I know, because once I was one of them, a poor woman on the streets of Buenos Aires and I am indecent enough to be able to reflect with theological honesty on issues of women, economic struggle, images of God and the flow of sexual desires.

My purpose in this book is not to demolish Liberation Theology *a la Europea* (in a European academic fashion), but to explore the contextual hermeneutical circle of suspicion in depth by questioning the traditional liberationist context of doing theology. In this way the project of Indecent Theology represents both a continuation of Liberation Theology and a disruption of it. I have taken Liberation Theology as my basic theological reference because this is my theological stand, in which I have been professionally educated and from which base I worked in deprived communities both in Latin America and in Britain. I still emphatically affirm the validity of Liberation Theologies as crucial in processes of social transformation and superior to idealistic North Atlantic theologies. However, Liberation Theology needs to be understood as a continuing process of re-contextualisation, a permanent exercise of serious doubting in theology. By 'serious doubting' I do not mean adding new contextual perspectives, such as the ones provided by the living metaphors of God and sexuality in the images of lemon vendors, to an established theological discourse. That would be good but insufficient and would allow colonial theology to continue with the traditional androcentric methodology which tends to absorb and adapt the most radical elements which can arise from the margins. Serious doubting as a theological method re-contextualises Liberation Theology by questioning those very hermeneutical principles which led liberationists to be indifferent to the reality of lemon vendors in the first place. Amongst liberationists, the fact that there is no such a thing as a neutral theology is well understood; neither can involuntary omissions in

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issue-based hermeneutical circles be justified as mere distractions. More than ten years ago, I was involved in a church project trying to identify a relevant orthopraxis for a parish belonging to a militant Protestant church of Buenos Aires. After two years of popular bible readings and much discussion, and before reaching a conclusive decision on our praxis, we suddenly noticed that our church was full of beggars. The subjects of our praxis were already there, ignoring our meetings and discussions; it only required from us the gift to look around us. That parish was located in the midst of the city, and the area was frequented by beggars looking for food and occasional shelter during the day. When I asked why it took us so long to discover that our praxis should be one which prioritised beggars as theological partners for the ongoing orthopraxis of our church, I received a simple yet truthful answer. The city was full of beggars but we had never seen them, because one does not see what one does not want to see. Women beggars in particular are extremely deprived people who hide themselves in big cities like Buenos Aires because they are scared of the police, of men in general or just ashamed of their poverty and destitution. However, we became used to walking in the city without wanting to see them, because we were unprepared for the challenges they brought to us. In a similar way, a materialist theology such as Liberation Theology has been walking in the streets without noticing the life of the rebellious poor urban women who do not use underwear, and the richness of the metaphors of God, based on the interface between their sexuality and poverty. This challenges us not only to ask different questions but also to undertake a different way of doing contextual theology. This is a concrete materialist theology which understands that the dislocation of sexual constructions goes hand in hand with strategies for the dislocation of hegemonic political and economic agendas.

### **Feminist Liberation Theology: the *Caminata* continues**

Feminist Liberation Theology, growing from a strong commitment to the life of poor women, has made a very important contribution towards androcentric dislocations in theology worldwide. However, as liberation theologians we are not immune to idealism and romantic visions of femininity in accordance with much contested, yet still normative theological views of gender and sexuality. *Machismo* in Latin America creates a strong base of assumptions and understandings in different aspects of reality by the pervasiveness of its sexual beliefs reinforced by the genderised linguistic universes of the Spanish and Portuguese languages. On many occasions, Feminist Liberation Theologies have taken for granted the male/female sexual identity and gender constructions in theology, striving not for sexual disruption and difference in order to produce an epistemological paradigm shift, but for complementarity. Gender identities have not been seen for what they are, the performative acts of the representation of sexuality (Butler 1990: 5). Sexuality is an unnatural conceptualisation of identities in struggle.

The gap between Liberation Theology and a Postcolonial Theology is one of identity and consciousness. The gap between a Feminist Liberation Theology and an Indecent Theology is one of sexual honesty. The consequences of an analysis of sexual constructions carry important implications in any contextual theology. Basically they destabilise the sexual foundations of economic and political theories, and unveil the sexual ideology of systematic (even liberationist) theology. Theology is then seen in its true nature as being a sexual project from its epistemological foundation based on a sexed understanding of dualistic relationships and its legitimacy role. Can Liberation and Feminist Liberation Theology liberate while still complying with these sexually hegemonic epistemologies?

