
A GOD AT THE MARGINS?: MARCELLA ALTHAUS-REID AND THE MARGINALITY OF LGBT PEOPLE

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Abstract: This essay contends that bodies are sites of epistemological significance. Bodies are theologically revelatory. God is revealed in and among the bodies of strangers, persons and communities at odds with ideologies of the center. Center ideologies chronically betray embodied discourses of sexual ambivalence in favor of an idealized heterosexuality that abstracts bodies into decent and indecent categories, such as normalcy and deviance, sanctified morality and taboo misbehavior, or the saved versus the damned. What would this marginal God who is revealed among the deviant and the damned look like? How would this stranger God who walks amidst the queer and the poor bring us to see ourselves? A Queer reading of the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19:1-38 is the vehicle for this enquiry, using the figure of Lot's wife as a lens through whom to experience the critical epistemology within a hermeneutical turn to the body.

*"When it is said that theological practices do not come from heaven, I agree. In fact, I think they come from the theologians' own bedrooms, which also means from the theologians' own closets."*¹

"Remember Lot's wife." Luke 17:32

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Marcella María Althaus-Reid, Ph.D. (1952 – 2009), Professor of Contextual Theology, New College, The University of Edinburgh.

¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," *The Sexual Theologian: Essays of Sex, God and Politics*, eds. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 106.

Since René Descartes locked himself in a hot oven over 300 years ago, Cartesian epistemological assumptions dividing human beings into *res cogitans* (“mind-stuff”) and *res extensa* (“stuff-that-can-be-measured”) remained largely unchallenged by disciplinary theology. In the early twentieth century, the founder of Clinical Pastoral Education, Anton Boison, began to understand the human person as a “living human document.”² Professor Charles V. Gerkin continued the hermeneutical theme in pastoral theology with *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*.³ An epistemological strategy was born: the hermeneutical turn toward the body. The image of a human life as a book that could be read and studied remains of interest today. As William Schmidt points out, however, psychology in its reductionist forms blocked theoretical psychology from adopting a more holistic account of human being.⁴ The human body as living document or book was thus relegated to the professional schools, especially seminaries.

In contrast to the disembodied theologies of old and center, this essay aims to establish that bodies are indeed theologically revelatory, that God may indeed be revealed in and among the bodies of strangers, persons and communities at odds with ideologies of the center. After brief description of the epistemic tension, the constructive contribution of this essay unfolds in three phases. A decentering method of reading Scripture is articulated. An exegesis of the text of Lot’s wife amidst Sodom and Gomorrah becomes a project of queer theology through a decentering reading and an indecent analysis. Lastly, potential lessons of such a hermeneutical turn to the body will be offered, inspired by Scripture and its select interpreters—contemporary, stripper-bar

² William S. Schmidt, “What Can It Mean To Know?” *Pastoral Psychology*, 34(2) (Winter 1985): 122-131.

³ Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

⁴ Schmidt, 122.

sodomites most violated by the text in question—who are given new voice and suggest new revelation across the dichotomies of center/edge in theological discourse.

The Hermeneutical Turn to the Body:

Origins and Conflicts

The hermeneutical turn toward the body draws its origins and conflicts from a much earlier time in the ancient Near East. Inscribing truth on the “fleshy tables of the heart” rather than on stone tablets or scrolls of papyrus is as venerable as the words of the Prophet Jeremiah in chapter 31, and the claims of the Apostle Paul in Romans 2.⁵ The law written in the meat, in the flesh, in the heart, has an immediacy and authenticity that externalized media do not. The living word, inscribed in the body, brings life, unlike the eponymous dead letter. The conflicts are seen in the well-established spirit-flesh dichotomy at the core of Christian tradition, suggesting an on-going suspicion of the body as a site of revelation. *Spirit*, pure and untroubled by the untidiness of historical bodily existence, is divine. *Flesh*, the seat of the desires and decay, is at odds with the dictates of the spirit. Spirit is of heaven. Flesh, or meat, is of the earth. It is secular, profane, uncomfortably if vaguely indecent. None other than the Fourth Gospel, which announces the Incarnation in its prologue, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us,”⁶ has Jesus, the incarnate one, discoursing on the ambivalence of Christian orthodoxy toward the body. The body is not only the site of incarnational grace and truth. It is also the seat of a will at odds with God. Nicodemus proposes that the new birth must be some sort of gynecological monstrosity (“Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”). Jesus sets Nicodemus straight, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must

⁵ Jeremiah 31:33-34, and Romans 2:14-16. All scriptural citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise specified.

⁶ John 1:14.

be born from above.”⁷ Fleshy origins and enfleshed ambiguities abound.

This uncomfortable, vague sense that the body is an epistemological problem to be solved exercises a near-planetary pull on the way knowledge of the body is construed and constructed in Christian theology. Western Christian thought has constructed social and individual bodies available to its interests, interests that are to this day dominated by patriarchy, hierarchy, and androcentrism, specifically white heterosexual androcentrism. There were many theologies of the body, but to this day all of them share a unidirectional approach hallmarked by what theology has to say to and about the body, not *vice versa*—not from the body to theological understanding. Notable among Roman Catholic efforts is the theological enterprise promulgated by Pope John Paul II under the title, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*.⁸ On the Protestant side, the tendency has been to take flesh and blood and turn them into thought. Instead of being honored as a living document, the human body is here reduced to an artifact, produced and analyzed by somebody.

