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Colonizing Bodies

The Visual Rhetoric of Masculinity in New Spain

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Abstract

Images of Saint Joseph in the New World stand in sharp contrast with depictions of the saint in Early Modern Europe. Before the Council of Trent, the saint was portrayed as an older, sometimes feeble man, but in Counter-Reformation Spain and in the New World he came to be portrayed as a virile, stronger, younger man. Joseph became the epitome of masculine virtue: a loving father, a good husband, and a hard worker. This paper examines the role of Josephine imagery in the colonization and christianization of Indigenous populations in the Americas, particularly New Spain, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By looking at images of the Holy Family, and focusing on the portrayal of Saint Joseph, the paper argues that the entrenchment of hegemonic gender norms and heteronormativity were necessary steps towards the colonization of pre-contact intimate and spiritual lives. His portrayal as a good husband is particularly fascinating in light of the Third Mexican Provincial Council, which devoted a significant amount of time to discussions of marriage and conversion in the New World. As such, Saint Joseph became a model for Indigenous men and new converts, a figure that stood in sharp contrast with Spanish depictions of Native masculinities as sodomites and promiscuous. Because monotheism and heteronormativity are anchored in the same dualistic thought, the model of masculine behaviour, heteronormativity, and the nuclear family provided by Saint Joseph paved the way for the establishment of Christian Orthodoxy in the New World.

In the Winter of 2010, I picked up a copy of Donald Boisvert's *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints.* After reading the book, I had an unbelievably-large crush on the man, which was the reason I came to Concordia in the first place. Here I am, four years later, lucky to be working on my Honours Thesis under his supervision. My paper today is the product of preliminary research done for said thesis.

The figure of Saint Joseph has generated some scholarly interest over the course of the past few years, though not nearly as much as his wife and child. A myriad of theological treatises make up the majority of sources on Joseph, although we also have two major scholarly studies on the

saint. On the one hand, Carolyn Wilson's *St. Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art: New Directions and Interpretations* (2001) examines the development of Joseph's cult in early modern Italy, situating its beginning in the Renaissance. On the other hand, we have Charlene Villaseñor Black's *Creating the Cult of Saint Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire* (2006), which examines the development of Josephine devotion in the hispanic world and attributes its beginning to the Council of Trent. Today, however, I am interested less in the origins of the cult, and more in how the rise of Josephine devotion was closely aligned with changing ideals of masculine behaviour and the role that it played in the christianization of the so-called New World. It is my contention that Joseph became the locus of discourses surrounding masculinity and religiosity, thus making him a key player in the construction of Christian orthodoxy and sexual orthopraxy in New Spain.

The Bible provides little information on Joseph. He is mentioned only a couple of times as the husband of Mary or her fiancé, as the father of Jesus, during the flight to Egypt, and during the Nativity scene. Although these are meagre details, Joseph is presented here as the husband of Mary and the father of Jesus, two attributes that will later on become central in his cult (Black; 21-22). This scriptural silence, however, didn't hinder the theological and popular imaginations, and instead invited story-telling in the form of apocryphal stories that emerged in the early centuries of the Church. These stories heavily influenced Josephine iconography in medieval and Renaissance art, allowing both artists and theologians to expand on Joseph's role in Scriptures with imaginative details (21-22)

The influence of apocryphal stories such as the *Proto-Gospel of James* can be seen in early modern art. This text describes how Joseph, at first, refuses to take Mary as his wife because he is "an old man" and "she is but a child" (*Proto-Gospel of James;* 9:2). It was believed that Joseph was of very advanced age when he married the Virgin, somewhere between eighty-nine to ninety-one years-old. *Giotto's Marriage of the Virgin,* c. 1303 portrays Joseph as an elderly man, and also includes the dove that indicates God's preferential option for Joseph as Mary's husband. Another painting, *The Marriage of the Virgin,* 1500-1504 by Perugino demonstrates the pervasiveness of Joseph's depiction as an elderly man. In Perugino's work, Joseph is balding, and the little hair he has left is grey, thus conveying his advanced age. Depictions of Joseph as an elderly man continued to appear well into the seventeenth century. Jusepe de Ribera's *Saint Joseph,* ca. 1635 portrays an elderly St. Joseph in an obvious Baroque manner at the moment

of his choosing as Mary's husband (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; n.p.). His wrinkled skin, skillfully and carefully painted, and his white hair and beard, reveal his advanced age.