*Indecent Theology* is a book on Sexual Political Theology intended as a critical continuation of Feminist Liberation Theology using a multi-disciplinary approach and drawing on Sexual Theory (Butler; Sedgwick; Garber), Postcolonial criticism (Fanon, Cabral, Said), Queer studies and theologies (Stuart; Goss; Weeks; Daly), Marxist studies (Laclau and Mouffe; Dussel), Continental Philosophy (Derrida; Deleuze and Guattari; Baudrillard) and Systematic Theology. This text is divided into five chapters, in which the process of de-hegemonisation of theology as a sexual normative ideology is contested as a methodology, while expanding the reflection on women and poverty.

Chapter 1, 'Indecent proposals for women who would like to do theology without using underwear' is an introductory chapter. It provides the methodological foundation for the rest of the book, arising from the question posited to us by the lemon vendors from Buenos Aires. Considering these women as the real subjects and living metaphors of theology, the chapter evolves exposing the economic mechanisms of production in Liberation Theology, and showing how poor women and sexual dissidents are located in the process of organisation of systematic theologies. This chapter uses postcolonial criticism in relation to Liberation Theology and Sexual Theory, including Feminist Anthropology in relation to Mariology. It engages with modernity and postmodernity from a Latin American perspective as necessary to consider the cycles of construction and deconstruction of religious Grand Narratives in the continent since the *Conquista*. The chapter as a whole is an introduction to a critical review of Liberation and Feminist Liberation Theology, and to a methodological (indecent) proposal.

Chapter 2, 'The indecent Virgin', offers the method of *indecenting* as an alternative for reflection on the Virgin Mary, as Mariology constitutes a key element around which Christianity and political hegemonies have been closely allied in Latin America. It asks questions pertaining to the figure of the theological woman writer. What is feminist theological *Ecriture*? What sort of ontological and economic investments are theologians contributing to when they create Mariologies? This chapter takes the sexual metaphors of Christianity to the border limits of the relation between metaphor and

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history in the Latin American context. If it is true that theology has always kept an ambiguous position between metaphorical and historical truths, Christianity in Latin America has blurred their frontiers according to convenience. In the life of the poor, and amongst poor women, there is no such sharp distinction between the metaphors of the incarnation and its factual veracity. Therefore it would be inappropriate for a materialist-based theology to discuss Mariology or Christology without accepting this starting point of blurred metaphorical truths. From there the chapter engages with indecent forms of popular Mariology from the cultural grounds of the poor urban dwellers of Buenos Aires. These are examples of the sexual deconstructions produced by the urban rebellious poor.

Chapter 3, 'Talking obscenities to theology' further develops the methodology presented in the *indecenting* of the Virgin Mary into a per/version, that is, deliberately taking what is considered as the wrong way in the *Metà-ódos* or methodological road. Per/verting deconstructs traditional elements of Liberation Theology such as solidarity, and finds in it the trace of homosolidarity (Sedgwick 1990) while using Sartre's concepts of viscosity and obscenity to reflect what is behind the theological concepts of purity and transcendence (Sartre 1956: 604). This is then applied to a Christological understanding as coming from sexual marginal epistemologies, such as the Bi/Christ (Bisexual Christ) model, and reflects on the relationship between lust and resurrection.

Chapter 4, 'The theology of sexual stories' develops the full hermeneutical circle of an Indecent Theology, based on the sociology of sexual stories, and the role they fulfil in communities especially amongst the poor. This chapter engages theologically with what Rubin calls stories from the bottom of the sexual pyramid (fetishism; 'leather' practices) apart from the stories from the top of the pyramid (*out-of-the-closet-heterosexual* stories<sup>1</sup>) (Rubin 1984: 279). These are sexual stories which come from magazines and newspapers engaged in dialogue with theology and with the symbolism of images and adverts in 'leather' magazines following Barthes' analysis of the *punctum*. The Latin American sexual stories help us to discern the rebelliousness manifested by the poor in their popular carnivals, discussing sexual excesses and nationalistic quests in the struggle for liberation from political, sexual and Christian oppression.

