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Santos Meza, Anderson Fabián.

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Article

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Article

Queering John of the Cross: Sanjuanist Contributions to the Fight against Phobias towards Queer People

Anderson Fabian Santos Meza 

Faculty of Theology, Pontifical Xavierian University, Bogotá 110231, Colombia; a-santos@javeriana.edu.co

Abstract: This article aims to approach Sanjuanist mysticism from a queer perspective. It is not a monolithic apology to queer people, nor a treatise on mystical interpretation, but an effort to recognize and validate the spiritual experience of LGBTIQ+ people. It takes some mystical passages from St. John of the Cross that help to read the experience of queer life in a mystical key. With this, the potential of mysticism to combat those phobic, segregating, and unjust ideologies that mistreat so many people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity dissidence is manifested. Although it is problematic, talking about this is an act of epistemic, sociocultural, and religious justice.

Keywords: mysticism; queer theologies; LGBTIQ+; social justice; John of the Cross; queering mysticism; contemplation; queer spirituality; queer theory; inclusion

1. Introduction

“The rupture or transgression of the theological path requires us somehow to assume God’s own determination to be led astray”. Marcella [Althaus-Reid](#) (2003, p. 44)

The purpose of this *special issue* is “powerful” because it seeks to point with explicit allusions towards the relationship between mystical experience and social justice. The writer of this reflection considers this motivational goal “powerful” because it addresses the question that presents itself, time and again, as urgent for theology, spirituality, and mysticism: what is their concrete contribution to the problems that incessantly wound, break, and tear our societies apart? On this issue, mysticism has much to say, for its eternal freshness always compels us to reflect on the way in which God communicates himself in history, on the way in which divinity manifests itself in the midst of human struggles and, becoming one among the people, traces paths towards reconciliation, justice, and healing, that is, towards the horizon of a life in abundance.

In the following pages, some reflections will be presented that seek to relate the experience of St. John of the Cross to the experience of LGBTIQ+ communities today. For some people, this may be problematic and cause conflict. However, for many others, including the writer of this article, this association is not novel, nor far-fetched, for it is about the spiritual bond that they have built and that they have cultivated within themselves. Sanjuanist mysticism is presented as a path of self-knowledge, of identity purification, of sexual healing and, above all, of the recovery of dialogue with the divinity. For a few lines, I will speak in the first person, as St. John of the Cross himself and some contextual and queer theologians have taught me.

Since adolescence, I identified myself as a Catholic Christian person, but also as a homosexual; I lived through many crises of faith that, for the most part, were related to the conflict of one who does not fit the sex–gender norms that society establishes as “correct” or “ordered” in “God’s plan”. I found it painful to constantly hear expletives from “very” religious people towards the LGBTIQ+ community, and I felt that my destiny was heartbreak, abandonment, and hell. However, those ideas changed when I began my religious formation in the community of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross.



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My approach to Carmelite spirituality was a “safe harbor” in which I was able to calm the turbulences that had been troubling me since adolescence, because I discovered the possibility of cultivating my “intimate world” or, in the words of St. Teresa, my “inner castle” [Castillo interior] (St. Teresa of Jesus 1946, 2000). What I remember most about this time of my first approach to Carmelite spirituality is that I felt deeply in love with the divinity that the Carmelite mystics had discovered; I was passionate about spending hours and hours of my days and nights reading their experiences and imagining myself in them. I fell in love with that powerful divinity who held little Therese of Lisieux in the palm of his hand and protected her unconditionally, who guided her along a little path of spiritual childhood, where the divine mysteries were hidden from the powerful and offered freely to the smallest and most fragile; I also remember that invitation I felt to give myself without reserve to God, that “ocean” in which, like thirsty deer, we can drink of his infinite water. I was captivated by the loving God who seduced and enamored Teresa of Jesus, who shook her from her comforts and urged her to reform Carmel—that God who, in the words of Teresa, invites her to have a loving search within: “Alma, buscarte has en Mí y a Mí buscarme has en Tí” [soul, seek you in me, and me, seek me in you] (St. Teresa of Jesus 2000, pp. 1192–94; Vega 1972, pp. 88–97).

Nevertheless, the experience of St. John of the Cross (1990, 2003) was one of those that most seduced me: the passionate departure of the one who loves in the twilight of a dark night, with anxieties in love inflamed, in search of his loved one, because the strongest conquest in darkness was made; the flame of living love that tenderly wounds the soul in the deepest center, the flame of love that makes the one who loves exclaim sobbingly “break the fabric of this sweet encounter! (. . .) O soft hand! O delicate touch that tastes of eternal life and repays every debt!” [rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro! (. . .) /¡Oh, mano blanda! ¡Oh, toque delicado /que a vida eterna sabe /y toda deuda paga!]. The recognition of the overflowing experience of the divinity that exceeds understanding: “I did not know where I was, but when I saw myself there, without knowing where I was, I understood great things; I will not say what I felt, I remained not knowing, transcending all science” [Yo no supe dónde entraba, /porque, cuando allí me vi, /sin saber dónde me estaba, /grandes cosas entendí; /no diré lo que sentí, /que me quedé no sabiendo, /toda ciencia trascendiendo]; a loving experience of God that produces such a sensation that the only thing that can be said is “woe to him who has made absence of my love and does not want to enjoy my presence, and the chest by his love is very hurt!” [¡Ay, desdichado /de aquel que de mi amor ha hecho ausencia /y no quiere gozar la mi presencia, /el pecho por su amor muy lastimado!].¹ I used to read the poet John of the Cross and he filled me with a love so deep that it made me feel madly in love. Above all, I discovered in his poetry a homoerotic language that made me think of a pure, healthy, tender, God-filled queer love.

This was not something that only I felt, lived, and thought. Many friars with whom I conversed and lived with alluded to it. Moreover, at that time I perceived how there was a generalized homoerotic background in the Carmelite conventualities, which used to operate as a way of *resisting* in the current heteronormative environments. If society does not accept the existence of homosexual people and recognize the richness of their experiences, religious communities will continue to be an option to resist, in a certain sense, heteronormativity, because there one can overcome the expectations of patriarchal society, opting for a “betrothal” with Jesus Christ and also for queer romances with other friars that take place in clandestinely in the convents (Thompson 1985; Kelly 2019; Díaz 2022; Santos Meza 2024). In the rhetorical consideration of St. John’s *dark night*, Thompson’s (1985) statement is critical: “The author is a man who is writing from the point of view of a woman” (p. 200). However, I wonder if it is only a “point of view”? Here, I would suggest that—at the very least—it must be suspected that John of the Cross is consciously or unconsciously using particular homoaffective and erotic language, which opens the horizon to interpretations beyond the cis-heterosexual. It was not something that only I felt, lived, and thought. Many friars with whom I conversed and lived alluded to it. Moreover, at that time, I perceived how there was a generalized homoerotic background in the Carmelite

conventualities, which used to operate as a way of resisting the current heteronormative environments. Suppose society does not accept the existence of homosexual people and recognize the richness of their experiences. In that case, religious communities will continue to be an option to resist, in a certain sense, heteronormativity because there one can overcome the expectations of a cis-heteropatriarchal society, opting for a “betrothal” with Jesus Christ and also for queer romances with other friars that take place in clandestinely in the convents (Thompson 1985). In the rhetorical consideration of St. John’s *dark night*, Thompson’s (1985) statement is critical: “The author is a man who is writing from the point of view of a woman” (p. 200). However, I wonder if it is only a “point of view”? Here, I would suggest that—at the very least—it must be suspected that John of the Cross is consciously or unconsciously using particular homoaffective and erotic language, which opens the horizon to interpretations beyond the cis-heterosexual.

