

Vision Through Ecstasy: Fabián Cháirez & Queer Catholic Symbolology

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Abstract

Spanish colonialism in the Americas offered a single vision of holiness, crafting Western notions of visibility and sign(s) as rooted in Christian imagery. The reality of figures of faith is bound to images and visual perception. This paper aims to examine this notion, how it upholds Western power structures, and how mysticism disrupts gendered boundaries within the Catholic Church. Mystic experience emphasizes female pleasure and women's capacity to commune with the holy, ultimately subverting the Western construction of women as sinful. Fabián Cháirez's subversive use of religious symbols in queer contexts challenges Catholic notions of sin, sensuality, and visibility. An analysis of Cháirez's paintings *Estigmas* (2023) and *La Eucaristía* (2020) evaluates tensions in terms of femininity and female pleasure, contesting the Catholic teachings of women as sinful, vision as sinful, and highlighting the paradox of this within socially accepted Catholic art and signs. By placing Cháirez's paintings in conversation with Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52) this paper finds that Catholic constructions of gendered sin inform religious signs, while the mystic body, across both Europe and the Americas, functions as a site of controversy and ecstatic pleasure where queer reinterpretations challenge traditional ideals through depictions of female ecstasy.

Keywords:

ecstasy, Catholic mysticism, construction of holiness, queer visibility

Counter to Christian beliefs, societies led by Catholic faith aim to transform subjects of the Church into subjects of the state, disconnecting humans from their celestial origin and instead focusing on earthly social values.¹ This structure creates one of recognized differences; when placed in the context of the sixteenth century and violent Spanish colonization in the Americas, these social apparatuses denoted any idol worship outside of monotheistic Catholicism as a form of evil. It imposed a similar homogeneity onto sexuality, gender expression, and the practice of faith. It is this colonial boundary that mysticism and stigmatic appearances on the human body challenge, as they do not abide by the institutionalized notion of a single vision of the holy.

Stigmata are a Catholic phenomenon and are commonly expressed on the hands and feet. They emulate the wounds from the nails driven into Christ's palms and feet during the Crucifixion, resulting in their image as symbols of redemptive suffering.² Stigmata have been reported since the time of Saint Francis in the late twelfth to early thirteenth century; however, over the past three hundred years, most documented cases have occurred on women.³ Mysticism and

1 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2007), 154.

2 Kristof Smeyers, "Building the Archive of Stigmatic Women Religious," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 107, no. 427 (Autumn 2018): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1353/stu.2018.0033>.

3 Smeyers, "Building the Archive of Stigmatic Women Religious," 338.

divine expressions on women's bodies challenge the usual Catholic notion of women being prone to sin.⁴ Historically, Catholic women within visual art were perceived to be passive and penitent and, if not, were seen as figures of temptation and vanity.⁵ Mystic symbols tied to ideas of ecstasy challenge conventional European notions of femininity, a tension that persists in the visual culture of the societies which were under Spanish colonial rule.⁶

Based in Mexico City, Fabián Cháirez (b. 1987) creates paintings that engage a range of social issues, particularly gender, sexuality, and the Church. His work reimagines activities and bodies tied to Western ideals and *machismo*, transforming traditionally masculine characters into queer figures. Cháirez's paintings *Estigmas* (2023) and *La Eucaristia* (2020) use mystical symbolism to challenge the historical use of Catholic art as a colonial tool that suppressed queerness in Latin America, erased differences, and promoted a singular, uniform vision of holiness.⁷ Both paintings highlight the pleasure within ecstasy, the autonomy of the female mystic, and the roots of queer vision in pleasure. As explained by Simon Critchley, "mysticism is not a religion, it is a tendency, a distillation of existing devotional practice, textual interpretation, theological teaching, and conceptual philosophical reflection."⁸ Evidently, mysticism operates both within and beyond institutionalized religious and social paradigms. By breaking from the Catholic model, it creates spectacle, and its association with women challenges the conventional visual signs attributed to religious figures. In order to understand the context of how mysticism breaks the gendered standard within the Catholic church even in traditional European mother country settings, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52) reveals how women's ecstatic experiences were used to affirm the existence of the divine. However, when the mystic framework shifts from a European context to colonial settings shaped by conquest and cultural hybridity, the relationship between the body and the divine takes on new meanings. Throughout this paper, Catholic symbols will be examined through the perspective of visual sign, exploring the symbols and traditions associated with Catholic female mystics, their interaction with space, and how the limits of a singular, institutionalized faith are disrupted by queer visibility and representations of female ecstasy in the works of Fabián Cháirez.

