

INDECENCIA

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I dedicate this essay to the late Alanna Lockward.

There are many sexual dissenters whose theological community is made up of the gathering of those who go to gay bars with rosaries in their pockets, or who make camp chapels of their living rooms ...

—Marcella Althaus-Reid¹

I am unable to offer any trigger warnings in embarking on an en fleshed engagement with Latinidad/Latinxidad. The histories/herstories/theirstories/ourstories of the subject are inherently imbued with trauma, blood, and laughter of the kind that melds with long rolling tears that can seductively turn into laughter—as in joy—and lead into revolutions and revelations of all kinds. And so, while struggling to articulate decency within the concepts of Latin/x America, the image that surfaces for me is that of a rosary, whose beads tightly connect the Renaissance–colonization of the Americas–modernity–capitalism–the Enlightenment–coloniality–globalization and corporatization. Connecting all of the polished beads in this metaphorical rosary is a dangling body and an empty cross. The empty cross desperately seeking to fulfill its original purpose as an historical instrument of punishment and working much like a magnet to pull the body back into itself. The body, on the other hand, dances in limbo, performing its own redemptive choreography without panties. The loincloth that traditionally covered the genitals of the crucified has fallen off to reveal what for so long was hidden behind it. Such disclosure is deemed obscene, and the powers that be rush to renail the body onto the cross, conceal the “private parts,” and call this job an act of decency.

My indecent proposition with this essay and the exhibition at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art is to delve into a selection of works by rara/o/e/queer artists from Latin America and/or of Latin American descent and living in the United States, Europe, or the

¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, introduction to *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

Caribbean and/or in-between spaces/identities, whose praxes center on performance art and ephemeral actions, in order to ponder on Latinidad/Latinxidad from the perspective of the body as it pertains to sexuality and religion—but not only.² I am curious as to how the elucidations that might arise from such a corporeal undertaking might shed light on the whereabouts of a continent-identity-and-idea that is in constant search of its own location and meaning. Where does this take me?

INDECENCIA focuses on the intricacies of the unorthodox concepts developed by Marcella Althaus-Reid (1952–2009) in her *Indecent Theology* (2000)—departing from Liberation and feminist theologies—as well as on the decolonial theory of Walter D. Mignolo. The meaning of the indecent in Althaus-Reid’s case is that which refuses to be policed. It similarly addresses the complexities involved in what Mignolo describes as “the idea of Latin America,” the title of one of his works.³ Who is included or excluded in this colonial and post-colonial enterprise? To this end, Mignolo explains how “the concept of ‘Latinidad,’ and identity asserted by the French and adopted by Creole elites to define themselves, would ultimately function both to rank them below Anglo Americans and, yet, to erase and demote the identities of Indians [*sic*] and Afro-South Americans ... [and Caribbean and Centro Americanas/os/es] ...”⁴ This raises questions that go beyond a mere search for the meaning of the idea of Latin/x America and Latinidad/Latinxidad, with all of the cul-de-sacs that can be encountered. It leads, rather, into the rara/o/e, weird, and queer praxis of everyday life and art-making in a location where, for many, the colonized and the colonizer—Columbus’s bastard offspring—often struggle, kick and punch, pull and push within a single body-mind-spirit. On the other hand, *INDECENCIA* remains aware of positions that argue for the potentialities imbued in Latinidad/Latinxidad as a force that can potentially unite-ignite, for social justice and political purposes, pan-Lantina/o/e/x groups representative of the most dissimilar backgrounds, yet sharing similar histories of European colonization and U.S. imperialism. And this is where theologizing without

² Latinxidad is my own neologism. Also, raro is my own translation of queer in Spanish. Raro means strange, weird, unusual ...

³ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

underwear, bringing rosaries into the lesbian bar, or talking about God while having sex with the “wrong” partner—performing the sacred with the forbidden—can turn into quite indecent and liberatory projects.