When I left the convent where I lived, I had an intuition: The God who had seduced me and who had made me fall in love with him would continue to do so outside the convent and, perhaps, I would be able to feel and love him better. Over the years, this intuition has become a non-negotiable certainty. But, in order to confess, by faith, that God loves me, seduces me, and accompanies me without condemning my sexual orientation and gender identity, I had to live and walk through my own *dark night*. Indeed, that “safe harbor” of the Teresian Carmel was not only a place where I could begin to discover some aspects of my being, but, as a good “harbor”, it also propelled me to set out on new journeys that helped me to advance in my self-knowledge and in my own spiritual life.

I must recognize that this is not something that only I lived, as many other ex-frail members agree with me in this aspect, and also today there are writings that tell us about real testimonies of believers and non-believers, in the dark night, who are going through difficult moments of illness, meaninglessness, depression, loneliness, marginalization, and oppression. However, although the dark night is not a new issue, it is of concern that different spiritual companions continue to note that today there are people who are going through this difficult process, and yet they do not know very well how to accompany them. The night is a stage of the spiritual process that takes us, among many things, into the *affective dimension* of the person, in human sexuality and in the so-called “sentimental education”. St. John of the Cross invites his readers to personal healing, which involves integrating and educating desire in all dimensions: power, having, and knowing. The night is a time for healing and liberation, and it is also for queer people.

Thus, the exercise of the *queerization* of Sanjuanist thought proposed here is an exercise of epistemic justice (Fricker 2007), but, above all, of *spiritual justice*, since it is an effort to point out how queer people, who have been deprived of even spirituality and mysticism, also cultivate our “inner castle”. As Cassidy Hall (2024, p. 64) states, “when we queer mysticism, we see that the pursuit of justice, love, liberation—and even joy and rest—stand within reach”. Reading and feeling the experience of St. John of the Cross from a queer perspective is a powerful response to the *colonial geographies of sainthood* (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 141), which systematically silence the voice of sex–gender diversities that speak of their spiritual experiences. Queer people have the right to be heard in relation to religion and mysticism, because we also have a relationship with our Creator. If, as Malraux once said, “the twenty-first century will be mystical or it will not be”,² the phenomenon of queer people’s return to religion and mysticism reinforces this conviction. We have a voice to pronounce in the face of justice, peace, benevolence, welcoming the stranger, forgiveness, coexistence with opposites, and union and love between humans and God (Boff 2000, p. 19).

Suppose we are to live “mystically” in our world. In that case, we need models, references, and witnesses who have lived an authentic experience of God and who speak to us in a way that is meaningful for today (Baracco 2014, p. 437). It should be noted that LGBTIQ+ people have had a challenging time with this because it seems that there are no figures of holiness who have courageously acknowledged dissident sexuality. Perhaps this is because—as Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, pp. 140–41) points out—the *queering* of sainthood has all but disappeared as people have not been able to witness holy men and

holy women eating with their hands in their underwear or the underwear of the opposite sex, let alone seen them praying while taking off their underwear. The signs of holiness—the decency and legal sexual order of totalitarian theology—have become equivalent to the real lives of saints, eliminating gestures of rebellion and the contradiction of the *colonial geographies of sainthood*. However, there are still roads to be walked. This is the main proposal of Hanna Reichel's (2023) disruptive book, *After Method. Queer grace, conceptual design, and the possibility of theology*. Its author, recognizing that theological malpractice has killed, proposes a shake-up in the architectural foundations of theological methodologies, to discover the many structural fissures and their constructive flaws, but also the new possibilities of doing theology and, furthermore, of approaching mystical texts.

While I was shaping some aspects of this research, I came across Cassidy Hall's work on *Queering Contemplation* (2024), a book that is due out in mid-May of this year, but which I was generously able to read before its publication, thanks to the kindness of its author. In her work, Hall (2024) lucidly points out the relationship between mysticism and social justice:

The mysticism can be found in falling in love with a tree or in the eroticism in oceanic oneness with one's partner. But it is crucial to also recall that mysticism occurs in social-justice activism, and in being awake—and responsive to the injustices in one's community and the world. (p. 63)

Like her, mysticism has much to contribute to social justice in the world and always has. I have already pointed out in other research that more attention should be paid to queer resistance to religious institutionality from a perspective that has received very little attention: the experience of mystics (Santos Meza 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). Mystics are "seeking the ineffable in the ordinary, the mystical in the mundane, the transcendent in the midst of pragmatic justice-seeking acts" (Hall 2024, p. 62; Holmes 2017). As in many social contexts, where the dominant, cis-heteropatriarchal interpretation takes precedence, queer people step out of the usual mode of approaching spirituality and mysticism, since "that" mode is merely a habit of thought from which we can disabuse ourselves. We pervert mysticism, removing it from the theo(ideo)logical closet (Córdova Quero 2015, 2016).

Therefore, this exploration of St. John's thought does not seek to assert itself within the confines of established interpretations; instead, it strives to highlight alternative perspectives that already exist and that many consider meaningful, therapeutic, and liberating (Kelly 2019; Santos Meza 2021; Díaz 2022; Hall 2024). It is worth noting that queer individuals are well aware that such interpretations are often considered "uncomfortable" and labeled as "perverted" by proponents of the conventional exegesis of mystical texts. This recognition is crucial because the proposal of these "alternative reflections" by scholars, such as we ourselves, stems from our inability to find resonance within the rigid and dominant interpretations that have historically been employed to perpetuate oppression towards LGBTIQ+ people under the guise of divine authority.

2. Walking *Queerly* into the Depths of Mystery

"Outside the established religious system there is a source of mystical powers available only to people at the margins". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 160)

Nothing has been as "strange" and "suspicious" to traditional hegemonic theologies as the mystical experience. Countless contemporary theologians—including Paul Mommaers (1979), Leonardo Boff (2003), José María Mardónés (2005), Evelyn Underhill (2006), Juan Martín Velasco (2006, 2007), Michel de Certeau (2007), and Raimon Pannikar (2008), among others—have agreed that the perception of mystics as "strange" and "dangerous" people has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout history. They all agree that this label has been applied to mystics mainly because their spiritual and religious experiences did not conform to the rigid and conventional model that prevailed in the religious practices of the time.

Within the framework of traditional beliefs, mystics often challenged established norms by describing direct and intimate experiences with the divine, experiences that went beyond conventional dogmatic structures and rituals. By not conforming to religious conventions, these individuals were perceived as threats to existing religious orthodoxy. The reaction to these divergent views was often swift and forceful. Those who shared their mystical experiences were frequently discredited and labeled as madmen, heretics, or blasphemers. They were accused of having deviations in their reason and faith since their testimonies challenged the conventional understanding of the relationship between humanity and the divine.

This tendency to marginalize the mystics was due, in part, to resistance to the notion that connection with the transcendental could be achieved directly and individually without the need for mediators or ecclesiastical structures. Mystical interpretations challenged established religious authority and raised uncomfortable questions about the very nature of faith and spirituality. Today, many scholars recognize the importance of mystical experiences and seek to understand them in a broader context, recognizing that the diversity of spiritual expressions enriches the overall understanding of religion (Kelly 2019; Santos Meza 2021; Díaz 2022; Santos Meza 2024). However, the history of the marginalization of mystics serves as a reminder of how religious institutions have often resisted interpretations that challenge established norms, perpetuating the perception of mystics as “outsiders” and “dangerous” figures.

A reading of mystical texts from various historical periods—and a review of the interpretations that have been privileged over these texts—reveals a dominant bias in canonical reflections. In other words, the cis-heteropatriarchal narrative has appropriated the interpretation of mystical texts to distort the testimonial meaning of the mystics, even to the point of theological distortion of divine experiences. This audacity reflects the firm determination of the religious hegemony to impose its normative vision on mystical experiences, even when these are expressions of the absolute freedom to feel and connect with the divine. The resistance of mysticism in the face of these normative interpretations highlights its unique capacity to challenge and transcend the limitations imposed by traditional religious structures, thus opening the door to a more authentic and emancipatory spirituality.