Divinity and the presence of the celestial on Earth are represented through figural images in Catholic faith and practice. Images of sacred beings are transposed onto the artist's reality; they bring cultural and religious significance to objects of belief and sanctity.⁹ This understanding of visibility is based on art not as an object but as a sign, since art plays a role in the ruling social

4 Smeyers, "Building the Archive of Stigmatic Women Religious," 337.

5 Reina Gattuso, "Women's Reflections in Renaissance and Modern European Painting," *Curationist*, 2022, <https://www.curationist.org/editorial-features/article/women's-reflections-in-renaissance-and-modern-european-painting>.

6 Stigmata are physical phenomena defined not only by visible wounds, but also by the bearer's intense physical and spiritual suffering and moments of ecstasy. In a visitor's account, Theodor Nolde described observing the stigmatized Rosalie Put, noting both her wounds and the ecstatic states she experienced. His account presents stigmata as a visible, physical phenomenon marked by both suffering and ecstasy. Tine Van Osselaer, Kristof Smeyers, et al., "On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity," in *The Devotion and Promotion of Stigmatics in Europe, c. 1800–1950: Between Saints and Celebrities* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 74.

7 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 154.

8 Simon Critchley, *Mysticism* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2024), 39–40.

9 Alex Potts, "Two Sign," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 25.

and cultural apparatuses of a time period.¹⁰ Significance and formal representation in this structure work in tandem, relying on the knowledge and belief of the viewer to place meaning upon the object. When sign takes on material form, the narratives and embodied representations of the divine become inherently subjective. They rely not only on the viewer's interpretation, but also on the figure itself, offering its presence to be made an image.¹¹ Rico Franes analyzes Jacques Lacan's theories of objects of faith as reliant on coming into existence *to be seen*.¹² This idea implies that the object does not influence the image, but is molded to meet the demands of the image.¹³ The Church invites the viewer to fixate on what is seen in the image, while fantasizing about what is invisible yet signified by the image.¹⁴ Figures of Catholic divinity take on the forms of their social climate; they are a reflection of cultural preferences and not solely a body of the Spirit. Usually, the classification of being seen and being are independent of one another; however, in the context of figures who are visions of belief, the image is the vision, and in turn, the formulation of faith. Being and meaning in the Lacanian context are separate, yet work in a paradoxical process; one must *be* to denote meaning, but meaning destroys being.¹⁵ Meaning pertains to the external, and the signs that surround the subject, while being refers to the bare existence of the subject.¹⁶ The process of signification of the world by the subject in turn destroys its ability to return to being; when applied to Catholic signs, which rely on meaning to be seen, it presents a model that reveals the socio-cultural focus of religious iconography. It is this process of signification that constructs holiness, stabilizing it into a seemingly singular idea of the sacred. Yet when these signifiers are reattached to symbols that carry personal meanings and identities, they disrupt the socio-cultural order—unsettling the reproducible visual codes that dictate what is recognized as sacred and what is excluded.

Christian modes of visibility create a form of representation that is reproducible, one that can be transferred to other cultures to suppress unique expression and create uniformity. Modes of visibility carry layered significance in images of religiosity as not only methods of cultural construct but also as creators of religio-cultural "Otherness."¹⁷ Sylvia Wynter analyzes the hierarchy of thought and religious practice used for imperialist means, explaining that the constructs created by denominational Otherness are held within the Spirit and Flesh codes,¹⁸ which are projected

10 Potts, "Two Sign," 26.

11 Rico Franes, "Lacan and Byzantine Art: In the Beginning Was the Image," in *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*, ed. Roland Betancourt and Maria Taroutina (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2015), 316.