Even so, Protestant theologians are mostly mum about the body. For example, in the recent book by the estimable German theologian, Gerhard Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads: How To Face the Crucial Tasks of Theology for the 21st Century*,⁹ the body or human sexuality warrants no mention. Instead, Sauter takes “contextual theologies” to task for appealing to “experiences.” In his chapter on “Eschatological Rationality,” he writes:

If ecumenical discussion is confined to [particular] experiences, referring only secondarily to the Bible and, perhaps, marginally, to confessional doctrinal

⁷ John 3:4, 6-7.

⁸ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997).

⁹ Gerhard Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads: How To Face the Crucial Tasks of Theology for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

traditions, how is the theological significance of these experiences to be assessed? How are we to distill from historical experiences theological insights which are important not just to one theologian or group of Christians, but to the whole Christian world family?¹⁰

Apparently, experiences and the matter out of which they and their history arise do not matter theologically. Sauter's systematic framework does not permit him to engage one of the hottest topics facing his tradition in the twenty-first century, namely God and bodies, social and individual. Protestant theology has orphaned the body, and assumed that ethics is the proper nanny to see to it. Bodies and experiences have to do with situations, and situations have to do with practical theology and ethics, the swampy no-man's-land of theological disciplines.¹¹ "Experiences," according to Sauter, have to do with hurly-burly choices, not important ideas.

The late twentieth century saw the emergence of a series of contextual theologies basing their protests on the experiences of women, racial/ethnic minorities, non-First World populations, and the poor, but each of them struggled to break the epistemological grip of this center of meaning, manifested in the primal center/edge dichotomy. Even the advent of gay and lesbian theologies in the years following the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 railed against the heterosexism and homophobia of "the system" without substantially subverting the hermeneutics of the center. Liberation theologies of all stripes wrestled with what to do with the center—displace it, overthrow it, or merely replace it with a new center of knowledge production and power? Hermeneutically, these theologies were repeating

¹⁰ Sauter, 57.

¹¹ Notwithstanding the work of world-class theologians such as the systematician Edward Farley, who late in his career esteemed the field of practical theology and ethics enough to dedicate one of his most widely appreciated books to it, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

themselves over and over again, without what Elizabeth Stuart called the “critical difference” necessary to prepare for something far more radical than what had gone on before.¹² Professor James Nelson summed up the problem as abstract transcendentalism, attaching it perceptively to a set of male ideological presuppositions that made it hard even for him to escape to a different theological venue. Males were alienated from the body by an abstract epistemology that squelched any chance that revelation might come from human bodily experience. He wrote, “[Male alienation from the body] leads us into abstracting ourselves from the bodily concreteness and reality of others. My abstractions lure me into an exaggerated, often violent sense of reality. They entice me to lose the concreteness of the present.”¹³ The flesh-and-blood realities of women with problem pregnancies and the sufferings of bashed gay youths, for example, recede into abstract ethical cases, or as one colleague of mine has suggested, “rubber dog droppings,” an odorless simulacrum of reality.

In contrast, Monty Python’s Mr. Blackitt, replete with a crusty candor in *The Meaning of Life*, begs a shocked smile over and against the strange bodilessness of modern Protestant theologies of the body. The Blackitts, dour Anglicans in Yorkshire, are witnessing the sad sight of their Catholic neighbors marching their multitude of children off for medical experiments in order to raise money to have more children. Mr. Blackitt turns to Mrs. Blackitt and gives his discursus on human sexuality and Protestant faith:

Mr. Blackitt: Because we don’t believe in all that
Papist claptrap we can take precautions.

Mrs. Blackitt: What, you mean lock the door...?

Mr. Blackitt: No no, I mean, because we are members
of the Protestant Reformed Church which

¹² See Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003).

¹³ James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 115-116.

successfully challenged the autocratic power of the Papacy in the mid-sixteenth century, we can wear little rubber devices to prevent issue....That's what being a Protestant's all about. That's why it's the church for me. That's why it's the church for anyone who respects the individual and the individual's right to decide for him or herself. When Martin Luther nailed his protest up to the church door in 1517, he may not have realised the full significance of what he was doing. But four hundred years later, thanks to him, my dear, I can wear whatever I want on my John Thomas. And Protestantism doesn't stop at the simple condom. Oh no! I can wear French Ticklers if I want.¹⁴

In sum, only prelates and *patres familias* have anything worthwhile to say about Protestant and Catholic theologies of the body. Most deem nothing revelatory about bodies or bodily experiences, and nothing in the discourse questions the reigning heterosexual ideology, much less decenters it.

The primal center/edge dichotomy today remains unchallenged. *Spirit*, which Western epistemologies use as a smokescreen for patriarchy and white heterosexual ideology, is favored at the center. It may nominate "thought," or "the will of God," or "transcendence," or the "rational principle." It is generally perceived to be ahistorical, antiseptic, removed from nature, impassive, stable, orderly, and serious. In a show of beneficence, the center may even deign to travel out to the margins where the meat is, in an act of missionary inclusion, but this move is clearly colonial in its intent, serving in the end to reinforce the superiority of the unitive center. *Flesh* is exiled to the margins. Whereas *spirit* at the center is *sui generis*, a priori, *flesh* at the margins is a posteriori, ad hoc, irrational, unstable, utterly derivative, and ultimately frivolous. *Spirit* is essential. *Flesh* is extra. The *spirit*

¹⁴ Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, written by Graham Chapman, et. al., (1983). Script accessed at http://sfy.ru/sfy.html?script=mp_meanlife on March 21, 2009.

reveals. It is the revelatory principle. The body, or *flesh*, is meat—dead meat in the end. In the scheme of Western epistemologies, then, all fleshy revelation can do is draw its significance from the spirit-center, and affirm the revelatory power of the true seat of theological gravity.