The testimonies of mystical experiences begin to be obscured and relegated to the theo(ideo)logical closet (Córdova Quero 2015, 2016), especially those textual passages in which the language is indecent. That has happened, for example, with the testimonies of the medieval Beguines—Marguerite Porrette, Hadewych of Antwerp, Mary of Oignies, and Julian of Norwich, among others—and of the saints of the Spanish Golden Age—Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross (Santos Meza 2021). As female voices emerged from the shadows of anonymity—after having been banished and exiled—a *disruptive masculinity* was also emerging that challenged and weakened the dominant and fragile patriarchal virility of the time.

St. John of the Cross (1990, 2003, 2011) was one of the first mystics who dared to share his spiritual experience using homoerotic and sexually transgressive language. His work reveals a deep and sincere masculine longing: the desire to be kissed by God with divine lips, to be delicately touched, seduced, and carried between divine arms into the sacred nuptial space where the eternal union is consummated (Loughlin 2007, pp. 1–7; Diskant 2012, pp. 67–115; Hinkle 2001, pp. 427–40). John of the Cross, like other spiritual witnesses, protagonizes acts of resistance by challenging and dismantling the self-indulgent supremacy of gender–sexual patriarchal ideology (Smith 1994, p. 147). This boldness not only involved a personal revelation of her inclinations and desires but also served as a direct challenge to the rigidity of the patriarchal conception that upheld heteronormativity as the absolute norm. Their spiritual experiences, imbued with homoeroticism, metaphorical and performative, challenged the prevailing narrative that limited spirituality and divine intimacy to heterosexual conventions. Such an act of defiance ultimately weakened the artificial construction of masculinity. It opened a space for exploring and accepting diverse expressions of spirituality and desire in the mystical context.

The Argentine theologian M. Althaus-Reid acutely identified the cis-hetero-patriarchalization of mystical narratives and, citing Georges Bataille, noted that mysticism seems to show a weakness in its ability to express itself fully in crucial moments of militancy, while, from the perspective of eroticism, it reveals itself as a more robust and uninhibited force (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 47). However, it is not that mystics are lacking in critical moments; rather, it is the hegemonic reading transmitted from their experiences that hinders and attenuates the revolutionary message of mysticism, attempting to present it as something “decent”. Clearly, the limitations and fears of traditional “decent” theology, as we have observed, cannot deal with the vision of uncontrolled corporealities, canon-defying orgasmic experiences, and the multiple orgies formed by these unrestrained bodies. Instead of addressing the *divinely indecent* dimensions of mysticism, traditional theology has chosen to minimize and silence them—rendering “*soft-sex*” what is “*hard-sex*”—hiding them in the dark theo(ideo)logical closet that disguises human experience in the tight garb of decency (Córdova Quero 2011, 2015).

That attitude reflects a resistance rooted in religious orthodoxy toward the exploration of spirituality that transcends normative boundaries, especially concerning sexuality and eroticism. A limited and biased version of mysticism is perpetuated by relegating mystical experiences to the periphery and restricting their expression in acceptable terms, which seeks to maintain the conventional image of decency in spirituality. The censorship, however, not only distorts the authentic message of mysticism but also perpetuates the invisibility of mystical experiences that defy established norms and embrace the fullness of human experience, including the erotic and sexual dimensions. However, mystical experience has always evidenced that “there are bodies whose fluids overflow the metaphorical discourse of theology, even if they have lost materiality and sensuality. Theology can see blood in wine, but not blood in blood” (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 47). In this way, theological discourse often prefers to elevate itself to the status of transubstantiation [*transubstantiatio*] rather than open its eyes and reach out to the sex-dissident population. Again, making Bataille’s words his own, Althaus-Reid (2003) dares to assert that,

God himself with all his attributes; yet this God is a whore exactly like all other whores. But what mysticism cannot put into words [it fails at the moment of the utterance], eroticism says. . . . (p. 94)

In this context, I think of the first time I read the erotic poem *Dark Night* by St. John of the Cross (2003, pp. 391–92):

En una noche oscura
con ansias en amores inflamada,
¡oh, dichosa ventura!,
salí sin ser notada
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

A oscuras y segura,
por la secreta escala disfrazada,
¡oh, dichosa ventura!,
a oscuras y en celada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada.

En la noche dichosa,
en secreto, que nadie me veía
ni yo miraba cosa,
sin otra luz y guía
sino la que en el corazón ardía.

In a dark night,
With anxious love inflamed,
O, happy lot!
Forth unobserved I went,
My house being now at rest

In darkness and in safety,
By the secret ladder, disguised,
O, happy lot!
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now at rest.

In that happy night,
In secret, seen of none,
Seeing naught myself,
Without other light or guide
Save that which in my heart was burning.

Aquesta me guiaba
 más cierto que la luz de mediodía,
 adonde me esperaba
 quien yo bien me sabía,
 en parte donde nadie parecía.

That light guided me
 More surely than the noonday sun
 To the place where He was waiting for me,
 Whom I knew well,
 And where none appeared.

¡Oh, noche que guiaste!
 ¡Oh, noche amable más que la alborada!
 ¡Oh, noche que juntaste
 Amado con amada,
 amada en el Amado transformada!

O, guiding night;
 O, night more lovely than the dawn;
 O, night that hast united
 The lover with His beloved,
 And changed her into her love.

En mi pecho florido,
 que entero para él solo se guardaba,
 allí quedó dormido,
 y yo le regalaba,
 y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.

On my flowery bosom
 Kept whole for Him alone,
 There He reposed and slept;
 And I cherished Him, and the waving
 Of the cedars fanned Him.

El aire del almena
 cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía,
 con su mano serena
 en mi cuello hería
 y todos mis sentidos suspendía.

As His hair floated in the breeze
 That from the turret blew,
 He struck me on the neck
 With His gentle hand,
 And all sensation left me.

Quedeme y olvideme.
 El rostro recliné sobre el Amado.
 Cesó todo y déjeme
 dejando mi cuidado
 entre las azucenas olvidado.

I continued in oblivion lost,
 My head was resting on my love;
 Lost to all things and myself,
 And, amid the lilies forgotten,
 Threw all my cares away.

How can I not think of those days when I would sneak out late at night to meet my beloved(s)? John of the Cross is using the erotic language of the love encounter, of the emerging passion in the sexual encounter, of orgasm and penetration, of moaning and post-orgasmic rest on the breast of the beloved. However, in traditional theological interpretations, we find only bodily mutilations, which disembodify John of the Cross, taking his mystical confessions to the language of the ecstasy of the soul, of intellectuality and imagination, without considering the mystic's sexed body, much less his homoerotic language. Should we not at least think about why John of the Cross had such a rich catalogue of erotic metaphors and descriptions of the sexual act?

Many times, I have heard homosexual or bisexual friars "*in the closet*" versed in mystical theology and spirituality but limited and reluctant to address their sexual practices honestly, claiming that homoaffective language should not be used in the mystical context. In fact, for some people, the simplest way to explain St. John's experience is to affirm that, most likely, before entering the Carmel, or even while inside, he had affairs with some of the women around him. According to this perspective, the mystical encounter of St. John is encapsulated in cis-heterosexuality, reduced to an experience between the "feminine" soul and the "masculine" God. Such a monolithic perspective—proper of patriarchal stubbornness—attempts to sexualize, cis-hetero-sexualize, and strip figures, like John of the Cross—poet and lover—of their richness, plunging him into the *dark night* of cis-heterosexual radicalization and repressing the communicative potentiality of his love songs. Poor John of the Cross, poet and lover, cis-heterosexualized to the extreme by patriarchal stubbornness! What a *dark night* in which the longing for love is extinguished!