This Scriptural silence is perhaps what allowed theologians and artists to re-imagine the Saint. Jean Gerson (1363-1429) and Isidoro Isolano (ca. 1477-1528) were among the first and most important theologians to promote the cult of Saint Joseph. Gerson rejected the apocryphal stories and instead argued that Joseph was, by necessity, a young and strong man. If he had been an elderly man, he would have required more assistance and care than he would have been able to provide the Virgin and the Christ Child (Hale; 109). He places Joseph's age at the time of his marriage under fifty (109). Thus, we see the emergence of a younger, stronger Joseph, a figure who would be able to provide for and protect his family.

Isolano, too, was concerned with Joseph's physicality. In his *Summary of the Gifts of Saint Joseph,* published in 1522, he writes that "bien plus, la chasteté et la virginité sont plus louables dans les belles personnes, donc saint Joseph, dont la virginité fut signe des éloges, fut beau" (Isolano quoted by Bertrand; 230-231). According to Isolano, Joseph's beautiful soul could only reside inside a beautiful body (230-231). We find here a wholeness-holiness paradigm, wherein Joseph's inner holiness (his virginity and chastity) was made made manifest on his outer wholeness (a beautiful man).

For Isolano, Joseph became the epitome of the ideal husband and father. He argued that Joseph's most profound joy emanated from being with his wife and child in the most idyllic scenes (237). He also described him as their protector, comparing the Virgin to the Garden of Eden (paradis terrestre), Jesus to the «bois de vie» and Joseph as the angel whose duty is to guard the paradise and the tree of life (242). In the context of the *Summa,* a period when the Church struggled to maintain peace in Italy and Christianize the infidels of the New World, Joseph came to be associated with the protector (or champion) of the Church Militant (Wilson; 22).

After the Council of Trent rejected these apocryphal stories (Black; 22), theologians and artists had the liberty of talking about Joseph and describing him as they wished, with no authoritative discourses or texts available to restrict them (34). For instance, in 1649, Spanish art theorist Francisco Pacheco published *The Art of painting,* a treatise on iconography, materials, and technique that would largely influence the Baroque style and the art of the Counter-Reformation. He writes that, at the time of his

marriage to Mary, Joseph was a little over thirty (34). The reason behind this, Pacheco argues, is that if Joseph was truly an old man, he would have no strength to work, walk, or provide for his family with the work of his hands (Pachecho; ch XII). Hispanic artists, then, started depicting Joseph as a strong, young man, following the prescriptions provided by Gerson, Isolano, and Pacheco.

Now I want to draw your attention away from Europe and into the Americas. At the same time as the figure of Joseph went through significant changes in Europe, images of deviant and heretical masculinities were being constructed in the New World. I refer particularly to Bernadino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva Españ**a***, also known as the *Florentine Codex*, an ethnographic project that sought to examine the beliefs, behaviours, and daily lives of the Indigenous populations of New Spain, the Nahua people (Kerpel; 1).

We have, for instance, a reference to Tezcatlipoca, one of the most important gods in the Nahua pantheon. Book four, chapter nine, folio twenty-four contains the following sentence: "tu Tezcatlipoca eres un puto" (Sahagún; book 4, chapter 9, folio 24). Loosely translated to English, this sentence would read: "you, Tezcatlipoca, are a faggot" (Sigal; 9), in a way associating this powerful god with a term that, at least in Spanish popular culture, referred to "the effeminate, passive, flamboyant man who flaunted his opposition to Spanish sexual and gender mores" (16). In other words, Bernadino sought to feminize and undermine a god that was understood in the Nahua pantheon as the paragon of masculinity. Moreover, the original Nahua text does not describe Tezcatlipoca in this way, and instead refers to a lesser god, Titlacauan, as a *cuiloni*, translated by Pete Sigal as "passive partner in the act of sodomy" (9). Referring to Titlacauan as a cuiloni was not in opposition with Nahua mythology, so Sahagún's methodology consisted on transposing the names of the gods and then appropriating the term *puto* to stand in for *cuiloni* (27). Sahagún, in his translation and interpretation, turned a Nahua myth into what Sigal describes as "a tool that could aid in the eradication of indigenous religion" (27). If one of the most important gods in the Nahua universe could be turned into a puto, then the foundations for the indigenous religion could be shaken, and the worldview as a whole would be in trouble (27).

