

## Sensorial Spectacles of Subjugation:

### Franciscan *Autos Sacramentales* in the work of Adela Goldbard

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In Mexico, the performative rhetoric of violence has always been dependent on the visual and material culture of intimidation. Adela Goldbard understands this, and her meticulously researched works aim to facilitate our understanding of this oppressive history. In *Juicio Final*, written by the Franciscan fray Andres de Olmos ca. 1531, referenced by Goldbard's *The Last Judgement/El Juicio Final* (2019), a native girl, Lucia, is confronted with her demons, and is ultimately expelled to hell to suffer divine punishment. In the text, each scene or *cuadro* is preceded by stage directions, which often include the detonation of gunpowder. The activation of the senses was a central edict of European Counter-Reformation art and its manifestations in the Americas. The ears were not the only conduit that received the moralizing lessons of the scriptures, but when the skin, nose and eyes were equally overwhelmed, missionaries assured the effectiveness of their theatrical instructions.

In *The Last Judgement/El Juicio Final*, Goldbard departs from this colonial text to culminate in a pyrotechnic performance that, with each boom, intends to echo the mechanisms of “spiritual conquest” introduced to Mexico in 1519 by the Castilians and their religious forces. In other words, Goldbard has chosen to appropriate the sensorial and ever-changing meaning of fireworks to express the visual rhetoric of colonial violence. While the intimidating spectacle of colonial fireworks has been appropriated and transformed by the people as a means of celebration, its employment in her art work aims to subvert what I refer to as technologies of oppression. This approach to the history of colonial tactics subverts the “moralizing and colonizing spirit [of fireworks] to transform punishment and submission into critical action.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Adela Goldbard original quote in Spanish reads as follows: “subvirtiendo su espíritu moralizante y colonizador para transformar el castigo y el sometimiento en acción crítica.” See Adela Goldbard, Poetical de la memoria/poetica de la violencia” YouTube video September 10, 2020.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GukdDCyHvvM&feature=youtu.be>

Throughout the second half of the sixteenth century, as the Catholic church began to reckon with and restructure its corrupted foundations, it found a new haven in which to strengthen its empire in Mexico. After Martin Luther nailed his “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of a Nuremberg church in an act of resistance against the increasing corruption of the Vatican in 1517, the church sought to regain control over the thousands of souls lost to the new Protestant religions. Two years later, across the Atlantic Ocean, the Spanish “explorer” Hernán Cortes arrived at the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The *tabula rasa* that the Nahua territories and souls represented to the Vatican and the Spanish crown, unleashed an era of spiritual conquest, invasion and control that depended on spectacle to carry out its function. In this manner, theater became integral to conquest.

The history of theatrical productions in Mexico dates back to the pre-Columbian period. The displays of power that were enacted in cities like Tenochtitlan (the Aztec capital), via religious dances and rituals of sacrifice, were later re-contextualized into theaters of conversion when the Spanish arrived. The blood obtained in sacrifice, which was to feed Nahua Gods for the endurance of life cycles, began to pour from the wounds of Christ into silver and gold chalices. Religious spectacles, to which pre-Hispanic societies were accustomed, continued after the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521; however, their character became Christian. The rhetoric of violence never lost its religious nature, and the “space of death,” as articulated by anthropologist Emilie Carreón Blain, was manipulated by hegemonic forces with political, social and conceptual rationales in mind.<sup>2</sup> When we speak of colonization, we tend to undermine the role of indigenous epistemologies, and their transformation into tools of control. That is, the Spanish came, saw, and appropriated existing forms of native knowledge, transforming them along the way. Understanding this logic, and aided by a counter-reformative mind frame, mendicant religious groups (such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits) employed theater and a culture of awe to overwhelm native subjects. With the evangelical goal of “saving” indigenous souls, the Franciscans produced a wide array of displays of power that manifested in architecture, mural painting, sculpture, and theater to maintain a religious dominion over central Mexico and the rest of the Americas.

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<sup>2</sup> Emile Carreón Blain —Tzompantli, Horca y Picota; sacrificio o pena capital Instituto de Investigaciones estéticas, UNAM, vol. XXVIII, núm. 88 (2006).

The Franciscans arrived in Mexico with Hernán Cortés in 1519, and they founded the first missionary order of New Spain in 1524. From that point forward, the endeavor of the order existed in a constant state of contradiction: simultaneously seeking spiritual transformation in the model of St. Francis' exemplary life, while acting as an auxiliary to Spanish colonial powers, which controlled most of the American continent for three hundred years. From day one, the Franciscans established their control and expansion into New Spain as an institution at the service of the crown. The extension of the order in the Americas over vast amounts of territory, the continual funding of Franciscan missionary endeavors by the Crown, and the history of spiritual conversion disrupted their fundamental values and vows of poverty; "A simple and poor life could hardly coexist alongside the marked prosperity of New Spain..."<sup>3</sup>

With the arrival of the Franciscans came their art and sacramental performances, designed to manipulate and control every aspect of indigenous religious life and epistemologies. From the transformation of written catechisms into the semasiographic language of pre-Hispanic codices, to the nature of public performances, the Franciscans tirelessly worked to redirect native technologies into weapons of spiritual control. Under the direction of missionaries, native peoples enacted *autos sacramentales* (allegorical religious plays). Among the *autos*' usual themes, we find the final judgment, polygamy, confession, the temptations of the devil to Jesus Christ, and the assumption of the Virgin. Sacramental theater was an extension of the so-called Golden Age of Spanish Theater, which began to thrive at the same time as missionary labor intensified in the Americas. The religious orders aimed to build the new kingdom of heaven on earth, one suited for the inevitable second coming of Christ. The missions that were frantically constructed throughout central México necessitated a visual culture of intimidation. However, the "New Jerusalem" was at all times under the threat of heathen attacks; that is, it existed only as far as native resistance allowed it.<sup>4</sup> For that reason, the missionaries assured an everlasting flow of murals, open chapels, atrium crosses, processions, festivities and religious plays to suppress pagan religious practices. *Autos* were activated not only by the

