

Excerpt from Maria Angelica Melendi, *Entre lo sagrado y lo politico. Sacrificio, devocion y profanacion en el arte del final del siglo XIX*. In: *Travessias de la Imagen, Historias de las Artes Visuales en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Eduntref-CAIA, 2011-2012, p. 534. Translated by Matheus Rocha Pitta.

The cult of the Difunta Correa arises in the late 19th century, among the muleteers who crossed the San Juan desert. Her story changes greatly in oral tradition: sometimes she is the mistress of a soldier killed in the wars of independence who, desperate with pain, runs away with her little son and dies of hunger and thirst on the journey. In other versions, she is named as Deolinda, Dalinda, Belinda, Antonia or Isabel and she is the wife of a civilian recruited by the montonera<sup>1</sup> who, harassed by the commissioner, runs after the troop with her little boy. All versions culminate in the meeting of her body by two muleteers who crossed the desert: the living son still feeds on the prodigal breast of his dead mother. The iconography of the dead—a young woman lying on the ground with her son in her arms, with a white blouse opened, revealing her beautiful bosom—belongs, for Marcella Althaus-Reid, to the indecent virgin's typology.<sup>2</sup>

The little boy, sucking from her nipple, reaffirms the existence of a survival or afterlife, still latent, in the dead body. Despite the presence of the infant, the uncovered breasts are a transgression of both representative codes of the time when devotion was born—the late 19th century and the 20th century. That would explain, for Althaus-Reid, why the Difunta, who began as the protector of the muleteers, today guides the truckers and the roads that devoutly keep their stamp next to the Virgin Mary.

Deolinda Correa, barely tolerated by the Catholic Church, is an impure transgressor saint, elevated to popular devotion for her past as a poor and suffering woman who, besieged by the powerful, finds death when fleeing with her son in search of her partner. Unlike Mary, who witnessed the torture and execution of her son, Deolinda gave her life for him: “In the Difunta, the Child Jesus was obliterated, absorbed by her breasts in an act of intense, erotic sucking of her magnificent nipples.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the best-known popular prayers places Jesus as an intercessor before the deceased: “Oh, adored Jesus, I, miserable sinner, I implore you to recommend my soul to the Difunta Correa and her pure mother, the Virgin Mary.” In this prayer, Jesus is just the one who pleads for the devotee to Deolinda, daughter of Mary. The Sanjuanina would be the Only Daughter of Mary, not just a female figure who substitutes Jesus, but another Jesus or the Jesus of the Others.

1) Montonera originally were known as the armed civilian, paramilitary groups who organized in the 19th century during the wars of independence from Spain in Latin America. Annotation: Matheus Rocha Pitta.

2) See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, London/New York, Routledge, 2000 p. 83.

3) Susana Certudi and Sara Josefina Newberry, *La Difunta Correa*, Buenos Aires, Huemul, 1978. p. 162.











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The photographs and sculptures in this essay were taken/made during two trips to the Cuyo region, in Argentina, in 2015 and 2019.