The Call for Epistemological Rebellion: Foucault, Sedgwick, Althaus-Reid

Michel Foucault has famously said that the invention of the homosexual by the medico-political régime of the nineteenth century created a new species. Whereas the sodomite was once a role and a set of sexual and cultural practices—“a temporary aberration” of the soul—the homosexual became an utterly sexualized type of person in whom the masculine and the feminine were inverted in a particular way.¹⁵

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pioneered the epistemology of this species. She identified the fractured definitional crisis of the closet as the oppressive social realities in which gays and lesbians interact with the dominant heterosexual matrix, and sought it out as an epistemological fault line for all of Western culture’s ways of knowing and constructing meaning. Homo/heterosexual definitions are endemically locked together in constative and performative ways, in articulations and silences. The place to begin this critical epistemology, she argued, was “from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory.”¹⁶ The purpose of such an epistemology, she wrote, was to “understand better the structuring, the mechanisms and the immense consequences of the incoherent dispensation under which we now live.”¹⁷ What she showed was that homosexuality is an ambiguous, unstable, incoherent identity. The implications for the

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 43.

¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁷ Kosofsky Sedgwick, 91.

companion identity we call “heterosexuality,” which as Jonathan Ned Katz has shown is dependent on the former for its invention,¹⁸ are obvious and mindboggling.

The anxious questioning about who is and who is not homosexual since the nineteenth century has not only poisoned the Western mind. It has also had terrible concrete consequences for gay men in Europe and North America who have suffered from these outrages. Under the cloak of abstraction that pretended objectivity, the modern, masculine ideological agenda acted to rob gays of their autonomy and their agency to name their own sexualities. With passion, Sedgwick wrote:

To alienate conclusively, definitionally, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence possible.¹⁹

Turning toward the body hermeneutically is therefore an act of epistemological and redemptive rebellion. It exposes the veiled oppressive agenda of centuries of knowledge production made captive to the tyranny of the unitive center. Theology’s ties to sexual, class, and economic domination strategies are laid bare for all to see. Its underwear is pulled down to expose the genitalia. As Professor Marcella Althaus-Reid might say, the turn toward the body in all of its sexual excess, impoverishment, and concreteness is an indecent exposure.²⁰ Turning toward the body is a theological obscenity necessary to shock theology and all the superstructures it supports out of the ceaselessly repeating oscillations that draw women, gay folk, transgender people, and the poor into a vortex of

¹⁸ Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton Books, 1995).

¹⁹ Kosofsky Sedgwick, 26.

²⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 87-124.

abstraction and captivity. One might say that it is a suicidal act of indecency disregarding all threats and warnings, much like the choice Lot's wife made to turn back toward Sodom.²¹

A Decentering and Indecent Exegesis— Method, Analysis, Lessons

What if we were to read the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah indecently as if it were passed along by rumor in a gay bar? Or better yet, what if a Hetero-Pope or Televangelist showed up undercover in this same bar full of gay men in order to commune with a different reality from his own, and listened in as these queer folk retold this story in their own voices? How would hermeneutic centers and margins look through the lenses of these strangers alienated from the patriarchal God, strangers who have a particularly strong investment in how queer sexual theology is done in dialogue with the Sodom and Gomorrah story? The constructive contribution of this essay may now unfold in tripart form: to articulate a decentering method of reading Scripture; to model a project of queer theology in decentered and indecent exegesis; and to refine potential lessons of the hermeneutical turn to the body inspired by Scripture and its select interpreters given new voice across center/edge dichotomies: contemporary, stripper-bar sodomites most violated by the text in question.

A decentering method of reading Scripture in dialogue with the sexual stories of the outcasts and the sexually ambivalent is the right place to begin a queer reading of this brutal story. Althaus-Reid offers us such a method in two basic hermeneutical movements: 1) a deconstructionist pattern loosely based on the work of Derrida; and 2) further queering of these deconstructive readings of Scripture. Though evidences of Althaus-Reid's vocation as a Latin American liberationist theologian are clear to see in her hermeneutical method, her materialist queerness is the critical difference that

²¹ Genesis 19:26.

stamps her reading strategy with the image and likeness of the Queer God.²² This text will be engaged in Althaus-Reid's two-steps before engaging in the analysis and suggesting preliminary lessons for consideration.

1) *Basic Deconstructionist Steps in her method:*

- Discernment of story elements that stand in some sort of opposition to characteristics of heterosexist thought, for example, features of the story that resist or subvert dyadic, patriarchal structures.
- Once these binaries are located, the relationships among the elements in the story need to be “inverted, dispersed and disrupted.”²³ Look for queer experiences such as denigration, since these terms are essential to the oppressive relationships that establish heterosexist control over texts and people. For example, “slaves make the master; women make men; women make God the Father; Queers make straights; sinners make ‘the saved.’”²⁴
- The interpreter then returns to the text to re-discern how the difference of the other is produced.