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<sup>3</sup> Francisco Morales "Mexican Society and the Franciscan Order in a Period of Transition, 1749-1859" *The Americas*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Jan., 1998). 326<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the notion that Mexico was the "New Jerusalem" see David A. Boruchoff, "New Spain, New England, and the New Jerusalem: The "Translation" of Empire, Faith, and Learning (translatio imperii, fidei ac scientiae) in the Colonial Missionary Project" (*Early American Literature* 43, no. 1, 2008), 5-34.

performance itself, but also by an entire artistic culture that demanded the moral lessons never be forgotten. It is not difficult to imagine how murals showing pagans suffering in hell such as the ones found in the open chapel of the Augustinian mission of Actopan in Hidalgo, or the *Last Judgement* scenes decorating the walls of the mission of Acolman, might have either served as backdrops to these staged dramas, or as reiterations of the lessons learned during these impactful performances.

Similarly to the ways painted murals enlivened the graphic sermons of missionaries and priests, *autos sacramentales* depended on *tramoyas* (theatrical rigging systems) and special effects to overload the senses of native spectators. As noted by Tiffany Lynn Hunt, the engendering of the senses in counter-reformative art was meant to create an empathetic connection with Christ's redemptive pain. When all corporeal senses were triggered in unison, they were meant to phenomenologically draw from the spectator's memories, "collectively construct[ing] a liturgically cultivated experience of pain."<sup>5</sup> As such, the sound, smell, and sight of gunpowder smoke would have had a deep impact on the spectators, perhaps activating the trauma of conquest, and ultimately setting in motion the culpability denounced onstage. The activation of guilt during *autos sacramentales* depended on a sensorial spectacle that was to culminate on the ultimate transformation of the soul; the path to salvation.

Tasked with the manual elaboration of theatrical props, the targeted audience itself carried out the physical labor necessary in the epistemic violences of the mission system. In *Totality and Infinity* Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) conceptualizes the real violence that war produces on the subjectivity of its victims:

But violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tiffany Lynn Hunt "Empathetic Wounds: Gregorio Fernández's Cristos yacentes as a Nexus of Art, Anatomy, and Counter-Reformation Theology". In *Visualizing Sensuous Suffering and Affective Pain in Early Modern Europe and the Spanish Americas*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 410.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Hingham: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 21.

In a similar vein, the success of *autos* resided in how the epistemic violence committed against native peoples was produced for-and-counter their own selves. As native agents painted Christian murals, produced *tramoyas*, and performed these *autos*, they were indirectly executing the labor of their own epistemic demise. While scholars may argue for the syncretism of ideas produced with the mission spaces of the colonial period, I contend that the real violence resides precisely in this myth. Missionary spaces became the locus for the destruction of local epistemologies, and the physical participation of natives during these events had the ultimate goal of betraying “their own substance.” Goldbard seeks to involve the communities she works with to subvert the performative aspects of that colonial epistemic violence. The labor involved in her performances is part of that disruption. As residents of Chicago’s *La Villita* (Little Village) neighborhood gathered to craft the maquettes and *tramoyas* to be burned in a later celebration, they did it with the dialogical purpose of disrupting the tools of oppression. Ultimately with the participation of these communities, Goldbard seeks to revert the coloniality of labor with the unified goal of momentarily inverting the epistemological violence of *autos sacramentales*.

Adela Goldbard’s *The Last Judgment* not only recalls the sixteenth century theater of evangelization in Mexico, but it shows how resistance can take the form of subverting spectacles, where systemic racist violence against communities of color in the U.S. can be exorcised through the smell, noise and sound of *juegos pirotécnicos*. For Goldbard, it is the sensorial technologies of the theater of oppression that she seeks to subvert into contemporary cathartic displays of resistance for those who continue to be under the direct yoke of neo-colonial tyranny. Every boom, every sparkle of *The Last Judgment/El Juicio Final* is directed to reframe the trauma of the violence of conquest, invasion, labor and occupation into a liberating spectacle.

Goldbard departs from the historical spark, smoke and boom of these *autos*, detonating a new type of transformation. The *tramoyas* of the colonial *autos* cease to have the same impact on the senses as the participants witness the physical destruction of theatrical props that historically were meant to subjugate. In the last scene of Olmos’ play, as Lucia seeps into the fire of hell she utters, “A dreadful fire viper girdles me, heart of

Mictlan, in infernal home! With this I remember my pleasures on earth.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast, in Goldbard’s play, Lucia’s final words are, “el pueblo unido jamás será vencido,” (the people united will never be defeated). Goldbard overwhelms your senses as a call to action, a wake up call and an open denouncement against the systematic history of oppression in the Americas. The visual rhetoric of violence, coupled with the smell, sight and sound of fire transcend its coloniality to land in a moment of awe, to exorcise the demons of *tramoyas* past.

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<sup>7</sup> Original text reads as follows: ¡Me ciñe una espantosa víbora de lumbre, corazón del Mictlan, en morada infernal! Fernando Horcasitas, *El teatro náhuatl I, Épocas novohispana y moderna* (Segunda edición, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004), 734