Therefore, some questions arise to glimpse the complexity of the situation: Why can we not suspect, at least, that these were encounters and love affairs with other men? Would

this be a reason for minimizing the mysticism of St. John of the Cross or some detriment to the validity of his spiritual experience? Furthermore, Can we not think that St. John was in love with another man—the man Jesus Christ—and that is why he presented himself as the “lover” who—in the “beloved”—was transformed? Can we not consider it *queer* that a man insists on systematically enunciating himself in states of sexual passivity and submission? In the end, Can we not at least be suspicious of his mystical and erotic language to avoid encapsulating it in norms that minimize and narrow its horizon?

3. Queering John of The Cross

“Can theology or God exist without a prescriptive sexual centre around which we should gather as a community to celebrate our struggles for justice and peace in our lives?”. Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 90)

Queering theology is an exercise in justice but, above all, in love. Whoever does queer theology inserts himself in a place [*locus*] and tries to get out of it by unsettling the given framework and, in the process, unsettling himself and others to see the world differently or to see other ways of understanding the world. Undoubtedly, it becomes necessary to unhinge the framework that labels theology, because this framework is tailored to the measure of a prevailing and traditional “*logos*” [λόγος], which makes some things visible, makes others invisible and places, always places, each “thing” [*ding*] in its specific place, conditioning it [*bedingen*]. From a queer perspective, the need to unsettle the theological framework is intensified by recognizing the oppression inherent in traditional structures. Queer theologians challenge the binary norms and categories imposed by prevailing, traditional *logos*, which—by selectively making certain aspects visible—invisibilizes and marginalizes others. This “*logos*”—by placing each “thing” in its specific place—exerts a conditioning that reinforces hegemonic norms (Santos Meza 2024). Therefore, as Althaus-Reid stated, we need not accept a *claim to neutrality* as indecent theologians. Still, instead, we need to maintain a *responsible position* in the divine cartography of desire and pleasure (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 7).

In this sense, theologian Gerard Loughlin (2007) affirmed that,

(. . .) to find St. John of the Cross teaching the due ordering of sexual to spiritual desire, and not the least for gay men, is not to find John a gay saint, even if there are aspects of his life and character that tempt this identification. (p. 147)

Although it might be thought that such a characterization is anachronistic, “we should attend to the queerness of his writings, to John’s written desire for the embrace of his divine lover” (Loughlin 2007). Another response to the concern that some con-temporary forms of reading and criticism of ancient and medieval texts are anachronistic has been put forward by Karma Lochrie (1997). She asserts that queer interpretation assumes the *risk of anachronism* in speaking of sexuality and does so precisely to challenge and disrupt cis-heteropatriarchal historicist and literary assumptions and practices (Lochrie 1997; Córdova Quero 2004; Santos Meza 2022). Therefore, if we assume the *risk of anachronism*, it is because it is undelayable to talk about sexual diversity, evidencing and problematizing it from historical sources that destabilize the cis-heterosexual paradigms that prevail in medievalist and patristic scholarship, but also in the fields of research on the mystical phenomenon. It is also necessary to “[. . .] contest medieval representational practices across sexual, gender and class lines [. . .]” (Lochrie 1997, p. 180). Additionally, it is irreplaceable to advocate readings of medieval texts that challenge traditional and rigid assumptions about medieval culture and practices of translation and interpretation of those texts.

In this case, the interest in thinking of a *Sanjuanist queering* arises as a response to the social, institutional, and religious injustice that excludes LGBTIQ+ people from mystical discourses, invalidating the experiences of God that such people live in the intimacy of stories. Undoubtedly,

We need to walk in these different paths at a time when Sexual theologies have left behind the male/female naturalized discussions within Christianity in order

to focus on the particular construction of masculinity and femininity of which the discourse on God not only has something to say but, as we shall argue, on which it might depend. (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 33)

As in everything, the writer of this text has already been preceded by other stories and vigorous research. The publication of the masterful book *Queer God de Amor* (Díaz 2022) by Latinx theologian Miguel H. Díaz has already presented an exercise in *Sanjuanist queering*. According to the author, John's mystical theology is disruptive and constructive. The apophatic elements of his theology take distance and oppose the idolatrous interpretations of the divine life and the exclusive mediations of that life in human experiences. The constructive or cataphatic elements are particularly evident in *Living Flame of Love* and its commentary. In this double process of altering and constructing, and in its deployment of sexual metaphors, Díaz perceives the opportunity to offer a queer reading of Johannine theology. *To queer John*, then, is to engage in critical conversations that unveil forgotten or suppressed theological elements in his thought and to open up new ones that challenge heteronormative theologies of God (Díaz 2022, p. 95). In this way, Díaz follows the idea of Hugo Córdova Quero (2004), who points out the urgent need to queerize the past to open the horizon of religious discourses:

To queer the past is a performative disruption in order to open up spaces for other discourses from the past to arise and to be heard in the conversation nowadays, as well as dealing with the performances of different discourses in the academy. To queer the past is not to transplant gays, lesbians, bisexuals or transsexuals into the past, but to disrupt monolithic discourses that oppress historical periods. It also refers to the fact that we need to be conscious that our own lenses should be disrupted and that the result of that process of disruption is not to reiterate hegemonic heteropatriarchal discourses. (Córdova Quero 2004, p. 28)

In reading John of the Cross, one finds permission to follow a queer line of interpretation, for going back to his words in the prologue of the *Spiritual Canticle*, one notes the following:

(. . .) because the sayings of love are better left in their breadth so that each one of them may take advantage of them according to his own way and flow of spirit, than to abbreviate them to a sense that does not suit every palate. And so, although in some way they are declared, there is no reason to be tied to the declaration; because mystical wisdom (which is for love, of which the present songs treat) does not need to be distinctly understood to have the effect of love and affection in the soul, because it is like faith, in which we love God without understanding Him.

In this confession of St. John, the affirmations related to preserving the "breadth" of love instead of "shortening" it to the taste of a few palates are striking; in addition, he points out that there is no reason to be "tied" to certain statements, because mystical wisdom, John knows well, exceeds our comprehension. These words suggest a robust *hermeneutical criterion* that considers lived experience over mere theorizing, that gives specific importance to the one who lives the experience of God and receives the effects of his love, then to the one who seeks to understand what happened to someone else, even sometimes without faith. In *Spiritual Canticle*, Prologue, 2 (St. John of the Cross 1961), we can note a similar argument in *The Living Flame of Love* when he writes: "and knowing the reader understands that everything I say is as far from the reality as is a painting from the living object represented, I shall declare what I know" (*Living Flame*, Prologue, 1). Finally, note the following argument that Celia Kourie makes: "John's entire mystical schemata must be seen holistically; the various stages may well overlap, and the path is unique to each individual: 'God leads each one along different path so that hardly one spirit will be found like another in even half its procedure'" (Kourie 2016, p. 10).