12 Franes, "Lacan and Byzantine Art," 318.

13 Franes, "Lacan and Byzantine Art," 316.

14 Franes, "Lacan and Byzantine Art," 318.

15 Franes, "Lacan and Byzantine Art," 321.

16 Franes, "Lacan and Byzantine Art," 320.

17 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation--an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (September 2003): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>.

18 It marks a distinction between the celestial and the human. In the medieval Christian context, humanity was understood as bound by Original Sin, requiring the continual pursuit of spiritual redemption. In the colonial period, however, this framework shifted toward the idea that man is created in God's image. As a result, judgment moves away from degrees of spiritual perfection and toward standards of rational, earthly perfection and imperfection. This shift establishes a hierarchy that enables a clear division between "Man" and subjugated Human Others. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 287–88.

onto physical reality.¹⁹ Maintaining a separation of the Spirit and the fallen Flesh absolutizes a “general order of existence.”²⁰ These codes are necessary in subjugating others to create order within places where people are forced under colonial control. Catholic iconography and symbols carry a directive created by the European religious hierarchy. How one consumes image as separate from being, while relying on being to place meaning on image, continues the contradictory idea of the separation between Spirit and Flesh.



Figure 1: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–52, marble sculpture, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Photograph by the author.

Mystic and ecstatic experience blurs the boundary between the body and the Spirit, uniting them through moments of divine vision and earthly pleasure. Saint Teresa of Avila played a large role in the documentation of mystic occurrences in Spain in the 1500s, and her story has far-reaching religious and visual implications. Teresian iconography became popular following the publication of her autobiography *Vida* in the sixteenth century, which includes an account of the piercing of her heart, and the ecstasy she experienced.²¹ Her writing inspired the marble sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52, fig. 1), created by Bernini sixty years after her death in 1582. Her head is tilted back and mouth agape—she is shown in the midst of experiencing pleasure. The angel readies his golden rod, lifting her by the edge of the layers of immaculate fabric which cloak her form. Her face is the main testament of ecstasy and connects to Saint Teresa’s personal accounts of her body during the ecstatic process.

Saint Teresa claims that at peak ecstasy, all senses are lost and the eyes are usually closed because of one’s inability to engage with the earthly world.²² As the flaming arrow pierced her heart repeatedly, she described the spiritual pain as so intense that it transformed into a feeling so sweet that it became an experience of immeasurable pleasure.²³ The story connects the body with the Spirit—one experiences ecstasy, spiritual suspension within the body at the hands of the divine. Saint Teresa characterizes the experience as being the “farthest from normal human condition.”²⁴

Saint Teresa’s ecstasy corroborates yet challenges the notion that earthly meaning prevents one from experiencing divine events and interacting with celestial beings. The ecstasy was a highly physical experience, one she remembered through her body, Spirit, and mind as juxtaposing the earthly human experience. Given this, Bernini’s depiction of Saint Teresa’s body carries two meanings. First, it canonizes women in mystic experience, unifying vision, divinity, and phys-

19 Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 296.

20 Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 279.

21 Critchley, *Mysticism*, 33.

22 Susanne Warma, “Ecstasy and Vision: Two Concepts Connected with Bernini’s *Teresa*,” *The Art Bulletin* 66, no. 3 (September 1984): 508, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1984.10788195>.

23 Warma, “Ecstasy and Vision,” 510.

24 Warma, “Ecstasy and Vision,” 509.

ical ecstasy into one visual object, re-imagining conventional Catholic signs of faith. Second, it emphasizes the experience of female pleasure, breaking the traditional visual sign of women as penitent and passive within Catholic imagery.

