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Saints, Mediation, and Miracle-talk: The Señor de los Milagros in Lima, Peru

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Cover Page Footnote

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MEDIATING CATHOLICISMS

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Saints, Mediation, and Miracle-talk: The Señor de los Milagros in Lima, Peru¹

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Figure 1.
The Señor de los
Milagros procession
in the Plaza de Armas,
Lima, Peru, 2017.
Photo by Kristin
Norget.

On the hot afternoon of October 19, 2013, a middle-aged man, a representative of the Confederation of Peruvian Workers (Confederación de Trabajadores del Perú, or CTP), one of the country's largest public-sector unions, delivered a long discourse at one of the public stages (*estrados*) erected along the route of the annual two-day procession of the Señor de los Milagros (Lord of Miracles) in the central district of Lima, Peru. The man's speech began, in typical manner, as a passionately offered litany of appeals to the beloved saint, known as the patron saint of Lima and the focus of the largest Catholic procession in Latin America:

The Confederation of Peruvian Workers pays tribute to the Lord of Miracles, asking for blessings for our leaders, for all of Peru, so that together we can fight for a country that is more just, with social justice, with enough bread and freedom [*pan y libertad*]. Lord of Miracles, Lord Christ of the poor, Lord Christ

1 We would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which generously funded the research on which this article is based. Many thanks also to anonymous reviewers for this journal whose comments helped improved this article greatly. We are very grateful to Mr. Carlos Paredes and formidable undergraduate students at the Pontificia Católica Universidad de Perú (PCUP)—Diana Safrá, Alexandra Díaz; Sergio Sarabia, Sergio Tirado, Sebastian Delgado; Eliana Caballero—for their generous assistance with our fieldwork and collection of data, and their continuing friendship.

of Pachacamilla: here are your people, your community, here are the people of Lima who present themselves to beg for your forgiveness [*clemencia*]. My Lord, Christ of all peoples, Christ of the ill, Christ of miracles, Señor, your mercy for our faith....²

The man's forcefully articulated words, initiating with an expectable petitional script for blessings from the Señor de los Milagros, were met with polite attentiveness from the crowd present. A couple of minutes later however his speech suddenly veered away from more expectable religious themes and launched into sharp criticism of the government's pro-Fujimori (a reference to the imprisoned former President) political line:

...Here are Christ and the workers that were victims of a *fujimontesinista* dictatorship, that got rid of 350,000 workers. Just like the new law just passed, which is also against workers.³ My Lord, blessings, give us your protection, your blessing. Lord, you are so great, my Lord, what a blessing it is for all of us to have you so close.

At this point, shrill whistles, hisses and screams erupted from the crowd: "Booooh! Booooh!" "Sssssssssss!" Noticing these signs of public opposition, a woman on the stage beside the representative removed the microphone from his hands, and called for prayer. The crowd joined her in collectively reciting the Lord's Prayer and soon calmed down. A large man standing near us, a member of the Brotherhood of the Señor de los Milagros de las Nazarenas, the lay Catholic organization charged with

2 Stop (*estrado*) at the Confederación de Trabajadores de Peru (CTP), October 18, 2013. "Pan y libertad" (Bread and Freedom) is a version of a well-known Latin American leftist revolutionary slogan.

3 The colloquial term merges the names of former autocratic President of Peru Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) and of Victor Montesinos, head of Peru's intelligence service, who together were complicit in an array of crimes, including bribery, corruption, embezzlement, drug-trafficking, and human rights abuses (in 2009 Fujimori was sentenced to 25 years in prison). The law the CTP director referred to was President Ollanta Humala's extension of a labor reform project begun by Fujimori: "La Ley del Servicio Civil," passed in July 2013, aimed at a more efficient re-organization of the administration of public service employees, but worsened their conditions of employment and led to the termination of employment of some 320,000 workers. Unions such as the CTP were strongly opposed to the reforms. Pablo Timoteo, "Informe PuntoEdu: Todo sobre la Ley de Servicio Civil," Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, June 17, 2013, <https://puntoedu.pucp.edu.pe/noticias/informe-puntoedu-todo-sobre-la-ley-de-servicio-civil>.