Relying on such prologue words, I propose a *queer* mystical theology of John that is useful for considering the mystical experience without abandoning the specific erotic-

sexual connotations concerning LGBTIQ+ communities. By this, it is not meant to reject the myriad efforts to understand Sanjuanist mysticism from multiple angles but to point to an additional perspective. Framing John through the lens of queer theology requires an attempt to hold queer *in extenso*:

In addition to the definition of “queer” as “odd”, and as a collective grouping for non-normative identifications of gender/sexuality, there is a third, critical usage of the word which emerges from its use as an academic term. In this context “queer” means to “disturb” or “disrupt”. It is this definition that was later applied to theory, and theology, as a critical lens. It calls for the uncovering and dismantling of power structures. (Greenough 2020, p. 4)

As Miguel H. Díaz (2022) rightly points out,

Unlike some queer voices in Spanish literature, few biblical scholars and theologians have attended to the sexual dimensions of John’s writings, and rarely do they venture beyond the heteronormative sexual subject. To some extent, John’s own commentaries reflect this heteronormativity, but as we have seen, his poems also push and disrupt ways of conceiving the human relationship to God through his performance, for example, as Christ’s mystical male lover. (p. 101)

Crossing the wall of the heteronormative is a fruitful exercise in all stages that seek to engage in sincere and honest conversations about the urgency of social justice, and even more so when the theme is mysticism, since it is the path of divine experience, of mystery, and of fullness. Nevertheless, if queer people cannot at least think, imagine, and confess their experiences with God without being attacked and discredited, then not only would it be unfair to them to take away part of their status as *imago Dei* and their right to confess their spiritual experiences, but this would be even more unfair to God, for it would superbly call into question that Divinity is indeed omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These reflective and queer lines seek to testify that it is true that human beings, LGBTIQ+ or not, can personally experience God, and the experiences of the mystics help human beings to experience that they have always been and continue to be in contact with “the divine” (Rahner 1990, pp. 10–12).

4. How Delicately (and Queerly) You Make Me Fall in Love with You

“In the economy of the text, processes of symbolic value and representations of the world (and the divine) come forward bringing new light (and darkness) to our understanding of Sexual theological reflections”. Marcel Hénaff (1999, p. 12)

A reading, with queer eyes and heart, of *St. John of the Cross* (2003) invites us to say the following: How meek and loving you are remembered in my bosom where secretly alone you dwell, and in your tasty aspiration of good and glory full how delicately and *queerly* you make me fall in love! The theologians Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid have already said that “different ways of amatory knowing express themselves in different ways of befriending, imagining God and compassion and creating different structures of relationships” (Isherwood and Althaus-Reid 2004, p. 5). Queer amatory knowing will, thus, be responsible for driving this Sanjuanist interpretation, since many people—including the writer of this reflection—recognize that the spirituality they experience is innately queer and find forms of queerness in the disruptions of the mystical testimonies of countless spiritual witnesses. Undoubtedly, healing and reconciliation, self-knowledge and love, justice, and freedom of queer lives are claimed here.

For this, Karl Rahner’s (1997) affirmation that “the mysticism of every day, the search for God in all things” (p. 53) is crucial and needs to be assumed because we cannot speak in our case of pontifical and canonized experiences because queer people reside in the peripheries and the social, but also ecclesial, diasporas. In the same way, it usually happens with those who confess their mystical experiences. Suffice it to recall how the nascent reform of the Discalced Carmel generated unrest among the friars of the old observance, also called “calzados”, who directed persecution towards the leaders of that enterprise:

Teresa of Jesus, Jerónimo Gracián, and John of the Cross, to put an end to it (Cantero 2010, p. 39).

However, the presence of the Saint, which was of great spiritual benefit for the nuns, was unbearable for the “calzados”. In 1575, they held a chapter in Piacenza, Italy, in which they dictated a series of dispositions that declared war on the reform. In 1576, the prior of Carmen de Avila, Friar Alonso Valdemoro, proposed to free himself from the two disalced friars, taking them prisoner and taking them to Medina del Campo, from where they soon left by order of the nuncio Ornameto, protector of the reform. With the death of the nuncio (1577), the “calzados” managed another nuncio favorable to their intentions, with which, under the command of Tostado, vicar general of the Order, and the prior of Toledo, Maldonado, they seized both friars on the night of 2 December 1577, and, chained, they were dragged outside the walls to take them to the convent of Carmen de Avila. John was finally transferred to Toledo to appear before Father Tostado. Once in Toledo, taken blindfolded to the convent of El Carmen, Juan de la Cruz was locked in the cell destined for the conventual prison (Cristiani 1983; Pachó 1998; Rodríguez 1991). When news of Friar Germán’s escape from the San Pablo de la Moraleja convent became known, greater vigilance was imposed upon the Saint. He was transferred to a more guarded place under worse living conditions. About the new place, the testimonies affirm: “They put him in a hole in a wall, little more or less than a grave, but much higher, without light” (Pachó 1998, p. 103). Bruno Moriconi (2020) states:

The door was closed with a strong padlock that could only be opened from the outside, and, for a bed, there was a bench and some old blankets. Because of the cold, Friar Juan went to bed dressed without being allowed to change (. . .) He and the lice were one and the same. (p. 119)

The routine during this time consisted of eating bread with water and sometimes sardines. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, he underwent a rigorous fast. However, on Fridays in the community refectory, he was punished with discipline. One by one, the friars gave him strong blows: “During this time, they took him down to the refectory, while the friars were there, three or four times so that he would receive discipline there, which was given to him with some rigor, without him ever speaking a word.” This testimony was collected by de la Madre de Dios and Steggink (1992, p. 415). And Steggink affirms: “after the repression, Friar John received the discipline: half naked, kneeling, head bowed; it lasted the recitation of a *Miserere*” (Steggink 1991, p. 299).

Treated by some as hypocritical and indecent, as well as proud and rebellious, Friar John responded with patience. In May 1578, the change of the jailer for a friendlier one led the Saint to ask him for paper and ink, and in his narrow cell and with little light, he composed 31 stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle* [Cántico Espiritual], the poem of the *Fonte* and some of his *Romances* (Sedgwick 2008; Boucai 2022, pp. 587–611; Beliso-De Jesus 2023, pp. 1–26; Ratcliff and Haltom 2021, pp. 249–69; Coburn et al. 2019, pp. 165–94; Seely 2013). Toledo’s prison and escape have become obligatory points of reference to understand the Saint, mainly because of their resonances in his works, specifically in *Noche Oscura* [dark night]. Undoubtedly, as Bernard Sesé affirms, this experience of prison, solitude, and abandonment “that John of the Cross suffered in the convent of Toledo was deeply inscribed in his spiritual doctrine. Who could have described in this way the night of abandonment, pain, and death without having gone through it?” (Sesé 2018, p. 75).

In the efforts to systematically study the phenomenology of the “closet”, that is, of the experience of gender identity and sexual orientation of LGBTIQ+ people who must hide because circumstances prevent them from being entirely free and authentic to themselves, one could find aspects similar to the experience of the deprivation of freedom to which John of the Cross was subjected concerning the suffering of captivity and the passionate transition to freedom from the darkness of night to the rising of dawn.

If it is true that symbolic totalization entails the freezing of the experience of the phenomenon and the totalitarian crystallization of culture, and any pretension of totality leads to the actual “end of history”, which, as Paul Tillich (1951, p. 134) says, is accompanied

by a *demonization of culture*, then undertaking this exercise of *Sanjuanist queering* is also an effort to break with the rigid interpretations of the work of John of the Cross, of his symbolism and his mystical eroticism. From the night, it is possible to deconstruct the luminescence of many totalitarian and dominant certainties to install the security of the provisional, always in rethinking, taking steps with love, but not establishing this path as the only way. It must be recognized that to appropriate the step taken is to give meaning to the step, but not to set paths forever, because the path is made each time a transit is begun. According to Jacques Derrida (1989, 1991), it is not the encounter that matters but the potentiality of the incessant *disencounter*.

The writer of this reflection profoundly believes in the existence of the eternal encounter and the never-ending *disencounter*, for this is the mystical–poetic inhabitation of the world. The traditional heterosexual interpretation of the mystics obscures dissident and plural understandings of the spiritual experience of figures, such as St. John of the Cross. His mysticism, imbued with homoaffective and homoerotic symbolism, harbors a powerful resistance to the regimes of masculinization and virility, aspects of phallogocentric “dominance” and patriarchalism, which dominate in all times. Recovering these traces of resistance and emancipation in St. John’s work is an opportunity to point out a necessary aspect of “social justice”, namely the equality of all human beings to love fully, unreservedly, and in freedom.