In European contexts, mystic and ecstatic experience challenges the materialization of religious figures as repeatable models, which aim to turn followers into subjects of institutional belief rather than participants in faith itself. However, these frameworks in the context of colonization in the Americas, where European expansion was not just religious but ideological, linguistic, and cultural, created social “order” as needed for Spanish profit.²⁵ The secularization of the Christian identity into the socially upheld “Man” created another secular category of Otherness.²⁶ This was the framework necessary to justify the violence, oppression, and slavery which occurred under the Spanish for their earthly capital. The materialism rooted within Catholicism allowed colonists to give rise to an order of faith based on the order of economic wealth.²⁷ This construction of Catholic holiness informed followers’ spiritual and social consciousness, and what came to be socially accepted was and is rooted in moral values crafted to meet the needs of a globalized system.²⁸

When imposed upon gender and sexuality, the European model of hierarchy is necessary for upholding Catholic values of female subjugation and the oppression of queerness. In the Americas, the rejection of queerness and sexual difference was introduced and enforced by European colonizers. In her study of *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, scholar Juana María Rodríguez analyzes shame and submission from the colonial to the modern Latin American context. Rodríguez explains the attachment of shame to “Latina-ness” as rooted in the legacy of European conquest.²⁹ She argues that queer positioning of bodies can present an opportunity to reimagine situations of submission: “This always imagined masochism confirms the way the unequal distribution of power in heterosexual romance is normalized: women are ‘naturally’ assumed to languish and take pleasure in their suffering over male dominance and cruelty.”³⁰ European expectations of female compliance with social and domestic inequalities operate under the hierarchical model, embedding violence and oppression into relationships of intimacy.³¹

Rodríguez’s analysis of religious and socially imposed suffering as a tool of sustaining European systems of hierarchy highlights how Latina bodies function differently in images of faith and worship as having to operate within the history of submission and conquest.³² The painting *La Eucaristía* (2020, fig. 2) by Cháirez challenges aforementioned notions of feminine passivity, repositioning the sign of the Eucharist and cloistered body by foregrounding female pleasure.

25 Notions of religio-cultural differences as means of creating hierarchy for profit is a Greco-Christian cultural construct, basing relationships with others on profit and empire. Profit in this context pertains to economic wealth, and the Spanish empire’s seizure of land and people to be subjects of their economic and ideological means. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 157.

26 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 292.

27 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 158.

28 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 157.

29 Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 143.

30 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 143.

31 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 143.

32 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 144.

Set within an oval frame, the painting presents a nun and a chalice of wine representing the blood of Christ against a deep gray background; her head is encircled by a luminous gold halo suggesting her sacred presence. Cháirez reimagines the cloistered Latina body as one reserved for self-pleasure, utilizing the symbol of the Eucharist as the body in a dual sense: as the cloistered Catholic Latina, and as the figurative holy body or Spirit symbolized by the overflowing cup of wine. The cup is a symbol of Christ and the spiritual consciousness; her interaction with the cup brings her autonomy to the forefront of the scene. The fingers of her left hand dip into the chalice, as the right descends into darkness in the folds of her garment below her abdomen. The blood of Christ trickles down the cup onto her lowered hand. Her tilted face and closed eyes suggest that she derives pleasure from her actions. The nun's fingering of the Eucharist and herself, cast shadows, and closed eyes connect to the physical pleasure within divine ecstasy.

Similar to Bernini's depiction of ecstasy, the ephemeral quality of *La Eucaristía* is shown through mystic gestures, including levitation. The bottom of her habit floats over her cape and casts shadows upon the cream fabric beneath it, giving the impression that she is ascending. Mystics, including Saint Teresa, have documented reports of levitation when accepting the Eucharist, the mystic body becoming a reflection of the miracles done by the body of Christ. The painting utilizes Christian symbols to highlight the holiness in the autonomy of self, connecting the celestial body to the earthly body of the woman. By centering self-derived pleasure and setting it in relation to a figure of sanctity, the painting illuminates the connection between pleasure, ecstasy, and divine presence.

Mystic experiences are often recorded through physical manifestations on the body. Stigmata are a visible and bodily phenomenon encompassing states of ecstasy, pain and suffering.³³ The marks that appear on the hands and feet are those which imitate Christ's wounds from the Crucifixion, and are viewed as divine intervention and signs of sanctity within the person who bears them.³⁴ The physical phenomena relates to the social apparatuses of the church through the culture of Catholic suffering. Osselaer et al. characterize redemptive suffering as a cultural construction, socially defining what pain is, as if pain in itself carries a divine purpose.³⁵ The suffering associated with stigmata is both physical and spiritual, due to its direct relationship with the Passion of Christ; the pain is that of reparative suffering, pain which atones for the sins



Figure 2: Fabián Cháirez, *La Eucaristía*, 2020, oil on canvas, 80 x 59 cm. Courtesy the artist.