Queer interpretation of Genesis 19:1-38 begins by asking the question, “Why was this story told and written down in the first place? Whose purposes does it serve, and why?” This is a story of denigration based on powerful center/edge politics. The Sodomites are clearly denigrated, even damned. So is Lot's wife, who gazes into the fiery Medusa, and is petrified. Accentuating her denigration, Pseudo-Tertullian suggested that her female flesh was imprisoned in salt, in effect turning her into her own tomb. Throughout time, he writes, the pillar of salt

²² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 80-85.

²³ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 80.

²⁴ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 80.

continued to menstruate.²⁵ But Lot's unmarried daughters are also debased. In vv. 30-38, the raped girls conspire to get their father drunk on two successive nights in their cave-refugee camp, and become pregnant by him. Their father-daughter incest produces two sons, Moab and Ben-ammi, the progenitors of Israel's two enemy nations to the east of the Salt Sea, Moab and Ammon. The prohibition of resident descendents of the idol-worshipping Moabites and Ammonites, even to the tenth generation, from religious participation in Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1-5), associates these children of incest with sexually mutilated men, and male bastards, the lowest of the low. This is an Israelite propagandist's wet dream, suggesting that Israel's xenophobia drove all manner of difference to the margins of damnation and political impotence. Read today from the margins of decent society instead of from the center, this is not a story that is about the 'homosexual menace'—far from it. Ask the queer folk, those most affected by this passage in the contemporary world. They are quick to tell you, it is a lethal Hate Crime text, linked to every xenophobic violent attack they know.

In *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid locates communities of strangers whose sexual stories interrupt the coherence of this xenophobic, heterosexist center of power, this inhospitable patriarchal God. First, she identifies the city of Sodom that adopted Lot's wife and her family as a "queer cultural site." She writes, "It is interesting to notice that little has been said of the Sodomites as people with a particular and respectable sexual culture and tradition. By doing that, biblical hermeneuticians have been systematically straightening Sodom, that is, eliminating agency from sexuality."²⁶ Queer hermeneutics looks directly to the sexual stories and praxis of denigrated people in order to disrupt an otherwise

²⁵ Latin poet Pseudo-Tertullian, *Sodoma*. Sarah Horrall, "Lot's Wife," *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 464.

²⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 85.

coherent heterosexist xenophobia. In this case, the *via rupta* leads the reader to defy sexual homogeneity and the politics that support it by the sexual ambivalence of the Sodomites. Varieties of sexual practices found a home in Sodom, as well as strangers from the hill country of Canaan. Aliens were incorporated into Sodomite society without robbing them of their agency, and if the legends surrounding Lot's wife's family hold even a kernel of truth, alien women were welcomed sexually to wed and find pleasure there. The center/edge hermeneutic of the exclusive God interprets the culture of Sodom as wicked beyond all accounting. But the hospitality of the Sodomites to varieties of people and their sexual practices in stark contrast to the juvenile intolerance of the God of Lot and Abraham is a hard bit of walnut shell disrupting an otherwise delicious Hershey-Bar of a text. Ideological teeth break over such stubborn story elements as this. The God of the queers, the "Queer God," if you will, had made a variety of sexual practices, spiritualities, and politics welcome in Sodom, much as the town square was open to anyone to pitch a tent and find refuge.²⁷ The patriarchal God, on the other hand, has none of the milk of human kindness in him and executes a "mini-genocide" against every man, woman, child, infant, animal, bird, and bug, for lack of ten ideologically puritan men!²⁸

The violence of the Sodom and Gomorrah story is a given, and on all sides it is reprehensible to modern sensibilities. But it changes the whole politics of the narrative when one considers that Lot may have been the one who transgressed the hospitality customs of Sodom by taking guests into his own home, rather than the other way around. The damned Sodomite queers come off quite differently in such a story. Rather than gang-rapists lusting after angel booty, their punishable offense seems to have been not building guest rooms in their houses.

²⁷ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 84.

²⁸ Genesis 18:32.

As the holocaust consumed her old neighborhood, Lot's wife acted in defiant love. This was no lapse into nostalgia for a past going up in smoke—the stakes were too high for that. She acted as the consummate stranger when she turned to gaze full in the face of a center/edge schema that brooked no opposition, even to the point of mass murder. As a young wife, she had been a stranger to Lot's family. As an alien to Sodom, she had been a stranger in a new town, a stranger to its urban geography and customs. She became a stranger to her husband, the one who compelled her to abandon the neighborly women who baby-sat her little girls, the Sodomite families she lived next to, cheek-by-jowl, the friends she made as she hung out the wash, or chatted with on her twice-daily trips to draw water from the civic wells. And she had become alienated from the patriarchal God of her husband and his uncle Abraham to the point of defiance. Perhaps she pitied Lot's God, who was imprisoned and lost in a régime that straight-jacketed him, too; or perhaps she grew to loathe a colonial divinity who preferred to destroy what could not be dominated. Whatever the case, Lot's wife defied divine patriarchal madness for the sake of a Queer City and a Queer God she had met in its precincts. Alone and unsupported like so many other queers, she made the Sisyphean turn back toward Sodom, and with an ironic smile forming on her lips, she tasted salt.