According to Althaus-Reid, “An indecent theologian ... [and I would say a Latina/o/e/x artist also] ... has many passports because she is a theologian in diaspora, that is, a theologian who explores at the crossroads of Christianity ... [or other systems] ... issues of self-identity and the identity of her community, which are related to sexuality, race, culture and poverty.”⁵ This statement reveals not only Althaus-Reid’s intersectional approach to her main fields of scholarship, but also a clear understanding of the interdependency of the elements informing the development of Latin America from colonization to corporatization. Moreover, Althaus-Reid’s project of queering the heterosexual and heteronormative God and theology of the European colonizer exposes the heterosexual and heteronormative Gods and theologies that are part of the patriarchal Grand Narratives of the so-called “New World” and how they have come to permeate almost every aspect of life, including the arts. But enough of foreplay, I would like to move into the artworks and artists.

It useful to approach “the sense of brown”⁶ that most anything Latin/Latinx American seems to conjure in the white U.S. American imaginary, by traveling to the tropics with Félix González Torres.⁷ *Rust, dreams on an ice bed* is an action in the manner of the hedonistic ritual that the millions of souls who descend on the Caribbean for sex, warmth, and all-inclusive meals and drinks enact day after day—but this time the ritual is meant to be carried out by a local, González Torres himself. Published in 1982 in *High Performance Magazine*, *Rust, dreams on an ice bed* narrativizes an action by González Torres and Aleida Amador at Casa Aboy in Santurce, Puerto Rico, on January 23, 1982, entitled *Óxido, sueño sobre una cama de hielo*. The performance references the exoticization of body/place so pervasive in conversations about the Caribbean, and it includes slides, a TV, vacation accessories (such as suntan lotion), and 800 pounds of ice on which the male performer rests. Just like memories of the island, the ice quickly melts

⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.

⁶ See José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁷ *Ibid.*

in the sweltering heat of the tropics. Charles Rice-González's script for *El Yunque* (2002), named after the legendary rainforest in Puerto Rico and put to movement by Arthur Avilés, narrates the itinerary of a person of color traveling from the South Bronx to the Caribbean island of Borinquen. The story suggests an introspective journey into self-recognition: Brick, a man from the so-called "inner city" returns to the paradise of his origins, guided by a mythical but very real character named Taíno. This quasi-homoerotic journey results in healing for the traveler. These two separate gestures, by González Torres and Rice-González respectively, prove to be ideal points of entry into the Otherness that performance art and the Latina/o/e/x body elicit in several of the works in *INDECENCIA*; into what José Esteban Muñoz describes, in *The Sense of Brown* (2020), as a commons that includes "peoples, places feelings, sounds, animals, minerals, flora and other objects."⁸ Yet this brownness, Esteban Muñoz continues, is not just about a self-sufficient organism; it is also about movement and contact and what they can kindle in the world.

Contact might spell touch by default. However, it tacitly encompasses all other senses that mix and mingle, such as those highlighted by the tongue. There is the phallic burrito that Nao Bustamante precariously straps to her crotch in *Indigurrito* (1992) in order to entice white men to perform a rite of contrition, on their knees, as they take a bite and ask for forgiveness for their retroactive complicity in the colonization of the Americas. The eating in Félix González Torres's "*Untitled*" (*Waldheim to the Pope*) (1989) must happen by invitation—as in the symbolic cannibalistic act of consuming the body of Christ, enacted by Kurt Waldheim, an individual connected to Nazism, whom the Pope absolved by allowing him to partake of the Catholic ritual of Communion.⁹ I am wondering as to the connection between eating and kneeling. Who gets to commune and who is excommunicated? Carlos Martiel's *Encomienda* (2018) complicates this. The performer's nude Black body genuflects in front of a map of "America" in an act that I would say defies the hermeneutics of Christianity with regard to the hierarchies of