A “fresh look” is then offered to look sensibly at the fractures and wounds that theology itself has inflicted on today’s societies, more specifically on LGBTIQ+ people. This reflection is pertinent for someone who believes that the healing of these social wounds must begin where theology exists—the minds and hearts of people, the prayer, and the lives of theologians (Copeland 2021). Testimonial traces of the *dark night* of queer people’s love will be presented in the light of the poem *Noche oscura*, because “its contribution and novelty will be in interpreting that Night as an experience of personal encounter, from a perspective of falling in love” (Pikaza 2004, p. 34).

5. Prison, Night, and Darkness: The Struggle at the Threshold of the Closet

“Without doing that, God may also be condemned to never come out of the confessional closet”. Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 52)

Iain Mathew (2001)—offering keys to a contemporary reading of St. John of the Cross—says,

John’s genius as a poet consists, in part, in his ability to play with an image without stifling its vitality. [...] When we ask him: ‘tell us your story of faith,’ this is what he tells us: *In a dark night, /With anxious love inflamed, /O, happy lot! /Forth unobserved I went, /My house being now at rest*”. (p. 95)

The metaphors of night and darkness appear in the story of St. John with an impressive force since they allude to his experience in prison but also to the process of an inner prison, to that prison of the senses, prejudices, and ideas that imprison the human being and prevent him from flying free towards the encounter with the Divinity. As such, there is a particular relationship between prison, night, and darkness, and this correlation is also perceived in the experience of LGBTIQ+ people who remain “inside the closet” or try to come out of it.

It is astonishingly paradoxical (and mystical?) that, even as they hinder queer people’s journey to the powerful center of their spirit, there are always, always possibilities to “find God in dark alleys” (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 33). Because of this, “our search is for theological interchanges of intimacy, sexual identities and politics in the dark alleys behind our churches; the search for God in dark alleys. However, how far can we go? And since when has God been a host of law and legality, instead of justice?” (Althaus-Reid 2003, p. 34).

This quote by theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003) encapsulates a provocative exploration at the intersection of theology, sexuality, and politics. Althaus-Reid advocates

for theological dialogues that delve into the intimate realms of human experience and sexual identities, challenging traditional religious taboos and norms. By metaphorically venturing into “the dark alleys behind our churches” (p. 34), she urges theologians to engage with marginalized spaces where conventional religious doctrines might not reach, suggesting that the divine presence can be found in the most unexpected and overlooked corners of society. Moreover, Althaus-Reid’s inquiry raises fundamental questions about the nature of divine justice and its relationship to human laws. She critiques the conception of God as merely a dispenser of legal edicts, highlighting the distinction between legality and justice. By interrogating the role of God as a mere enforcer of laws, she prompts a deeper reflection on whether divine justice transcends human-made legal systems, thus challenging theologians and believers alike to reconsider their understanding of the divine and its implications for social and moral order. This motivates the reflection on the prison, the night, and the darkness, which are pointed out in the struggle at the threshold of the closet.

5.1. Prison: Physical and Interior Place, Complex Reality

“We are sexual and class warriors who need to beware of the danger of ending up in confined, narrow spaces of reflection (our little jails) when reading the Scriptures or God”. Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 88)

In the poem, jail represents the feeling of being trapped or limited, away from light and freedom. In the context of LGBTIQ+ people who struggle with the “closet”, jail could symbolize the oppression of having to hide their true identity for fear of rejection, discrimination, or violence from a society that does not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity. In his short play, entitled *Miserere para un medio fraile* [*Miserere for a half friar*], playwright Carlos Muñiz recreates the stay in Toledo of St. John of the Cross and makes the convent doorman exclaim: “They are coming, brothers. Come. Come. Come all of you. Look how they bring him. Handcuffed. Like a thief. Like a highwayman. Like a heretic. Like a blasphemer. Like a Jew. As a criminal” (Muñiz 1975, p. 88; Sastre 2011, p. 60).

Such a description resembles the description that is usually made of a queer person, as “dangerous”, “indecent”, “deviant”, “sodomite”, “demonic”, and “blasphemous”, given that everything “different” and “strange” has been historically displaced to the peripheries in which many human beings suffer the systematic silencing of their voices and a sort of existential cornering on the threshold of the unnamable (Santos Meza 2021, p. 85; 2023, pp. 134–38). In this sense, the experience of prison and the transformation of John of the Cross into an indecent and blasphemer would similarly enter the queer since, as Judith Butler (1993) points out, the term queer operated as an excluding linguistic practice whose purpose was to shame the naming subject or, instead, to engender a stigmatized subject through that humiliating interpellation. The word *queer* acquires its strength precisely from the repeated invocation that ended up linking it with accusation, pathologization, and insult. As with many Carmelites who were reluctant towards the Teresian–San Juan reform, John of the Cross deserved death and jail for his insurrection and rebellion; so too are many LGBTIQ+ people today continuously criminalized by the dominant socio-religious hegemony for confessing their queer love, carrying on their shoulders the yokes of illness, sin, and crime, a triad that Hugo Córdova Quero (2024) has called the “perverse trinity”.

Returning to the story of John of the Cross, some biographers affirm that he stood firm, but before an illegitimate tribunal, which also relied on a false accusation, a peaceful man was found guilty. He knew beforehand that the punishment consisted of imprisonment (Ruiz 1990; Steggink 1991; de Jesús 1991; Martínez 2006). To all this must be added the psychological pressure to which the dissident Carmelite was subjected, being bombarded with hurtful and threatening phrases about the failure of the reform and about what would await him if he did not cease. All this was said near the cell door where he was imprisoned with the intention that the words become *poisoned darts* (Sastre 2011, pp. 61–62).

However, they failed to shatter his morale, conviction, passionate love, or rebelliousness. Year after year, many LGBTIQ+ people take to the streets to march and commemorate their love, their life, and their resistance, even though in many countries today, affirming their queer existence is still a death sentence and a cause for imprisonment, both in and out of the closet: inside the closet, many people die from depression and anxiety, from sexually transmitted diseases without timely treatment, and from ignorance, loneliness, and a lack of social guarantees; outside the closet, the injustice and phobia of political and religious systems hinder access to rights of all kinds for people of sex–gender dissidence, and there is also constant neglect, insults, and abuse that does not cease. Amid this terrible panorama, a large majority of LGBTIQ+ people refuse to give up on love, which produces countless *dark nights* at the threshold of the closet.

5.2. *The Night: Possibilities of Escape and Love Amid the Dark*

“The transparency of light which carries with it the clarity of imperial logics and the white axis of its racial supremacy, gives a global identity to demons”. Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 135)

Note that *night* in the Sanjuanist poem can be seen as a time of darkness and bewilderment but also of introspection and spiritual search; similarly, for LGBTIQ+ people who live in the secrecy of the night due to lack of social acceptance, the night can represent a time of hiding and isolation, but also the only space where they can find community and solidarity among those who share their same life experiences. It is striking that John of the Cross characterizes his night, in addition to being “dark”, as “blissful”, “guiding”, and “kinder than the dawn”, and that it was a space “that joined beloved with beloved”. Thus, it seems that with these characterizations, the poet recognizes that it is about the *transit* from a frightful *dark night* to one that was never dark again, the itinerary of the night of meaning, in which the human being does not know much about himself, nor about God, nor love, to the blissful night in which knowledge of himself, the loving presence of God and the fire of a corresponding and overflowing love concur.

As can be seen in the explanation of the poem, there is a linguistic movement of meaning that expands in two directions when speaking of “night”: on the one hand, of that night in which there is loneliness, discouragement, suffering, incomprehension, mistreatment, imprisonment, punishment, violence, and lack of company, and, on the other hand, of a night in which there is sound solitude, company, balm, requited love, healing, rest, repose, calm, serenity, clarity, and care.