2) *Further Necessary Queering*: Since assimilationist tendencies in biblical interpretation are so strong, continual queering needs to be done so that the concreteness of the other may resist being absorbed by a re-reading that leaves queer folk outside the stories.

- Reading in Queer solidarity means resisting teleology by using a variety of bisexual, transgender, and gay/lesbian reading strategies in tandem. Such queer strategies of reading and resistance are unhindered by concerns with eternal life that have often been used to police

how biblical texts are read (“If you want to be saved, read it this way, or else”). Queer coalitions are never docile, and often conflict with one another, but the objective here is not agreement or uniformity. Queer solidarity seeks to discern and extend the other, and stand in opposition to attempts to subjugate the other.

- Reading for incoherence, not coherence. Reading for coherence is a heterosexist strategy intent on order and stability. Queer reading is just the opposite, seeking to locate how mismatched genre, sexuality, and desire are in heterosexist, totalitarian readings of the Bible. Queer reading locates these hetero-incoherences, for example, men do not need to be fathers, nor women to be mothers, and biblical characters do not need to be sexually sanctioned in order to be created in the image and likeness of God, who, after all, is the original Queer (God desiring relationship with creatures is, after all, a pretty queer thing!).
- Location of queer sexuality in characters and communities. Where are the red-light sectors in biblical stories, that is, those actual and interpersonal geographies where sexual edge communities gather? Where are the places that deviant people congregate, where dissident sexual identities are safely expressed, or where heterosexist center language is refuted, say, as in Jesus’ meal practices with prostitutes and sinners, and in his opposition to legalism? Where and how people gather to eat and drink can be a clue.
- Refusal of interpretations that seek to ‘straighten’ sexual expressions of the other. Defiance of attempts to rob sexual agency from people and stories. Suspicion of abstractions and insistence on transcendence as a marker for holiness and/or divinity.

- Insistence on bodies as epistemological sites, and the refusal to spiritualize or essentialize sexual practices, poverty, race, and gender.

This second step of Althaus-Reid's method becomes more apparent with a brief overview of queer theology's roots in feminism, womanism, liberation theologies, all now requiring further decentering with patriarchal centrist ideological environments.

Queer theology has much in common with feminist and womanist liberation theologies. Their strategies of subversion and their option for feminine experience as a revelatory site for theology have inspired queer theologians since the 1990s. Still, feminist theologies have flirted with deposing masculine ideologies of the center with feminist ones. For all the power of the *Christa*, feminine identities have moved toward decency, and away from indecency. As David Wagner has said in *The New Temperance: The American Obsession with Sin and Vice*,²⁹ the short-lived rebellion of the 1960s gave way to the norm-making behavior regulation of the 1980s and 1990s. The result has been a localization of vice in the lower classes, especially lower class youth, and the normalization of virtue in standardized understandings of middle-class temperance.

Queering theology goes beyond the usual bounds of "decent" feminism. Like Lot's wife, it has been sequestered outside the feminist tent, as the encounter of the women's movement with the so-called Lavender Menace showed.³⁰ When sexuality moves beyond the bounds of "sanctified sex," that is, out of the sanctioned realm of dyads, and into the realms of triads, or lesbian bars, drag queens and kings, or sex work, the demand that a stable, "decent" center be reasserted kicks in with a

²⁹ David Wagner, *The New Temperance: The American Obsession with Sin and Vice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 130-134.

³⁰ "Lavender Menace" was coined in 1969 by Betty Friedan, president of the National Organization of Women, to describe the threat to the women's liberation movement posed by the Daughters of Bilitis. Friedan worried that "mannish" lesbians would endanger the push for the equal rights of middle class women.

vengeance. Queer theology cannot forget that center ideologies assume there is nothing more sinfully indecent than being a woman, unless it is being a poor woman, or being a man who acts like a woman, or being a woman who acts like a man.

Queering as an epistemological strategy reminds feminism of its radical roots, that there can be no turning back. Queer theology moves beyond middle class feminine identities, running the risks of Lot's wife for the sake of the extra, for women are always *ad extra*: something other, and something more. The sexual excess of women, the feminine *extra*, if you will, shows that though sexuality has been rendered invisible in the academy and the church, its outsider status will not be denied in anything, for, as Althaus-Reid wrote in *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, sex has to do with everything in Feminist Liberation Theology:

For every theology is always a sexual theology and it is necessary to uncover not just the gender codes but the sexual (ideological) assumptions of Christian theology, ecclesiology and the methods of theological inquiry that have pervaded our understanding of Christianity. Sexual ideologies are foundational in economic and political structures of oppression, just as they remain foundational in our understanding of ourselves and ourselves in relation to God.³¹

Thus queer method reminds Feminist Theology of its political mission, not to make a devil's pact with conservative center stability, but to quake the foundations of patriarchy in church and state as nothing else has ever done. For that reason, feminism must be continually queered. Queer theology follows Lot's wife by breaking the taboos of sexual behavior for the sake of shaking up the market system not only to set humanity free, but also

³¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings On Poverty, Sexuality, and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 4.

to liberate God from the “narrow sexual ideological confines in which God has been located.”³²