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ While central to *INDECENCIA*, *Untitled (Waldheim to the Pope)* could not be included in the exhibition due to the high cost of securing this limited editioned piece within the gallery space. The curator decided the funds should be allocated to supporting artists rather than to guarding a costly work of art.

forgiving and forgiveness, of who forgives and who is forgiven, and also with regard to where the possibility of reparation might reside in this confrontational exchange. “When the first and second generations of Creoles of European descent in what are today the two Americas, Latin and Anglo, came into power,” Mignolo writes, “the Creoles appropriated the name of the continent for themselves, labeling themselves ‘Americans or ‘Americanos.’ Indians and Blacks were definitely put out of the game.”¹⁰ Where do BIPOC bodies fit within the two Americas? And more so, within U.S. American exclusionary and racialized borderlands and territorial booty?

The quandary of who is included or excluded from the Latin/x American project—which I see as the image of a wicker basket that, once its fibers start to be pulled out, can easily unravel completely—pertains as well to the politics, religions, and sexualities that have shaped this undertaking. In *Gone with AIDS* (1989), Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis (Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas) forgo any invitation to stage their own indecent but perhaps more faithful and compassionate rendition of the Christian Last Supper. Their photo-performance pays homage to a series of cultural figures as the artists dress in some clothing of friends who succumbed to the stigmatized virus. Otherness in Marga Gomez comes up through a Mojito’s mishandling by a white hostess who uses vodka to avoid the Caribbean darkness that rum would otherwise impart to the drink. In Gomez’s *Miami Waitress*, excerpted from her *Spanking Machine* (2021), brownness emerges through language as well as the “ethnic” features of the monologue’s fictional waitress, a menu’s Caribbean food items, and the two middle-aged queer characters that the plot centers on, Scotty and Marga. Scotty, the first boy Marga kissed, takes her to a Cuban restaurant in Miami much later in life—as middle age adults—where they recall personal memories in the midst of flan, guava treats, yuca, and tostones. Scotty tells a story dealing with Devil Dogs, confession, and his chocolate allergy. Iván Monforte expands the scope of brown further by demanding, in his 2016 response to Zoe Leonard’s 1992 poem “I Want a Dyke for President,” how he wants “...a goth Mexican for a

¹⁰ Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 21–22.

president... and whose great grandfather was mono-lingual Mayan and planted his own food according to the positions of the stars and the moon in the sky.”¹¹

“Yes, We Have No Bananas.”¹² Although food is one of the main staples in Carmelita Tropicana’s repertoire, I would like to look at three of her items in *INDECENCIA* that speak to me of the body, religion, sexuality, and politics in inseparable ways. There is the dog collar, usually associated with ownership, domination-submission, and restraint; the toilet plunger, signaling the tight connection between eating and elimination, as well as the hyper-consumption and disposal so palpable in capitalism; and finally, there is the whip, an instrument of punishment and torture that also points to the erotic realm, hence blurring the line between pain and pleasure. In some Catholic mysticism, the whip has been associated with self-flagellation as a way of transcending the body—unlike in performance art, which is so much about embodiment. The plunger in Tropicana’s piece is actually an homage to Jack Smith, the father of the U.S. American avant-garde; the collar traces to José Esteban Muñoz and his dog Lady Bully; and the whip was a gift from Juan Pablo Ballester, relating to Tropicana’s piece on Sor Juna Inés de la Cruz, a visionary woman who, according to Tropicana, was “not a mystic, but one whose poems to Maria Luisa, a Vicereine, can be interpreted as S&M love poems.”¹³

Coco Fusco talks about how, “whether to escape the strictures of the art market, the break with the tradition of contemplative objects, to explore extreme behavior ... performance art is almost invariably centered on the artist’s body.”¹⁴ This translates into any conversation regarding Latinidad/Latinidad and issues of race, colorism, nationality, and citizenship. If Latinidad is based on language, imposed religion, shared histories of colonization, and experiences of U.S. imperialism and territorial land grabbing, then I have to ponder whether this could include Haiti, the Philippines, and Martinique, to name a few former colonial outposts, now nations. I must also ponder the copyright to “Americanness,” which the U.S. has usurped from other nations in the region—not that

¹¹ Monforte’s delivered his “Para Santiago y Alicia” as a performance presented on the Highline in New York.