33 Van Osselaer et al., "On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity," 74.

34 Jesus bore five wounds from his Passion and Crucifixion: one on each hand and foot from being nailed to the cross, and one on his side from a spear wound. Individuals experiencing stigmata often display wounds on their hands and feet, and some also bear marks on the head from the crown of thorns, bruises on the shoulders, or a wound on the side. Van Osselaer et al., "On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity," 74, 79.

35 Van Osselaer et al., "On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity," 87.

of man.³⁶ Intriguingly, the timeline of stigmata cases align with the Catholic calendar and events within the church, showing the wounds as not only a mystic phenomenon, but a divine response to societal structures.³⁷ The social implication of stigmata relates to the spectacle they create, as stigmata cases were investigated by travelers, researchers, and church officials. In fact, Osselaer et al. note that “stigmata were perceived as sensational epiphenomena, ‘proof’ of the authenticity of a spiritual experience, which many stigmatists were happy to exhibit.”³⁸ This willingness to show the wounds, as proof of heavenly intervention to convert others to Catholic faith, carries social and institutional religious motivations. However, the exhibition of the stigmatic female body as evidence of the divine through physical expression breaks the gendered bounds within Catholic ideology.

Events surrounding the appearance of stigmata on women’s bodies reportedly involved the undoing of spatial constraints, such as her bedroom or domestic sphere; for nuns with stigmata, this includes their spaces of worship and devotion.³⁹ The need for there to be visible and physical proof of the stigmata has been an expectation noted in visitors’ accounts.⁴⁰ The public visibility of stigmatic individuals sparked criticism, as women were put on display for legal examinations of the phenomenon; this question of the authenticity of the wounds made a distinction between godliness or deception, saintliness or sin.⁴¹ The Church wanted to confirm the stigmata as a spiritual phenomenon, but also felt there was a requirement to see the pain, suffering, and physical disability of the stigmata bearer. Smeyers explains the spectacle of the stigmatic body in the nineteenth century as consumed by followers and press, with stigmatic bodies being the crux of debates of fraud or faith, altering the cultural perceptions of the stigmata.⁴² The public spectacle illuminates the social controversies surrounding stigmatic women, as their bodies were seen not only as holy vessels, but as sites of suffering in society, as bearers of the pain once experienced by Christ. In furtherance of this point, Osselaer et al. analyze the stigmatic woman’s body as a reflection of both Christ and society: “The visitors may have been looking at a female body but they were gazing at something that represented other bodies, someone else’s pain—Christ’s obviously, but not solely.”⁴³ The role of the female body in conveying the divine as an earthly reality occurs through mysticism. The spectacle of the body for the confirmation of God as reality illuminates the paradox created by mystic situations in Western religious contexts. The stigmatic woman’s body being consumed by onlookers, and gazed at by strangers, challenges Catholic notions of feminine inaccessibility, despite the stigmatic body being the very representation of sacredness.⁴⁴ Although the transformation of the female body once it becomes stigmatic challenges religious gender confines, the spiritual and physical suffering of the body maintains the culture of Catholic

36 Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 87.

37 The intensity of the stigmata bearers pain coincides with Holy Week, days linked to Christ’s passion, or to the appearance of stigmata on St. Francis. Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 88.

38 Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 77.

39 Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 73.

40 Visitors, or viewers of stigmata, include church officials and religious tourists. Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 73.

41 Smeyers, “Building the Archive of Stigmatic Women Religious,” 338.

42 Smeyers, “Building the Archive of Stigmatic Women Religious,” 339.

43 Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 92.