Chapter 5, 'Grondes medidas económicas: big economic measures: conceptualising global erection processes' considers globalisation from a sexual, Indecent Theological perspective. What are the relationships between a theology of sexual stories using a per/version methodology and the economic assumptions and facts of the life of poor people? How does the external debt as contracted in Argentina during the 1970s relate to the case study of the 'shrinking penis' in Ghana in 1997? Hegemonic sexuality and witchcraft mentality can no longer be considered irrelevant but on the contrary are constitutive of current economic thinking and economic relations amongst people in poor countries. Which political postcolonialist

analysis can be drawn from there and how does it relate to a theology from the margins? What does the Drag Queen dressed as the Virgin Mary during a carnival procession have to say about developmental paradigms? To reflect on questions like these we explore elements from sexual theory and post-Marxist theory related to identity and representation which are used to do a sexual re-reading of Marxist theology in Latin America (Dussel). Indecent Theology is the opposite to a sexual canonical theology, concerned with the regulation of amatory practices justified as normative by economic infra-structural models where anything outside hegemonic patriarchal heterosexuality is devalued and spiritually alienated.

Sexuality is a complex issue and so is theology. The continuous exchange and dialogue that sexual theories, the sociology of sexual stories, new political thought and postmodernism provide us with, together with the hermeneutical circle of suspicion, are crucial elements necessary for any theological reflection which wants to disentangle liberation from colonialism, and gender quality theories from other quests (or the quest of the *Other*) of plurality and difference in sexual identities. Of course, in the end it is our historical experience as theologians, forged in the struggle with political, sexual and theological hegemonies, which determines the terms of this ongoing dialogue. In this case, the multidisciplinary dialogue of this book engages deeply with my own life as nurtured in the struggle against dictatorial regimes in my country, and the intellectual and Christian challenges that they provided me with as a Latin American woman brought up in the poverty of Buenos Aires.



# 1 Indecent proposals for women who would like to do theology without using underwear

## **The collapse of the Grand Narratives of Latin America: theology and sexual mutilations**

The Grand Narratives, or the authoritative discourses which sustain everyday life, which Gramsci spoke of when writing about the common sense or common order of things which are ideologically constructed yet have assumed a natural and almost biological presence in our life (Gramsci 1971: 33), collapsed in Latin America over the course of a few years. Cultural, religious, socio-political discourses, economy and science, and philosophical cosmovisions which defined identity, meaning and patterns of social organisation and sexual constructions were obliterated from the earth. Even language was erased. ‘Tongues’ were lost; mother tongues were buried while human tongues were cut from mouths. Women’s tongues were silenced for centuries. What survived entered into a covenant of silence, and since then it has never fully spoken again. Following Jacques Lacan, we may say that it was a silence of the magnitude of planets, silenced as if by a set of Newtonian laws, replaced by unified field theory and leaving behind anything outside the new cosmovision. ‘We will never know what can happen to a reality till the moment that this reality has been definitively reduced by inscribing it in a language’ (Lacan, in Miller 1990: 357–60). Unified field theories resolve perplexity, avoid relationalism and install laws assigned to points of space or space-time as particulars. Precisely, the resolution of perplexity (plurality) in Latin America was done in material ways. ‘From some people the buttocks were cut, to others the thighs, or the arms . . . cutting hands, noses, tongues and other pieces from the body, eaten alive by animals and (cutting) women’s breasts’ (Todorov 1987: 151). These mutilation rituals, paraphrasing Lacan, could be compared to the cutting off of the breasts of truth, the reductionism into a new bodily order, that is, humanity reduced to one formula, one law of union and compulsion. This required a massive mutilation. The need for Grand Narratives always takes with it some cuttings and mutilations in itself. Latin American theology comes from that, a mutilation of symbolic knowledge such as theology, politics, economics, science and sexuality. It was the time of enforced martial law on perplexity,