Analysis of the text—read, deconstructed, and queered in stripper-bar community—offers three main reasons for equating the project of queer theology with Lot’s wife and her suicidal act of epistemological rebellion. *First, Lot’s wife’s turn is a sexual act.* She physically turns toward the city wreathed in fire and smoke. She carries this act out with her body. Her gender makes this sexual conclusion inescapable. She was a woman. As a woman, she is deemed excessively sexual in comparison to her husband. She was, as all women are and have been *vis à vis* imperial systems, *ad extra*, that is, toward the outside, marginal. In the Genesis text, she is never named. Instead, she is “Lot’s wife”: her identity is utterly derivative. She is the “non-Lot.” Her identity depends on his identity, her story is a subset of his. Her role as mother is as the bearer of “Lot’s daughters,” not hers. She does not lead. She is led. That is the way she came to Sodom in the first place, following her husband who had departed from his uncle Abraham for the Pentapolis, the five Cities of the Plain.³³

Second, equating queer theology with the rebellious gaze of Lot’s wife back into the city of Sodom underscores both as *acts of love and defiance*. The lack of information about this ungovernable woman in Hebrew Scripture has sparked imagination for centuries.³⁴ Early Jewish legends have painted her as quarrelsome and shrewish. She grumbles at Lot for bringing home unexpected guests, and refuses them salt. In New Testament³⁵ and patristic sources, she is showcased as the type of person who turns away from salvation, refusing to give up the world. Augustine of Hippo makes a wry joke at her expense for the sake of his male readers:

³² Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 4.

³³ Genesis 13:12.

³⁴ Horrall, 464-465.

³⁵ Luke 17:31 ff.

Lot's wife, indeed, when she looked back, remained, and, being turned into salt, furnishing believing men a condiment by which to savor somewhat the warning to be drawn from the example.³⁶

But why did she turn back?

The silences of the Genesis text offer modern interpreters the opportunity to imagine her motivations just as literary sources have done. Was shrewishness enough, suggesting that she was an obstreperous cartoon instead of a real woman, someone who *never* did as she was told? The Genesis story tells us that she had two daughters,...but could she not have had more? The two daughters mentioned in Genesis 19 were unmarried, and would remain so, if the citizens of Sodom raped them as Lot's horrendous bargain to shield his guests suggests. Having sacrificed their virginity, Lot had committed himself to keep them the rest of his life, since now they were "damaged goods." At least one ancient Jewish source, however, suggests that there were other daughters, perhaps two, who had married Sodomites.³⁷ They would have stayed behind in the burning city with their husbands and children, rather than flee with Lot's household. The inhumanity of the threat to someone for even looking back on the city is made the more intolerable to any woman who had to tear herself away from her children and grandchildren without so much as a good-bye.

Her love and defiance mingle queerly, indeed! Only in relatively recent times has the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah been laid at the feet of homosexuals, making this text one of a half-dozen "clobber passages" employed to condemn same-sex behavior. Though we have the first-century Jewish theologian, Philo of Alexandria, called Judaeus, to thank for tying God's

³⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 16.30.

³⁷ Horrall, 464.

punishment to pederasty,³⁸ most early sources concur that breaking Hebrew hospitality codes rather than same-sex lust brought God's wrath down on the Cities of the Plain, including Ezekiel 16:49-50 and Matt. 10:14-15.³⁹ Xenophobia, not homosexuality, appears to be the fabled "sin of Sodom." But xenophobia on whose part?

Third, Lot's wife commits a *radical act of indecent exposure* as she turns back toward Sodom. Not only does she expose herself to the wrath of a patriarchal ideology that permits no dissent, she also exposes the genitalia of theological ideology itself. This is a radical deed of epistemological honesty. As she uncovers herself as sexual, mortal, theologically alienated, and marginal, Lot's wife also reveals the heterosexuality of the puritan theology that blasted Sodom to vapor. As Althaus-Reid wrote, "Theological virtues come with genitalia included....Our concept of God is made of our sexual experience in the world as mediated by sexual epistemologies."⁴⁰ In this way, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was a theological practice, must also be identified as a sexual practice. To label someone a "sexual theologian," then, is a redundancy. The immolation of the cities and all their inhabitants is just the flip side of salvation in this systematic theology, conceived in the bedrooms and closets of (sexual)

³⁸ See J.A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish, and Early Christian Traditions* (Kampen: Peeters Publishers, 1990), 92.

³⁹ Ezekiel 16:49-50 – "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it," and Matt. 10:14-15 – "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town."

⁴⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Indecent Exposures: Excessive Sex and the Crisis of Theological Representation," *Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, ed. Lisa Isherwood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 217, 218.

theologians, not in the precincts of heaven.⁴¹ The suicidal turn of Lot's wife denudes the sexual ideology of the center/edge dichotomy, and turns her from a cipher with no name into a pillar of salt standing in perpetual witness, exposing the inadequacy of the unitive center as a colonial fantasy whose authority passes away even as it destroys dissenters. This indecent exposure forces us to raise some exceedingly uncomfortable questions, the sort Althaus-Reid helps us to ask:

What regulatory, decent order has organized the systematic theological sexual discourse in Christianity? Which sort of classroom ideology is behind a theological ethics which reproduces and encourages an attitude of theological submission to one specific epistemological model such as idealized heterosexuality in the making of systematic theology?...Moreover, we may like to ask which are the connections between a colonial sexuality which not only gave God a penis but also regulated what that penis was supposed to do.⁴²