executing the procession each year, extended his palpable sentiment of disapproval: “That guy came to speak about his own problems,” he muttered loudly, to no one in particular, “and there was nothing there for the Señor.”⁴

“Nothing there for the Señor”: The Brother’s words suggested that the man’s allusion to the reality of a horrifically violent period and one of the most controversial, yet still popular, presidents in contemporary Peruvian history, his brief appeal for fair treatment of Peruvian workers, was somehow not acceptable. The man’s spontaneous mixing of devotion to the Señor and an overtly anti-Fujimori line of politics, the “irruption of heterogeneous being”⁵ in his remarks, ruffled what had been up to that moment the procession’s smooth, scripted surface. Apparently, for most people present at least, a tacitly enjoined reciprocity of some kind—in this very public, sacred space, at this significant moment—had not been fulfilled. The moment was one of the most striking and perplexing for us during the procession that day and made us reflect hard on the kind of public arena that the procession offered: Why did so many members of the crowd reject this particular overtly political discourse, yet did not object to the many others we heard that day? How does this elaborately and overtly *traditional* Catholic saint celebration mediate local, national political identity in today’s nominally secular Peru?

Every year, the image of the Señor de los Milagros is taken out of the Church of the Nazarenas on the shoulders of members of the Brotherhood, and through two long days (October 18 and 19) snakes through the heart of Lima’s colonial center past the public buildings and institutions that are most emblematic of the country’s national political identity—the Cathedral, the Archdiocese of Lima, the Government Palace (*Palacio del Gobierno*), the Republican Congress, and the Judicial Palace (*Palacio de Justicia*), among others.⁶ In this highly charged context, as a

4 “Este pata viene a hablar de sus cosas, y nada para el Señor.”

5 Daniela Gandolfo, *The City at its Limit: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

6 There are also processions on October 6 and October 28 that are part of the wider annual celebration of the Señor; we focus here on the main procession days of October 18 and 19. The main, well-known stops are at the Presidential Palace, the Palace of Justice, the City Hall, the Archdiocese of Lima, the Hospital de los Niños, the Congress building, and the San Jorge Prison. The *anda* also stops at churches, prominent businesses, banks and newspapers, and other organizations and public buildings (e.g., the Ministry of Economy and Finance, Attorney General’s Office, fire stations,

complexly interpellated, vital entity, the Señor has a central role in a sensual and ornate ritual worlding in which Catholics nurture their devotion to this much-beloved saint while the Peruvian nation and the powers that constitute it are underlined, performatively, materially, and affectively. This orchestrated ideal world is ephemeral, existing for just a couple of days, but its effects—and affects—are enduring.

This article is based on ethnographic research over several years on technologies of mediation and Catholic saint celebrations in Latin America, including the procession of the Señor de los Milagros in contemporary Lima.⁷ A range of scholarly writings on the procession has drawn attention to the complex history of the Señor, including his syncretic (pre-Hispanic and African) origins;⁸ and the saint's role in the articulation of identity for Peruvian diasporic communities.⁹ In this work we approach the celebration in Lima as not merely as a performance of local or national sacred (i.e., Catholic) significance for devotees, but also as having a critical

police stations, prisons and penitentiaries, schools, colleges, and universities, other hospitals, markets, municipal offices, national political party offices [Partido Popular Cristiano or PPC], and union offices [Pensionistas Municipales de Lima, Confederation of Peruvian Workers, or CTP], and the elite social Club de la Unión. People also offer more spontaneous or impromptu homages throughout the route.