but not an end of authoritative discourse followed by deconstruction. A deconstructive path would have submitted responses ‘to endless interrogations . . . overthrowing power, to preserve the opening’ as Jabès says (Harvey 1986: 94). We have nothing to fear in deconstruction if this process carries with itself a problematisation of reality which opens to new questionings and visions. Instead of that, what happened after the *Conquista* was an authoritarian process, and the imposition of the Great European Meta-narratives on people’s lives. That was more a process of asset-stripping than deconstruction. The Latin American Grand Narratives became redundant, empty (in Spanish the name given to asset-stripping is *vaciamiento*, emptying) perhaps due to the fact that every Grand Narrative carries in itself an objectification of a *Lebenswelt* or ‘World of Life’. Let us consider this point in detail. The production of Grand Narratives is in itself a way of commodifying life. These are no innocent paper moons. These are concrete intentional discourses growing from relations of production and capital appropriation. The end of the Grand Narratives of the Original Nations was an undressing process, and the native’s new nakedness was then available to be re-dressed with a different (European) Grand Narrative, yet one which fulfilled the same objective as the first. Therefore, I am not claiming that the Grand Narratives of the Original Nations were better or worse than the European. No, I am only saying that the natural processes of deconstruction never happened and people were brutalised into Christian Grand Narratives and economic discourses by criminal forces. Narratives of people’s exploitation and women’s submission in Latin America did not change, at least not substantially. Only the masters who gave names to the planets, still following Lacan, and determined their reduced vocabulary, changed. A more brutal regime and a genocide without magnitude happened in the continent, but as a woman I cannot say that the situation of women after the *Conquista* was substantially different from before. However, as I will argue later, deconstruction is unavoidable even if forcefully obstructed. Deconstruction can be traced in Latin America in multiple forms of political, cultural and religious mistrust throughout centuries. The sexual mutilation still needs to be theologically addressed.

Lemon vendors who do not use underwear are indecent. The Argentinian theologian without underwear writes *Indecent Theology*. They both challenge in different ways the creation of a factual sexual order of things, one that became entangled in an alliance of patriarchy between Europeans and natives. Heterosexual Christian imaginary came to Latin America to reproduce expressive models of sex/gender by normalisation and control (Butler 1990: 24). These things are the bases of structural organisation in my country, the primal forms of normalisation and frontier patrolling systems as we know them historically. Indeed, the fact that we have been able to trace different political and cultural systems throughout human history but never a historical experience of non-heterosexual normalisation is significant, even if we take into account cultures where heterosexuality was constructed in

different ways to the contemporary form with which we are familiar. Some understanding of heterosexuality is always in the origin of patriarchy. It is an understanding based on hierarchy and submission by processes of affirmation by subtraction: I am what I am not (a woman and not a man; a bisexual and not a 'woman'); and what gets subtracted is also annulled: I am what I am not, a 'woman', therefore I am not. Heterosexuality is not a neutral science and the inner logic of the system works with its own artificially created 'either/or' concepts. It unifies the ambivalence of life into one official version. Per/versions (the different versions of a road) are silenced.

When Cortes met Moctezuma in 1519, the Grand Narratives behind these two men were based on two cosmovisions which set them apart except for one thing which they held in common: the patriarchal excess of their narratives of authority. From a materialist analysis, we can think about Grand Narratives as the surplus of praxis of patriarchal power, the matrix of which is constituted by heterosexual thought. Heterosexual power therefore continues, and provides the flow between Grand Narratives linked by occasional asset-stripping processes as we have already considered. For instance, the colonisers stripped Africa of its culture, religious and economic systems but kept patriarchal power intact, if not reinforced, by Christianity. Ricoeur, in his analysis of living metaphors, has considered how symbolic constructions develop a quasi-biological life. They are born, they develop and flourish, they form alliances with other symbolic systems, and finally die and/or transmute (Ricoeur 1967: 17ff.). Grand Narratives also seem to follow similar processes, except that the primal binary construction of sexual systems remains alive (although not uncontested) and is reproduced into epistemologies and structures of political and social organisation. It is especially reproduced in our understanding of authority.

Authority defines authority, begets authority and resurrects authority. Authority is always positioned authority, Darwinian (surviving by force and confrontation) and self-perpetuating. We might be referring here to Western theological authority or USA capitalism. The authority of, for instance, the Grand Narratives of Christianity in Latin America is composed of these plus the following elements:

- 1 A modern conception of (Western) linear time.
- 2 A core knowledge base provided by the construction of the Western subject as constitutive of the real. Against that real, we position our invented lives.