Perhaps the lessons of this radical, hermeneutical turn can reveal the face of God to us in new ways, the sort offered these days not in the smoke and fire of Sodom, but in smoky stripper bars where sodomites dance for tips on the margins of our churches. According to Althaus-Reid, we start by listening to the sexual stories of poor women and men, of dick dancers and sex workers, and by finding the courage to tell our own sexual stories in response. The God revealed by Lot's wife and her modern descendants is a stranger God. Althaus-Reid locates herself in this tension and struggles to find new possibilities for theology among communities of strangers, showing us what it might mean if we were to trust that the marginal God is both queer and real:

I stand as queer among queers, as I stand for the circle of hermeneutical suspicion to be taken towards new limits, and for the presence of the

⁴¹ Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," 106.

⁴² Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," 106.

strangers of theology to share stories from which a new face of God may appear....Queer we may stand, with a sense of pride and resistance which comes from the sharing of our own stories and our own sufferings, and the silence of a theology which has assumed too many things about sexuality and God. This has been the theology of sexual idealization, an idealist-based theology now challenged by the materiality of our own strange communities, and the strange God who walks with them.⁴³

The face of God has become embodied and strange, and it requires not only a new way of seeing but new eyes with which to see. All neo-colonial projects must be exposed for what they are: a refusal of concrete, bodily theology, a manifestation of the theological injustices Lot's wife stands in testimony against from her barren lookout, gazing over her time and ours. Her muted voice echoes in the words of Althaus-Reid from *The Sexual Theologian*.⁴⁴

I have argued that a God at the margins is not a marginal God. The latter would be a real God within the margins, and a God with a substantial difference from the charity models which present us with a God coming to our margins, so our borders. It is precisely that movement of coming towards the marginalized which betrays that God.

She continues:

Where does this God belong? Which cartography of salvation has this movement towards the margins traced? The theology at the margins that I would like to pursue as part of a queer trajectory in theology is not a neocolonial theology where an economic and affective model of relationships needs to be either expelled from the system or incorporated by providing an understanding alien

⁴³ Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," 104.

⁴⁴ Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," 105-106.

to what real margins are. Margins are not margins except for the colonial mentality.

So, if margins are peripheral illusory locations constructed to exhibit the power of the center, or if they are places to sequester the sexual, class, and economic casualties of center/edge ideologies, what is a *center*, and what power discourse does it serve theologically? Althaus-Reid answers, "What we call the discourses of the centre are just the edited texts of the rich and powerful, hegemonically organizing people's lifestyles with promises of salvation which exclude, for instance, economic salvation."⁴⁵ Center/edge schemes are neo-colonial even when they become gentled by inclusion attempts, as if the God of the center genuinely opted for the margins. The center is still dominant, setting all the terms by which it includes anyone, since the politics and theology it espouses still rely upon center epistemologies. This may be seen in action, for example, when the ideas of LGBT people on justice, political participation, and civil rights are welcomed by heteronormative causes, while LGBT people themselves are rejected, remaining unequal, unmarried, second-class, drummed out of the military, victimized, and peripheral, even as their stories, cultures, needs, and dreams are ignored. In the church, a corollary is readily at hand. LGBT people's baptismal statistics pad membership roles, and their contributions fatten ecclesiastical coffers while the mere rumor that a seminarian may be gay or bi excludes that person from the possibility of leadership.

What is needed is a marginal God, not a vicarious God at the margins who still has little common ground with the poor and the queer whom God supposedly loves. The mainline God, even the "God of the poor" written about so passionately by liberation theologians, is still brainwashed and ideologically straight-jacketed by the idealist epistemologies that hold divinity hostage.

⁴⁵ Althaus-Reid, "The Divine Exodus of God," *God: Experience and Mystery*, eds. Werner Jeanrod and Christoph Theobald, Concilium 2001/1 (London: SCM Press, 2001), 32.

This God is still a center-God who may benevolently visit the margins, but who “still lives far away and belongs to a central discourse in theology.”⁴⁶

*Doctor my eyes / Tell me what is wrong /
Was I unwise to leave them open for so long?*⁴⁷

We began this essay contending that bodies are sites of epistemological significance. Bodies are theologically revelatory. God is revealed in and among the bodies of strangers, persons and communities at odds with ideologies of the center. Center ideologies chronically betray embodied discourses of sexual ambivalence in favor of an idealized heterosexuality that abstracts bodies into decent and indecent categories, such as normalcy and deviance, sanctified morality and taboo misbehavior, or the saved versus the damned. We may now ask, inspired by Scripture and engaged by new interpreters, what would this marginal God who is revealed among the deviant and the damned look like? How would this stranger God who walks amidst the queer and the poor bring us to see ourselves? Is the comprehensive lesson to learn a new way of seeing, new eyes with which to look?

Lot's wife lends us her eyes to catch a glimpse of this Queer God. Her gaze back into the holocaust of Sodom offers us a new way of *seeing*. In order to develop a radical, indecent hermeneutic, we need a new set of eyes. Whatever her eyes of flesh saw as Sodom burned became fixed into crystals of rock salt as her eyes froze in place. Lot's wife cannot turn aside from looking fully into the blasted remains of what had been a vital, viable sexual culture. Yet her gaze is without regret. The punishment of her epistemological rebellion has had unintended consequences. Her opaque lenses are preserved for us to use. Rather than being rendered into an object lesson on the ills of disobedience, she has become something of a

⁴⁶ Althaus-Reid, “The Divine Exodus of God,” 33.