John of the Cross devotes many pages to interpreting what, according to him, is the process of purification of souls and their ascent to God; here, we do not want to repeat what John already says, but to point out how this same path is analogous to the one that queer people usually relate when they move from the darkness of the closet to the self-affirmation of their life experiences, because when they suffer the suffering of the normative closet, which prevents them from externalizing their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their feelings and, ultimately, prevents them from being able to express their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their feelings and, ultimately, their sexuality and feeling, which prevents sincerity when talking about one’s own life; infinite problems, pressures and ties arise, from which only those who begin a process of self-knowledge and self-affirmation, with courage, can advance towards the “blissful night” in which loved ones and lovers meet to give themselves unconditionally.

Moreover, at night, queer people manage to break through the lock of the closet that prevents them from being fully themselves during the day, to go out in clandestine freedom to look for their love, to live their sexuality, and to dream of the possibility of love.

5.3. *Darkness: Groping between Social Uncertainty and Human Reality*

“Did Shadow know that Shadow was dead? Without any doubt. Shadow and herself were associated for many years ... Sometimes the clients called Shadow,

Shadow; but Shadow replied to both names, as if Shadow was, effectively, Shadow, the one who was dead". Alejandra Pizarnik (1985, p. 58)

Darkness is associated with the absence of light and clarity, but it can also be seen as a place of mystery and possibility (Baruzi 1999, pp. 279–85); for LGBTIQ+ people who live in hiding and anonymity due to socio-religious intolerance, darkness can represent the fear and uncertainty of being discovered, but it can also be a refuge where they can express themselves authentically, albeit in private. The poet Luis Rosales said that people who do not know pain are like unblessed churches (Rosales 1996, p. 319). Here, I want to reformulate this sentence in the following way: people who have not had to live in solitude, darkness, and secrecy because of being true to themselves—or trying to be so—cannot fully measure what John of the Cross lived through.

Whoever wishes to understand St. John's darkness must consider, at least, that it is not the same to expose oneself to the darkness that comes when the lights go out in the comfort of one's home, amid the people one loves and with one's family, as it is to expose oneself to the darkness of the street, with the loneliness and danger that such exposure entails; that it is not the same to inhabit the darkness that one wants—for example, to make movies look better, to sleep better, to make some environment more romantic—as the darkness that is painfully imposed by economic or other needs (lack of public services, exposure to the street late at night, lack of housing, romantic clandestinity due to persecution). This is what is not usually made explicit when it is believed that all people understand the same thing by "darkness" or when one tries to understand that *dark night* of which John of the Cross speaks, since although it is an "interior" process, the primary way in which we human beings understand is through what we have lived and experienced, and even more so if it is the so-called "interior castle".

When LGBTIQ+ people talk about "darkness", they think of some different things than cis-heterosexual people do because—especially if one lives "in the closet"—darkness has become a quasi-companion of life: watching TV shows you like but that have queer content is carried out in the dark of night, wearing lipstick or some makeup you want to try is carried out in the dark of night, seeing the person you like is carried out in the gloom of night so that no one suspects your "inclination", going out on the street dressed in a certain way is carried out in the shadows of night, among other things. That does not happen because LGBTIQ+ people "love" the night and its dangers, but because the society in which they live relegates them to such nightlife. And perhaps, when a queer person honestly read the John romances, they think of their own experiences because if God is everywhere, He was also there in the journeys of queer people in search of love and companionship.

6. Tear the Fabric of This Sweet Encounter!

"The theologian expects this encounter of communities from past and present to create a new understanding by the act of resignifying the past in a sharing of memories of belief in itself". Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003, p. 14)

I want to allude to a queer witness, Luis Caballero Holguín (1943–1995), a Colombian artist who gave life to erotic art (Caballero 2023). In some interviews, this artist recognized that he had to be "different", not because he had "decided" or "chosen" it, but because he had to be. And he also affirmed that when it was his turn to be different, it was his turn to be an artist, his turn to be a painter, his turn to be a queer, his turn to be the way he was, and that he had no regrets. Even today, in the museums of Colombia, it seems that nothing is more powerful than those torsos painted by Caballero. The Colombian artist's work incorporates a long artistic and religious tradition and speaks of enduring themes, such as sex, violence, eroticism, and pain. Simultaneously, it is a dynamic, contemporary, and ephemeral art (Davis 2024).³ Caballero not only worked the nude incited by hedonism and homoerotic passion or motivated by recurrent reflection on the Christ of passion but based on the most brutal graphic references of contemporary violence. The trident—suffering, sacredness, and eroticism—will mark the artist's work. When looking at his paintings, the

men he drew seem to be in mystical or sexual ecstasy, in the middle of a torture session, or in a trance of divine adoration, but who knows for sure?

Caballero was obsessed with the human figure that he stole from sacred art, with the drama of the martyr, and with the imminence of a divine call that one never knows if it will materialize because a fascinating and overflowing ambiguity marks it. His interest was to capture what is most human in humans, that which makes us vulnerable: the exposed corporeality, the naked flesh, the open wound, the *nuda vita*. The impact that sacredness left on him has to do with the anatomy of men, with the suffering of Christ, his contortions on the Cross and his descent, with the martyrdom of St. Lawrence and the folds of his skin, and with the feminized corporeality of St. Sebastian. It is appropriate to speak of this author because one of his most famous works is precisely the Dark Night of St. John of the Cross (1977), a graphic work composed of ten lithographic engravings on Velin d'Arches paper (Figure 1).⁴



Figure 1. The author of this paper took these photographs from the lithographic work of Luis Caballero.

The contemplation of this work is frequented by LGBTIQ+ people, who see in it “something” of their own experience, their blissful night, their passionate love, and their divine ecstasy. There are certain similarities with the work of Richard Stott, a Methodist minister and art therapist in England, who created three paintings inspired by “The Dark Night of the Soul”. The triptych by Stott is called “*Intimacy with Christ*” (Cherry 2013). Portrayed in the work are countless anonymous, beatific, wounded, whole, heavenly, chopped, surrendered, violent, defenseless, sexual, murdered, ecstatic, subdued, and dependent men that the Colombian queer artist knew or imagined and then painted. However, who were they? Perhaps Roman legionaries in Carthage, victorious Maccabees, Christians martyred by Diocletian, Trojans returning from war, Constantine’s soldiers; perhaps in all his paintings, the same ones always appeared, sometimes alive, sometimes dead. Possibly, they matured with him, always accompanying him in the creation of his universe, until they abandoned him to his fate, leaving him alone in his studio in Paris, that city of love that was his temporary refuge (Erazo 2020).

In Caballero’s work, prison, night, and darkness come together, and these three realities dance to the rhythm of San Juan’s mysticism, which touches the heart of the queer artist and moves his brushstrokes to testify to something of the spiritual experience of queer people. Nevertheless, when contemplating the Sanjuanist work painted by Caballero, reflecting on the author’s vital outcome is most important. The queer man who portrayed his queer experience through the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross around 1977 would, eighteen years later, die in Bogotá, Colombia. He died of complications arising from the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which has claimed countless LGBTIQ+ lives from the 1970s to the present day. Dying at the age of fifty-two, Caballero remembers the

generations of queer people whose lives and work were cut short by an epidemic of silence and stigma, the actual *dark night* of society, the terrible night of systematic abandonment by the state, churches, and health institutions.

To contemplate his work today is to feel the yearning in inflamed loves of so many LGBTIQ+ people that continue to be extinguished. It is to feel the suffering that comes from the impossibility of loving freely in an era in which queer love continues to be condemned. It is to recognize the vulnerability of those who decide to love and give themselves unconditionally, even if there is prison, night, and darkness in between. In his paintings, he who has spun this reflection hears a cry for justice, which incessantly cries out for the blissful night, in pair with the rising of the dawn, for the fallen music and the sonorous solitude, for the dinner that recreates and falls in love with LGBTIQ+ people.