Another example of the feminization of Indigenous of masculinities is found in book 10, chapter 11, folio 26, and refers to the xochihua, a male helper and companion who would provide warriors, priests, and member of the

high nobility with a variety of favours, including sex (23). The paragraph describing the *xochihua* is followed by a paragraph describing the sodomite as "passive, abominable, unmentionable, and detestable, someone others should make fun of […] he comports himself as a woman and is effeminate in his deportment and speech, *for all of this he deserved to be burned* (italics mine)" (Sahagún; book 10, chapter 11, folio 25). Bernadino effectively imposes Euro-Christian sexual mores on traditional Nahua roles, and draws a connection between same-sex eroticism and burning, similar to that of sin and punishment. This connection is made clear in the illustration that accompanies the paragraphs on the sodomite and the xochihua. It shows two men, sitting with a flower between them, one of them dressed as a man and the other, the *xochihua*, dressed as a woman. The flower in this case, as in other cases throughout the codex, signifies sexual desire (Sigal; 22). The other side shows a person, presumably a sodomite or xochihua burning in a fire, which is reminiscent of European religious and juridical discourses (24).

In sharp contrast with depictions of deviant, heterodox masculinities, images of St. Joseph emerged and were used to introduce and maintain notions of sexual, gender, and religious normativity in the Americas, particularly in New Spain. A sermon delivered in New Spain recounts how "with the vassals of his Catholic Emperor, St. Joseph converted them so that through his Protection, they were baptized, leaving for our true God all the various, multitude of their false gods" (Villaseñor Black; 28). As such, Joseph became a powerful tool in the evangelization of natives.

As I have pointed out before, many theologians and artists in the seventeenth century argued that Joseph was, at the time of his marriage to the Virgin, a "most handsome young man," and this is the way he appears in the art of the Spanish Empire (46-57). A painting by Sebastián López de Arteaga titled ***Betrothal***, 1645-1652 is a good example of this new Josephine iconography. These images communicated the ideas put forth during the Third Mexican Council, which mandated that couples were not to live together before marriage, and that marriage ought to take place "in presence of a priest […] and two or three witnesses (Concilio Tercero Provincial Mexicano; book 4, title 1, section 3). Paintings of the Holy Matrimony, and Catholic marriage ideology altogether, served to draw a clear divide between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

By imposing European marriage models through images of Saint Joseph, Spanish colonizers attempted to eradicate practices such as polygamy, divorce, and to convince natives to embrace Christian practices (Villaseñor

Black; 55). Just like pre-contact deities were portrayed as sinful sodomites, pre-contact Indians were accused or being polygamous and of practicing divorce to characterize them as sexually voracious. Accusation of sexual voracity was often linked to lawlessness and came to justify the need for European colonization. As sexually voracious predators, sinners, and sodomites, the native populations would benefit from Christianization and civilization by European power (53). These images, then, served as mnemonic devices, reminding native men that they ought to imitate Joseph and get married under the Catholic Church or else, much like the burning *cuiloni*, they would burn in the flames of their own lust.

The Catholic Church in New Spain attempted to colonize the intimate and spiritual lives of native populations (Sigal; 13). In the words of Villaseñor Black, "Christian marriage thus became a form of colonialism (Villaseñor Black; 56). Christian orthodoxy goes hand in hand with sexual normativity. Both Christianity and sexuality are "anchored in the same religious symbolic of dualism and monotheism" (Carrette; 217-218). The cultural mindset that arises from Christianity's emphasis on a single (orthodox) truth about salvation entails, according to scholar Jeremy Carrette, "an ideological oppression of a single (heteronormative) sexuality" (218). Christianity's desire for certainty and power does not allow for diversity and multiplicity—the Christian worldview, emphasizing the existence of a single, orthodox truth, requires the existence of absolute truths for everything, including sexuality.

Monotheism, which is the system of thought that Catholics imposed on native populations, obliterated the existence or potential for multiple truths—multiple gods, multiple forms of relationship, multiple sexualities. The idea of theological orthodoxy and normative sexuality are "dominant discourses that silence difference and conceal the implicit relationship between theological utterances and bodily acts" 218). Thus, Spanish colonizers imposed normative sexuality and masculinity, while simultaneously imposing an orthodox religious belief. They might appear to be two different campaigns, but I would argue that they are intrinsically and necessarily related because monotheism needs heteronormativity. Carrette writes that "to have one God is to have one sex, one leader, one choice. Monotheism anchors heterosexuality. To have more than one desire is to have more than one symbolic for divinity, more than one truth. To be polymorphously perverse is to be open to the polytheism of desire. It is to take self and desire out of the epistemology of monotheism to create a diversity of truths" (228). Colonization and Christianization, therefore,

need the establishment of a dominant heteronormative sexuality and masculinity in order to establish monotheism.