¹² See Alina Troyano, *I, Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*, ed. Chon A. Noreiga (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 10.

¹³ Carmelita Tropicana, email to author, June 18, 2022. Tropicana discussed with me the meaning of each one of these props and how they came to be.

¹⁴ Coco Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

this is necessarily worth reclaiming in the decolonization process. “Americanity and coloniality are mutually imbricated from the beginning ... [and, I would say, might always remain inseparable].”¹⁵ Anyway, and after all, Quisqueya—what is now called the Dominican Republic—is where this whole thing—this big tolo called America—started spreading out from in 1492.¹⁶

Althaus-Reid delves deep into the problem that idols possessed for the colonizer. They could not be duplicated in the capitalistic fashion that Christianity spearheaded. “If *zemis* were a praxis, then what sort of queer practice did they facilitate?”¹⁷ The problem of the true God as opposed to First Nation “idols” was for colonizers to solve. One of Jesusa Rodríguez’s and Liliana Felipe’s influential works in *INDECENCIA* consists of their interpretation of a dress for a performance involving Cōātlīcue, the fearsome Aztec goddess of agriculture and childbirth. Rodríguez and Felipe’s dress is part of *Cabaret prehispánico: el ombligo de las diosas* (2005), a video in the show that speaks of the fight for corn, a most pivotal food in the Americas, which capitalism has genetically engineered, much like duplicatable sacred images of Christianity.¹⁸

The body continues through this essay and exhibition in the form of other praxis-based works, as opposed to objects of adoration-marketing-contemplation. Nina Terra, in a video directed by Anna Costa e Silva, releases guttural vocals that render the language of the colonizers and empire obsolete. Their videos *Experimentos de Retorno* (2021) and *Tremor Tentativa* (2021) are, more than performed, lived, in a waterfall near Rio de Janeiro. Susana Cook’s *Homerun* (2002) turns her into a storefront church activist, or *trovadora*, who humorously addresses “Americanness.” She asks her audience for their Social Security numbers and speaks of baseball, said to have its origins in the fields of the Caribbean islands inhabited by the Taíno/o/es, and not in monstrous concrete U.S. American stadiums. Jean Ulrick Désert, in *The Passion* (2006), puts to the test the consumerist-factionalist-nationalist (and at times, ultra-nationalist) culture surrounding corporate soccer and its temples (stadiums) with an installation originally presented in

¹⁵ Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 47.

¹⁶ In Dominican vernacular Spanish, *tollo* means mess.

¹⁷ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 155.

¹⁸ Unfortunately, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art was not able to borrow Cōātlīcue’s dress due to funding constrains. However, this piece remains central to *INDECENCIA*.

Germany, where museum visitors were invited to use an array of white costumes to pose in front of the camera for individual and group portraits. The resulting memento mori are devoid of any logos, insignia, or flags linking the subjects to a specific team or country. Although the use of white clothing in this piece seems to do away with color, it actually brings attention back to white and whiteness and thereby default mis-association with purity, cleanliness, fairness, colorlessness, goodness, clarity ... For *INDECENCIA*, Désert's photographs are arranged in rows, resembling a ghostly crowd of eerie spectators or fans. Arthur Avilés, can you take me through your *x* dance prop and arch?