⁴⁷ Jackson Browne, “Doctor My Eyes,” song chorus on the album *Saturate Before Using*, released by Asylum Records, January 1972.

new *Promethea*, a defiant, creative visionary for the strange communities of God. According to one ancient Jewish legend, oxen traveling past her pillar of salt every day licked at her feet until she toppled over, only to be fully restored upright each morning to bear witness to what she saw on that terrible day.⁴⁸

Lot's wife sees that the patriarchal God cannot be rescued, and the marginal God does not need to be. There is no justification of a center ideology that would obliterate the other. In one of Scripture's odd, subversive reversals, the destruction of the Sodomites undercuts the morality of the center's claim to unrivalled power. If one is going to accept the hideous logic that God who set the test for the survival of the city is not culpable for destroying it, one should have no problem with the logic of the Rev. Fred Phelps, either, who pronounced that God used Hurricane Katrina to destroy New Orleans because of the immorality of gays and lesbians. Most interpreters see the problem with such an interpretation, however, and move to rescue God from it, usually along developmental lines. God, in more developed theologies, is still good, no matter the horror visited on the powerless. The unfortunate series of events did not *depend* on God to happen; they just somehow did happen due to a complex set of dependencies set in motion because of what God permits in the name of free will or nature.

Dependency is built into center ideologies and the theological projects that rely on them. It is hard to rescue the decency and coherence of the God locked in a death embrace with the Sodomites, even by employing all the developmental ideas of psychology and culture at a theologian's disposal. And God, the principle of unity and stability, has nightmares about theodicy, which struggles unsuccessfully to free Godself of responsibility for the degradation of the beings that heterosexist ideology exiles and kills. It is not Lot's wife who is blind about God, but the center theologians whose God is no more than a modification of power, and who cannot see

⁴⁸ Horrall, 464.

the way they have suffocated such a God in the confines of their own bedrooms and closets.

Through Lot's wife's eyes, we can see new, concrete places where the marginal God is manifest in the flesh-and-blood struggles of people who are excluded economically and sexually. In the sense that seeing is understanding, we are able to see that mutuality and dialogue can resurrect new life from the ashes of Sodom, and address the Spirit/Flesh binary. The Bible can be read with new interpretive lenses, and the old monarchical interpretations of control can be dispersed, disrupted, and supplanted. God, the first Queer of all, is revealed in the *conscientization* of the people.⁴⁹ In Jesus, listening to their stories, learning from their experiences, intimately touching and being touched in return, the Queer God resurrects again and again, exceeding "the border limits of a fatigued heterosexual foundational epistemology which has reduced religious experience and human love."⁵⁰ For resurrection is God's coming-out party, accompanied by signs and wonders like sexual dissidents finding their voices to speak out to the churches, boldly exposing sexual ideologies in theology, and doggedly loving with integrity in a world where love has become a commodity to be bought and sold.⁵¹

Conclusion

There are borders and margins in all of us, as well as stubborn, embedded tendencies to oppress and flatten out difference. Change comes hard when one has spent a lifetime submitting theologically to abstractions that have become comfortable, that safeguard the privileges we enjoy. Serving the center and pitying the margins has its benefits. The vision in Lot's wife's sightless eyes, however, is cold and unsparing. Her act of epistemological rebellion was suicidal, and we who follow

⁴⁹ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), and Althaus-Reid, "The Divine Exodus of God," 33.

⁵⁰ Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 176.

⁵¹ Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 176.

her queer turn will not be able to avoid costs to ourselves, either. It is painful to see how much we straddle center/edge dichotomies, in denial about the many ways we just do not get it. There are times when you give it a go, and wind up feeling you failed to understand yet again. Those are the moments when you have moved beyond what you know, and stepped into the queer spaces where hope is all you have left. But our teachers are willing to help us. They are found in lesbian salsa bars with no underpants, living in love triangles in mountain villages, dancing for tips in gay strip clubs because they enjoy the attention and need the money to make their rent. They are the ones who will teach us about diversity, disorder, and justice.

For now, as Professor Marcella Althaus-Reid once wrote, our principal duty is to exist:

And even if queer theology is just another utopia kicking against the dogmatics of heterosexist ideology, proving that in the end not even by challenging heterosexist ideology can we transform this world, our duty is to exist. Doing theology as if touching God under her skirts is a duty of love and justice and an encounter with God among us. May we together, by the grace of God, stand always *queer* with love, courage, and a passion for justice.⁵²

⁵² Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," 109.

NB: I gratefully acknowledge the wisdom and good conversation I have had on queering the Sodom and Gomorrah story with Roberto Rodriguez, Lennon Brown III, my colleague Dr. Leo G. Perdue, my administrative assistant Sandra J. Brandon, the Reverends Andy Shelton, Kyle Herron, Shannon Moore and Todd W. Simmons, and dancer-theologians Cowboy Cory from Crews Inn, Julian and Marcus from Zippers, and Alex, Blake, Brandon, Curtis, Jacob, Jonathan, Michael-Shawn, Robert and Steven from the Tin Room.