This simple and provocative *Sanjuanist queering* is nothing other than a sobbing groan that comes from the bowels of LGBTIQ+ people to confess that our human experience, our experience of God, and our experience of queer love is accurate and true. We have as a witness the light and guide that in our heart burns, as it burned in the heart of John of the Cross. However, for most people, when addressing the intersection of gender and sexual diversity and the religious sphere, we tend to visualize two opposing extremes, as if we were observing two opposing trenches in a supposed war that has already claimed numerous victims. I present an effort to reconcile these two supposed antagonistic poles, recognizing that they are not essential. Indeed, there are histories, wounds, and socio-religious conditions that have tragically fractured the bonds. Notwithstanding, if it is believed that,

The [Sanjuanist] commentaries turn out to be, in this way, a kind of hermeneutic code, without pretensions of exclusivism, given the wide margin of width that the saint confers to the explanation of the multiple significant values enclosed in his symbols. (Mancho Duque 2008, p. 2)

then these two realities can still be reconciled. Sanjuanist mysticism is one of the many ways to achieve it. Undoubtedly, mysticism has much to contribute to gender diversity, and the LGBTIQ+ communities have a lot of wisdom and love to resignify and revitalize the mystical experience. I believe that mysticism and contemplation are in many human places and realities beyond those usually considered mainstream. As Hall (2024) puts it:

Contemplation can show up as the pause when I gaze at the maple tree billowing in the breeze, my arrival at the state house to protest the latest anti-trans bills and rhetoric, the walk in the woods when I find my body metabolizing memories, the note written to the beloved in silence, the strange bug I see with my nephew on a walk by the ocean, the morning's silent coffee with my companion, the weeping prayer I experience when I sense my interconnectedness to all living beings. Contemplation is the centering of myself in order to know and remember who I am and what I am to speak—or show up to. Contemplative life is a continual deep engagement with the roots and truth of life that bind me to all the lives around me. Rather, contemplation is, at its heart, a reflective activity that is always seeking the spiritual balance between individual piety and communal justice seeking. (pp. 3–4)

When we strive, with honesty and transparency, to acknowledge God's loving and disruptive passage through our queer experiences, we feel the need to continue transgressing the narratives of the mystics, past and present. We use inadequate and indecent language to speak of ecstasy and immoderation, of divine dissidence and popular spirituality, of queer diasporas and sanctity out of the closet. We find peace and love in the mystical verses of St. John of the Cross because we have felt God's love pouring over us through them. Is not reading the mystics with queer eyes a service of social healing, an opportunity to heal the wounds that have tragically exiled the LGBTIQ+ community from religious spaces? Precisely, authors, such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesus, are notable because,

They make God accessible to us and teach us that we ourselves are desirable. They teach us than by opening ourselves and making ourselves accessible to the transforming love of God in ongoing and deepening ways, we are drawn into the love that gives life. Endowed with the capacity to love, each of us, no matter what our station, can be empowered in that love to enkindle love in others and rejoice in the fruits of new life. (Ahlgren 2016, p. 153)

Let us not forget that John of the Cross thought that his poetry could and should act on its own; it even seemed to him that symbolic language was more appropriate than theologically inspired prose to convey the full scope and human richness of the spirit of love, which is in itself so fruitful. Therefore, I invite every queer person who reads this reflection to pause prayerfully in the poems of St. John and to find other ways, better ways, and paths of reconciliation, to undertake spiritual itineraries of return to the “inner castle” that every human being has within. As Reichel says “Such a theological realism takes its cues from that which it recognizes as even more real than the reality of sin: the revelatory, excessive, messy, kenotic, indecent, and honest reality of God and real people (. . .) Grace is not clean, straight or immaculate” (Reichel 2023, pp. 111–12).

7. Conclusions

Throughout these pages, an effort has been made to adhere to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s assertion that “The rupture or transgression of the theological path requires us somehow to assume God’s own determination to be led astray” (Althaus-Reid 2003). The interpretative *rupture* of Sanjuanist thought presented here has been mobilized by the queer perspective, not merely as a theoretical framework but as a genuine way of inhabiting the world—a way of existence embraced by countless individuals. Thus, our approach did not entail merely “postulating” a reading of the mystical texts. Instead, we aimed to highlight how queer individuals discover in the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross a remarkable opportunity to encounter the divinity that resides within us.

While contemporary societies find themselves amidst the “night” of social injustice and the “terrible night” of systematic violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals, the flame of [queer] love persists in our hearts, serving as a beacon of resistance. In traversing this reflective journey, guided by the rhythm of St. John’s night, various provocative aspects have been unveiled, some arising from personal experiences, as illuminated by Sanjuanist mysticism, others emerging as queer communities embark on paths of emancipation, struggle, and resistance, and still others manifesting as aesthetics that offer disruptive itineraries. It is all about ruptures.

To “walk queerly into the depths of mystery” entails acknowledging that mystery always transcends our human comprehension. It may not be about “knowing everything”, but rather about feeling deeply and loving passionately, and recognizing that love, in its profoundest essence, invariably invites transgression, risk-taking, and a leap into the unknown. This loving interpretation of mystical texts embodies precisely that: a radical queer leap into the ocean of divine love. Such leaps and risks occur daily in Latin America and many other parts of the world, where being “queer” still carries the threat of death and condemnation.

This *Sanjuanist queering* arises from the author’s profound conviction: in every act of giving and every instance of loving, whether agapic or erotic, there is also the presence of God. Acknowledging the omnipresence of divinity elicits the exclamation: “How delicately (and queerly) you make me fall in love with you!” Affirming this is, once again, a leap—a daunting one, particularly in the dark night as conceived by Sanjuanist tradition.

This leap prompted us to offer insights into the experience of imprisonment, night, and darkness from the perspective of the struggle at the threshold of the closet. Regardless of whether one embraces or rejects these insights, the crucial point is to demonstrate that queer individuals approach the mystical texts of St. John from a different vantage point—one to which society has consigned us, yet also from the vantage point shaped by each personal narrative. Amidst these narratives, numerous closets and prisons emerge, constraining

life and ensnaring affections—a factual reality. Yet, amidst the myriad stories and infinite divergences, there exists a potent similarity: the shared desire to liberate ourselves from oppression, and to rupture the fabric hindering our tender and loving encounter with love. This is resurrection, salvation, and eschatology.

This reflection implies as much. Thus, beyond merely commenting on the work of St. John of the Cross, our intention was to delineate the horizon proposed by Spanish Carmelite mysticism. To take the mysticism of John of the Cross seriously is to embrace the challenge of social justice, the liberation of all individuals, and the upholding of dignity and human rights.

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Notes

- ¹ The translations proposed here are the author's own, taking as a starting point the Spanish text of *St. John of the Cross* (2003). In this exercise, several existing versions of St. John's work have been thoroughly reviewed.
- ² Carlos Floria, of the Argentine magazine *Criterio*, affirms that the French writer confessed this in an interview granted in 1963. However, Juan Martín Velasco affirms that, in 1975, Malraux specified that "I have been made to say that the 21st century will be religious. I have never said such a thing. . . What I am saying is something more uncertain. I do not exclude the possibility of a spiritual event on a planetary scale" (Martín Velasco 2008, p. 14).
- ³ Davis' recent article is wonderful in its descriptiveness of Caballero's work. It is an invitation to visit the tribute "*Luis Caballero: A Deliberate Defiance*" that is showing at Cecilia Brunson Projects.
- ⁴ The *Opera Omnia* by Luis Caballero has been preserved in the museums of the Central Bank of Colombia (BRC). More information is available here: <https://www.banrepcultural.org/luis-caballero/linea-de-tiempo.html#prettyPhoto> (accessed on 1 January 2024).

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