We should not underestimate the role of images in the formation and imposition of a sexual orthopraxy and Christian orthodoxy. Following the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent, images acquired a significant pedagogical role. According to this session, by means of images "the people is instructed, and confirmed in the habit of remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of the faith; […] may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety" (Council of Trent; session XV). Because of language barriers and the pressing need to Christianize native peoples, images were at the forefront of evangelizing and colonizing efforts (Gruzinski; 54). The introduction of Christian imagery for pedagogic and evangelizing purposes also imposed a new symbolic order, a different way of understanding and interacting with one's surroundings, a new worldview. The introduction of Josephine images, then, served as part of a project to create a new man, thus breaking with the idolatrous past and integrating natives into colonial society and Catholicism (56-57, 70).

It has been my contention that the sexual and religious lives of indigenous men in the Americas were colonized, at least partly, through images of Saint Joseph and the eradication of pre-contact practices. In an attempt to Christianize the new continent and establish Christian orthodoxy, colonial authorities had to eradicate the potential for multiple symbolic orders and this included the potential for sexual diversity. A claim for a single truth about God necessitated a claim for a single hegemonic masculinity and a single sexual norm. In this way, the figure of Saint Joseph provided a model of proper religious faith, proper Christian practices, and proper sexual behaviour. This model, made visible in paintings of the Holy Matrimony, was incompatible with what Europeans perceived to be common indigenous practices such as polygamy, cohabitation before marriage, divorce, promiscuity, and sodomy, all of which were considered sinful and therefore were condemned. The rise of the cult of Saint Joseph, then, was not an innocent casualty. It was used as a tool for conversion to the Cristian faith and the European model of heteronormative masculinity.

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Figures

Figure 1: Giotto, *Marriage of the Virgin*,
Scrovegni Chapel (Arena Chapel), Padua, c. 1303.

Figure 2: Perugino, *The Marriage of the Virgin*, 1500-1504, oil on wood, Musée des beaux arts de caen, France.

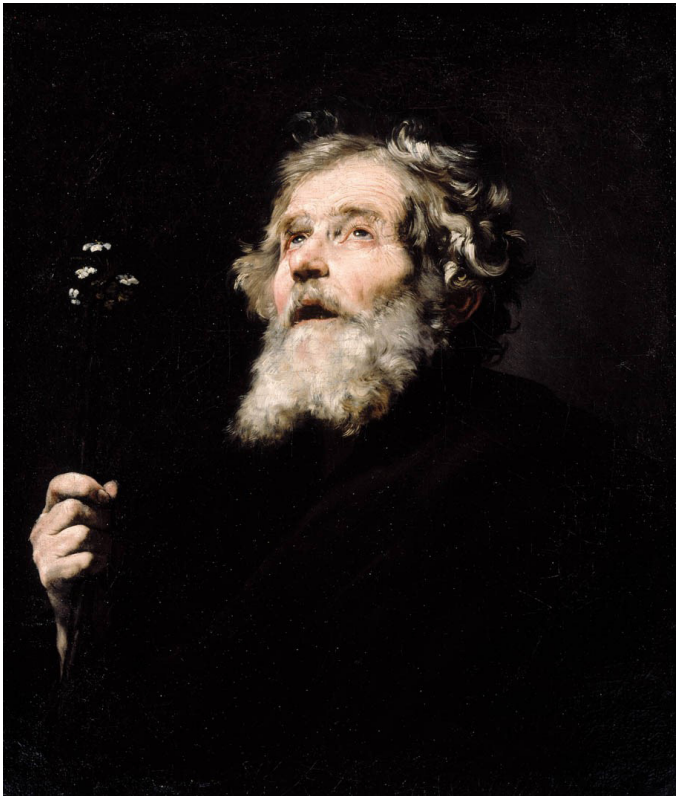

Figure 3: Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Joseph*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal

Figure 6: Sebastián López de Arteaga, *Betrothal*, 1645-1652, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City