One of my hesitations about the Latinx term, or what I call Latinidad, is the unstated expectation that it can potentially solve everything and bring the debacle to a happy ending. I understand the use of *x* as an affirmation that can do away with gender binaries, yet I continue to question the inherent colonial-imperial strands that the term Latinx might still carry in its DNA, which may not be possible to excise unless there is constant vigilance. Mignolo talks about “‘invention’ ... not just as a different interpretation but a move to decolonize imperial knowledge.”¹⁹ I would add to this, *to render this imperial knowledge indecent*. In the midst of all this self-questioning, the title of one of Avilés's works wins my heart: *Puerto Rican Faggot from the South Bronx Steals Precious Object from Giuliani's East Village* (1999). (Avilés has also performed a different work, *Puerto Rican Faggot from America* [1996].) Now, can the rustic wooden cross that he used in *Untitled #1 After Martha Graham* (1994)—his boogie down enactment of one of Graham's pieces—be seen as the *x* in Latinx, and, perhaps, a repurposed cross? Does this *x* function as an occupied and reclaimed symbol of oppression turned into one of liberation? Mignolo writes: “Thus, for the *imperial imaginary*, ‘Latin’ Americans are second-class Europeans while Latinos/as are second-class American citizens. In short, ‘Latinidad,’ from its very inception in the nineteenth century, was an ideology for the colonization of being of Latinos/as are now clearly turning into a decolonization project.”²⁰

INDENCENIA purposefully complicates things by way of its roster of artists, comprised of individuals and collectives from both Americas, the Latina and the Anglo,

¹⁹ Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

with some also living in Europe, or with connections to Haiti and the Philippines. Some of these artists trace their roots to a myriad of places—to Africa, or to the very here of Turtle Island, to before America and Latinidad existed. In videos directed by Noelia Quintero and featuring vocalist, performance artist, and writer Rita Indiana, the body is approached via mediatized channels reminiscent of MTV in the 1980s. The videos in question reanimate the activisms that have characterized Latin America and its peoples' opposition to dictators and revindication of students' rights, for example. In *El Juidero* (2020), the central theme is the assassination of journalist Orlando Martínez during the dictatorship of President Joaquín Balaguer of the Dominican Republic, who was backed by the Anglo American political apparatus. The video ends with a faster version of the crucifixion: a smoking gun. Mission accomplished. A Dominican silver coin drops on the pavement, showing the outline of an “Indian” head—an image of the first victim of a system that kicked off in 1492 and continues.

Nadia Granados (La Fulminante) goes deep into capitalism and the most recent dismemberment of democracy in Latin America through videos such as *La gasolina* (2008). Lip-synching to Daddy Yankee's “Gasolina” (2004), Granados dismantles the reference to semen or cum, which Daddy Yankee equates, it seems, to the combustible. Granados instead calls it for what it is—the equivalent to blood in U.S. market democracy and its involvement in the Middle East. *Candela* (1988) is the collaborative endeavor of Carmelita Tropicana (playwright), Ela Troyano (director of photography and editor), and Uzi Parnes (director, production designer, and editor). Tropicana plays a tropicanette at the glamorous Tropicana Night Club in Havana, where she also deals with the mafias of Cuba and Las Vegas. The film's images of Latin America, as remembered, seen, interpreted, experienced, and embodied by Latina/os/es/x living in the U.S., are, as in *Candela*, worth noting. I remain attentive to the shape-shifting that this looking back can generate in what Mignolo humorously describes as “(The pear-shaped form plus the stem connecting Mexico).”²¹

²¹ Ibid.,10.

“Is theology the art of putting the hands under the skirts of God?”²² Perhaps this is the idoneous moment to bring Althaus-Reid and Mignolo into conversation, since the darkness inside the intimate garment might be the site wherein reside, in *Latinidad*, silences and gaps that have for centuries been pushed aside, forcefully hidden. This hideaway being a safety mechanism, a closet, or even both at once, the false heaven where the corrupt and the victimized have, for different reasons, concealed the Black, Blackness, the “Indian,” the queer, the idolatrous, the Earth worshiper, the dissenter, the scandalous, the rebellious, the brown goddesses ... and on and on—anything that does not fit the decency that colonization and empire tout under the guise of salvation. The performance *Épreuve d’artiste* (1982), Carlos Leppe’s occupation of a museum’s bathroom as part of the Twelfth Paris Biennale, stretches the limits of the dissenting body, and of bodies in general, as well as society’s tolerance. Leppe’s piece happens outside of Chile, then under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. In *Épreuve d’artiste*, the artist works with Juan Domingo Dávila and Manuel Cárdenas in an action involving washing, undressing, cross-dressing, eating, and vomiting in a space customarily understood as private, but also as hosting activities that must remain out of sight, a space associated with homosexual encounters and transgression.