The trajectory of Grand Narratives seems to follow a Western linearity and modern conception of progress, because progression also implies the notion of a point of departure, a constitutive moment, and therefore a regression, even if it is a regression to the not known or acknowledged, already there although occult. This occultist call is no doubt meaningful. Para-

phrasing Chairman Mao saying that ‘good ideas do not fall from heaven’ (Lin Piao 1967: 206), we may say also that neither do Grand Narratives fall from heaven, but obey corporal needs of what Foucault called the disciplining and ordering of rationality, institutions and sexuality (Foucault 1980: 196–7), and we may add – of capital. We believe in them because they make us; we know we perish with them, too. However, the regressions of authority do not need to obey linear movements but can be digressions: for instance, sexual digression. If we do not have a point in our Latin American history to say that the sexual organisation of the continent was not heterosexual, we do have digressions, discordances and incongruences at any time. If North Atlantic visions of poor Latin America have been seen through heterosexual eyes, it is because the socially disadvantaged in the continent present different parameters of sexual transgression than in Europe or in the United States (Foster 1997: 7). The homosexuality amongst the Caribs and the sexual freedom of women in some indigenous communities may be erased from the theological history of our ancestors, but is strangely present in the sexual protest of the 1990s in Latin America, when people tired of militarism and repression have decided to come out as free people (Foster 1997: 13). Let us reflect, for instance, on the Maya conception of time, taking the Mayan subject as that which gives us this sense of preservation of the opening in understanding processes, which is so needed if one wants to avoid the ruling of progressive (linear) philosophical discourses (Derrida 1972: 211).

Maya theology is born of numbers and repetitions. The politico-religious Grand Narrative of the Mayas was built from the obsessive behaviour of controlling numbers, dates, astronomical calculus and construction. Each stone of a monument is part of a liturgical memory of numbers, which are important recorded human gestures in themselves. Their god was not the name of in/difference, but the numerical difference which approximated them to God. León-Portilla explains the cyclic but non-repetitive conception of time. ‘The *sol* (sun) never rests. The appearance shows us that the *sol* is devoured in the *chi-kin* (the evening; literally, the sun in the mouth) but it penetrates the inner world (*mundo interior*), goes traverses and triumphantly, is born again’ (León-Portilla 1986: 34). Every *sol* comes with its Grand Narrative of origins and ordering but it is expected to die a death by penetration (their time pre-fixed, divined in the sacred texts) and resurrected by penetration too. Like the biblical genealogies of male descendants, one penetration giving birth to someone else till God enters into the genealogy by penetrating a woman’s womb. That is Jesus, part of a linear and progressive conception; yet resurrection adds circularity to penetration. Jesus’ death is an example of tolerance, of the enduring of human life. However, the *sol*’s death carries in itself the idea of some form of tolerance too. In other words, former identities were allowed to remain in the new *sol*, as a token of co-operation from the new discourse in power. The Aztecs are exemplary of that. They had confederate narratives, at least during the

fifteenth century and the time of the *Conquista*. These reflected their tributary system organised around thirty-eight tributary provinces depending on Mexico-Tenochtitlan as a centre (Pérez Herrero 1992: 43). The Triple Alliance of the Aztecs did not kill but incorporated regional identities and their regional discourses of identity. That was not what the Narratives of the Spaniards were about in their construction of authority: they brought Christianity without resurrection, without the tolerance of life. Theirs was a linear, terminal conception of Christian narratives. While the Aztec Confederation expected that at least some of their philosophical and scientific paradigms would be able to rotate as peripheral moons of the Spaniards' Christianity, the Spaniards only wanted to kill them.