44 Van Osselaer et al., “On Stigmata, Suffering and Sanctity,” 81.

suffering.⁴⁵

Cháirez's *Estigmas* (2023, fig. 3) transforms the suffering female body into one of queer pleasure and celestial connection. The painting is vivid and striking; the deep red background juxtaposes the tender embrace of two nuns, one of them stigmatic. Their eyes are closed, as the nun in the foreground tilts her head upward to touch the face of the nun behind her. The top of her white habit glows with an iridescent mixture of white, blue, and purple hues. The nun in the background wears a crown of white roses, which are associated with the Virgin Mary, her white cape signifying purity of heart. The rose-crowned nun is darker in complexion and embodies symbols associated with the Virgin Mary, reflecting a connection to contemporary depictions of Mary in the Annunciation. Both nuns wear brown robes, connecting them to the Carmelite nuns, a branch of Christianity founded in the 1200s, and reformed by Saint Teresa in the sixteenth century. Carmelite Catholicism is rooted in humility, represented by the coarse fabric of their brown robes. A thin, gold halo surrounds the nuns' heads, their forms framed by deep red; the darkened edges suggest that light is emanating from the two women.

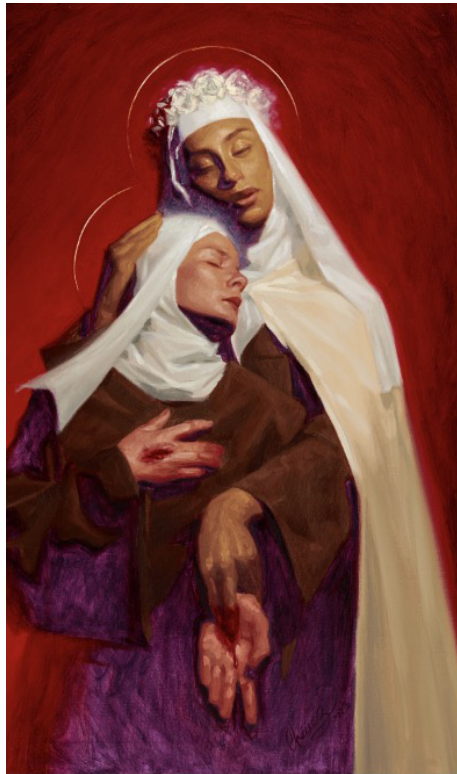


Figure 3: Fabián Cháirez, *Estigmas*, 2023, oil on canvas, 96 x 62 cm. Courtesy the artist.

The rose-crowned nun tenderly holds the stigmatic nun's tilted head, as her other hand enters the stigma in her open palm. The stigma emulates the wound of Christ, and simultaneously the female vulva; the imagery of the open wound is one of pain and suffering, as well as ecstasy and pleasure. Amy Hollywood analyzes the readings of female sex as a wound, identifying its homoerotic underpinnings in representations of Christ's wounds since the medieval period.⁴⁶ She argues that images of Christ's wounds, particularly of his side wound, evokes vaginal form, destabilizing the heterosexual matrix that aligns masculinity with penetration and femininity with penetrability.⁴⁷ Stigmata's relation to the notion of female sex as a wound is reinterpreted through the crowned nun's penetration of the stigmatic nun's hand, shifting the focus toward feminine pleasure and queer gestures. The stigmatic nun's raised right hand reveals that the wound pierces through, as it is visible on the top of her right hand and the inside of the left palm. Her right hand rests on her chest while her fingers grasp at the robe indicating the tightness within her body.

Her lowered palm with the penetrated stigma appears tense; her extended fingers and bent thumb react to the sensual touch. The crowned nun's cradling and caressing of the stigmatic nun demonstrates the immense tender-

45 Smeyers, "Building the Archive of Stigmatic Women Religious," 339.

46 Amy Hollywood, "That Glorious Slit: Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ's Side Wound," in *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Theresa Krier (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 120.

47 Hollywood, "That Glorious Slit," 120.

ness in the pseudo-sexual encounter. Catholic imagery of purity and chastity drapes the nun in the background, juxtaposing her erotic engagement with the stigmata, alluding to the capacity of cloistered women to have queer desires and fantasies. The crowned nun is an active participant in the scene, entering the open wound while also nurturing and comforting the stigmatized nun, illustrating the sensuality and vulnerability within mystic ecstatic experiences. The queer narrative in *Estigmas* reconnects the religious mystic body to the female body, liberating the body through its display of anatomy that stimulates earthly pleasures, connecting the feminine flesh with the celestial Spirit.