Through dance, Luis A. moves across the world as a brown, third-class citizen, a Latinx body who employs masks, wigs, and costumes to query otherness and whose “metamorphosis, transformation, change, and multiplicity are ways of disguising and becoming.”²³ Luis A.’s *cosa* (2022), from the series *Morphylactic*, goes beyond stretching the body, to instead crumble it into textured parts that hang and drip onto the floor, as if to turn the process of giving answers into an inside-out somatic revelation. For the performance *Psychic Gold* (2015), Gigi Otálvaro Hormillosa invites a roster of guests, from Sigmund Freud to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, for a dialogue on “female” masculinities. “Can the artist justify her desire for women by turning herself into a man?” Hormillosa asks herself in one of the vignettes, archived in a group of photographs by Robbie Sweeny. What do theology and colonization have to do with all these dissonant

²² Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 99.

²³ Luis A.’s words in his statement.

bodies? According to Althaus-Reid, it was not so much a spiritual conversion that the history of colonization in Latin America sought to achieve, but a replication of the affective patterns of the colonizer.²⁴

What happens when God's skirts are lifted up, and what is exposed? Arantxa Araujo's *Mi Cuerpa* (2022) sheds light on the politics not only of God's garments but of women's bodies. She/they places an unfertilized egg in a monstrance, giving shape to Althaus-Reid's poignant statement that "theology has been and remains a sexual praxis."²⁵ Moreover, Althaus-Reid sees theology as a sexual project, circling back to the idea of colonization being so much about the control of "barbarian" bodies. There is a relevant dialogue happening across time, between *Mi Cuerpa* and Althaus-Reid's introduction to *The Queer God*, published almost two decades earlier, in 2003. Araujo asks: "Who decides who I choose to love?" Althaus-Reid's response is: "You are thinking about religion and courage and you go to the salsa bar where a Latina may be friendly to you. But then, torn between love and rosaries, you may wonder what life would be if you were to love her."²⁶ *Mi Cuerpa* just goes ahead and tries it. Elizabeth Marrero, in video documentation of *CUNTOLOGY 101* (2003) a lecture on the vagina that is part of her *Macha Monologues*, interjects loudly by pointing assuredly, with the tip of an umbrella, to a slide projection of the wide-open female organ: *God came out of here!*

The cosmic orifice in Marrero's cabaret opens the dialogue into Mignolo's more terrestrial colonial wound. I therefore borrow Marrero's umbrella and Mignolo's theories, and I make my own slide of the two Americas that actually centers on a third space, the colonial wound. This colonial wound, like Latinidad, sheds light on "a pluriversity of paradigms that are no longer subsumable under the linear history of Western thought, managed as a totality from imperial institutions that control meaning ... [bodies] ... and money."²⁷ Within this wound, I see how the artists in *INDECENCIA* have been foretelling a future already being birthed in the present, with complete irreverence for colonial and imperial decency. And inspired by Mignolo, I ask: What After America?

²⁴ Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, *The Sexual Theologian*, 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 1.

²⁷ Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 156.

After the two Americas? “After ‘Latin’ America”? Latinidad? And yes, after Latinidad?²⁸

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This text was written on the occasion of INDECENCIA, an exhibition curated by Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful Espejo Ovalles, at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York, September 16, 2022-January 15, 2023.

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