How did this religious philosophy of identity affect their sexual discourse? We know that women in the Aztec Empire were of low value and ill-treated. Were the alloying identity myths suspended in relation to women? Did women have a national and religious identity or a reflective one, that is, one that reflected their gender roles and positions? We will never know for sure, because much was destroyed and little was preserved in terms of books or accounts of the times before the *Conquista*. However, since we know that one of the factors in the fall of the Grand Narratives of the Original Nations was a different conception of time and the understanding of cycles of discourses of power, one wonders how they worked sexually. In short, what was the difference? There is a second factor to consider, and it comes from the fact that the Aztecs had a military narrative, which was the same as the Spaniards. The people were indoctrinated to obey and accept subjugation. It was part of the order of worship. Therefore, the fall of the Aztec Empire was a gravitational one; vertical military structures, tied to each other, collapsed without knowing how to find the space of the horizontal decisions and challenges. The military culture, patriarchy at its peak, erased the cyclical conceptions and understandings of God, also based on different compulsions on the side of Christians and Aztec: one group obsessed by numbers and metaphors of cyclical penetration; the other by a linear penetration pattern interrupted by Christ's resurrection. In the end, the Aztec Confederacy's Grand Narrative fell, perhaps because Grand Narratives have a set time for their own self-destruction. That 'progressive erosion' which Derrida identified in metaphors such as value of usury and usage (Derrida 1989: 39) is present also in Meta-narratives. The usury (*usure*) is that surplus of value which is transmitted in Aztec discursive confederations, which comes from the corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*) of the oppressed which through their oppression has given value to the Meta-narratives which objectivised them in the first place (Dussel 1988: 63). The usury, interest, continues and makes alliances and arrangements with new authoritative orderings. The story of colonial settlements and imperial control is a story of one basic alliance: the patriarchal one. Disparaged forms of patriarchal cultures find enough elements in common for mutual agreement. Languages and religious systems are banished and societal orders and political configurations are

demonised by new central powers, but women's oppression continues to give focus, a sense of solidarity and reciprocity between conquerors and conquered. There is a sense of tradition and ontological continuation. Without this, and the unquestionable Western subject, Grand Narratives would be effectively deconstructed, called to subpoena. These two elements are the main surpluses of the preservation of the order of life as we know it.

However, the end of the Original Nations' Grand Narratives implied also a patriarchal crisis of gigantic proportions: husbands were required to give their wives to any Spaniard who wished to have sex, fathers to witness their daughters being taken as concubines or slaves without their agreement. Grandmothers became concubines and children sex slaves outside the control of the male eldership of society. On reading these stories, and the voices of protests from writers such as Todorov or Dussel on the *Conquista*, one gets the impression that it is authority which is questioned more than rape. When husbands came back from working in the mines, they needed to witness how their wives were forced to have sex with their bosses (Todorov 1987: 150). Guaman Poma de Ayala gives graphic accounts of Spanish men sexually abusing indigenous women while they slept (Pease 1980) which work at the level of denouncing male trespasses into other men's properties. The issue here is one of possession, of men taking the property of other men, but not a discourse about the abuse of women. The fact is that the sexual Grand Narratives of Central America and the Inca Empire worked in a frame of property, similar to the Scriptural Commandment of men's sexual rights over women. In the *Conquista*, women's sufferings are a matter of economy.

The destruction of the Grand Narratives of the Americas did not come as the result of a hermeneutics of suspicion, or the realisation of the trace in the text, that element which is a movement leading us towards what the text tries to occult, hide and negate. No, economic exploitation was the deconstructivist clause, the doubting interrogation of naturalised, assumed authoritative narratives. In that, women's oppression was to continue as part of an economic exchange. The pursuit of gold destroyed the idea of unity, the systematic thought of civilisations such as the Aztecs or the Inca Empire and introduced the plurality of European exploitation instead. As in a good deconstructivist process, it overthrew the power of an ancient monolithic discourse (built on the suppression of other discourses, those from internal processes of colonisation such as annexed cultures under the Aztec empire) and affirmed the 'coming of the Other' (Caputo 1997a: 53). However, the Other came with its own law, its own closure of interrogations, while pursuing at the same time that passion for the impossible which lies at the base of the project of supplanting one civilisation with another. To take Tenochtitlan with 400 men and some tired horses could be a metaphor for the experience of surpassing limits of the unrepresentable and unrepresentable (Caputo 1997a: 33). That is to say the Original Nations' civilisations proved to be beyond the comprehension of the symbolic of colonial Europeans.