The queer framing of two cloistered women and the wounds of Christ within *Estigmas* contests the suppression of queerness in the Americas as a method built for justifying violence, oppression, and Otherness. Before the Conquista, queerness was accepted socially and religiously, as deities and idols were queer in religions in the Americas before Catholicism.⁴⁸ The fear instilled in populations whose ancestors and communities were deeply impacted by colonial violence maintains the Eurocentric narratives of moral and denominational hierarchy, and are perpetuated in the present by Catholic groups founded on conservative social and religious beliefs.⁴⁹

The exhibition *La venida del Señor (The coming of the Lord)*, featuring three paintings from Cháirez's series *Monjes y Cardinales*, was scheduled to run through February 2025 at the Academia de San Carlos Centro Histórico in Mexico City.⁵⁰ Members of the Association of Christian Lawyers (AAC) and Christian groups of the University of Mexico affiliated with the exhibition filed a complaint and staged peaceful protests outside the gallery.⁵¹ Following the complaints and public reaction, Judge Francisco Javier Rebolledo Peña passed a suspension order on the show, giving the gallery twenty-four hours to remove the paintings or risk the use of public force.⁵² Expectations of how viewers encounter and consume the Catholic sign are placed on the artist and figures themselves; when the artists transfigure colonial narratives, their works are removed or protested for occupying exhibition spaces. The censoring of artists who utilize religious imagery in “non-traditional” ways relies on an understanding of religious art as being literal representations of sacred figures. Classifying certain mystic and religious representations as sacred and others as not in an area of faith that relies on figural imagery to be seen, consumed, and followed creates an ambiguous interpretation of traditional faith. However, besides its social impact, the closing of the gallery raises an important question about visibility and visibility within acceptable and so-called unacceptable uses of Catholic signs. Why are figural interpretations that reimagine and reposition Catholic Latina bodies considered sacrilegious by “traditionalist” belief? Art that highlights the Latina body as one of divine and earthly power fails to uphold the Eurocentric idea of gendered hierarchy in faith and devotion.

I present these ideas of controversy surrounding Cháirez at the conclusion of this paper so as not to limit my reading of the work merely to the social reaction which it has provoked. Jennifer Doyle explains how writing in the context of controversy dilutes the analysis of an artwork,

48 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 154.

49 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 157.

50 Rhea Nayyar, “Mexican Artist Decries ‘Censorship’ of Queer Nun and Priest Portraits,” *Hyperallergic*, March 5, 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/994150/mexican-artist-decries-censorship-of-queer-nun-and-priest-portraits/>.

51 Nayyar, “Mexican Artist Decries ‘Censorship’ of Queer Nun and Priest Portraits.”

52 Nayyar, “Mexican Artist Decries ‘Censorship’ of Queer Nun and Priest Portraits.”

which triggers societal reaction, “not because it is emotionally intense but because the subjects of their works are so politically charged. Art controversy invariably simplifies its object.”⁵³ It is important to acknowledge, however, the role that the policing of bodies, minds, and spaces has in preserving colonial ideologies. The female Catholic form engaging in self-pleasure, queer gestures, and ecstatic satisfaction eliminates the Catholic imaginings of religious women as unseen and incapable of sensual experiences and desires. Mysticism and ecstasy automatically challenge these notions, but when placed in the context of the Americas, it illuminates the maintenance of European paradigms of control through religious symbols.

Like *La Eucaristía*, *Estigmas* presents autonomy and pleasure as a form of connection to the celestial, freeing the Latina and cloistered body and reimagining its power through the breaking of religio-social confines. The cloistered bodies within *La Eucaristía* and *Estigmas* are liberated from the culture of Catholic shame and suffering and instead become symbols of divine existence through ecstatic experience. The intimacy and gentleness of *Estigmas* remove the spectacle associated with the feminine stigmata and place viewers’ attention on the pleasure in queer touch and gestures. Throughout this paper, I have explored the Catholic mystic body as a site of controversy, pleasure, and spectacle, offering insight into the possible liberation of religious women through queer transformations of Catholic image and sign. From Europe to the Americas, the upholding of traditional iterations of religious women as penitent and cloistered is broken through mystic action and ecstatic pleasure.

53 Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), xiv.

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