- 7 Our analysis is based in years of fieldwork (carried out principally in the years 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2017) involving participation in the celebration and interviews, and analysis of media sources (print media and television programs, and social media).
- 8 E.g., Raúl Banchemo Castellano, *La Verdadera historia del Señor de los Milagros* (Lima: Inti-Sol, 1976). María Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, *Pachacamac y el Señor de los Milagros: Un trayecto milenario* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1992). Rubén Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del Santo Cristo de los Milagros* (Sanmartí, Lima, 1966). Julia Costilla, "'Guarda y custodia' en la Ciudad de los Reyes: la construcción colectiva del culto al Señor de los Milagros (Lima, siglos XVII y XVIII)," *Fronteras de la Historia* 20, no. 2 (2015): 152-179, <https://doi.org/10.22380/2027468813>. Julia Costilla, "Una práctica negra que ha ganado a los blancos: símbolo, historia y devotos en el culto al Señor de los Milagros de Lima (siglos XIX-XXI)," *Anthropologica* 34, no. 36 (June 2016), <https://doi.org/10.18800/anthropologica.201601.006>. Camilo Gómez Torres, "The Procession of the Señor de los Milagros: a Baroque Mourning Play in Contemporary Lima," MA thesis, Dept. of Anthropology, McGill University, 2015. Susy Sanchez Rodriguez, "Un Cristo moreno 'conquista' Lima - Los arquitectos de la fama pública del Señor de los Milagros (1651-1771)," in *Etnicidad y discriminación racial en la historia del Perú*, eds. S. Carrillo et al. (Lima: Instituto Riva Agüero, 2002), 65-92.
- 9 E.g., Karsten Paerregaard, "In the Footsteps of the Lord of Miracles: The Expatriation of Religious Icons in the Peruvian Diaspora," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34, no. 7 (2008): 1073-1089, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830802230380>. Larissa Ruiz Baía, "Rethinking Transnationalism: Reconstructing National Identities Among Peruvian Catholics in New Jersey," Special Issue *Religion in America* 41, no. 4 (1999): 93-109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/166193>.

normative political role in Peruvian society more broadly. As we discuss later, a focus on the divergent ideological and other discourses and interests which may be encompassed by Catholic pilgrimage-like celebrations in Latin America and elsewhere is, of course, not new.¹⁰

Nevertheless we are concerned here to both widen and nuance this political lens by examining the annual Señor de los Milagros procession in Lima within a more extensive, heterogeneous “pilgrimage field”¹¹ that includes the saint’s shrine, various institutional interests, actions and discourses, and material, physical spaces, both secular and sacred. It is precisely the relationship between sacred and secular power that is of particular interest to us here. In this essay we build on the above-mentioned work that has highlighted the layers of historically shaped social and political complexity inherent to saint pilgrimage celebrations, yet push this perspective further to explore performative aspects of the procession in relation to the shaping of the normative subjectivity/ies in Lima and Peru far beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of this particular procession. Inspired by the work of political philosophers Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben and others, recent anthropological works on Catholicism have developed the analytical frame of political theology, highlighting how key notions in modern secular political doctrines—including sovereignty and authority—are grounded in theological world views.¹² Thus, we draw on this body of research by examining the Señor de los Milagros’s celebration in contemporary Lima not merely as a symbolically rich arena for devotees’ mutual engagement with the saint, but also for the production of a specifically *Catholic*

10 See, for e.g., John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (NY: Routledge, 1991). N. Ross Crumrine and Alan Morinis, eds., *Pilgrimage in Latin America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991). See also Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814738368.001.0001>.

11 Simon Coleman, “Pilgrimage as Trope for an Anthropology of Christianity,” *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 10 (2014): 281-291, <https://doi.org/10.1086/677766>.

12 E.g., Valentina Napolitano, “Theopolitics and the Americas,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), Barcelona, Spain, May 25, 2018. Valentina Napolitano, “On a Political Economy of Political Theology: El Señor de los Milagros” in *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*, eds. Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano and Maya Mayblin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 243-255, <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520288423.003.0019>. Chris Garces, “The Cross Politics of Ecuador’s Penal State,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 459-496, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01067.x>.

Peruvian national identity and the legitimation of power and authority by representatives of both Church and State.

We note that we regard legitimation not as a certainty or *fait accompli* secured or underlined by the procession, but as an uncertain ritual end that is performatively emergent and socially contingent. The legitimation-seeking performances in the procession we are concerned with are interactions with the Señor by prominent leaders of the Catholic Church (most notably, the Archbishop), the State (the President), and a gamut of government and public agencies and organizations. In this context, we examine “miracle-talk,” a particular mode of discourse that is a petition to the saint for his blessing and protection, as much as it is a bid for public vindication of the petitioner’s actions and status. In the procession of the Señor de los Milagros, miracle-talk is not “just” devotional speech. It forms part of the miraculous (*lo milagroso*) as a wider register of visceral, embodied affective experience with both popular and theologico-political force.¹³ Thus, while “miracle narratives” have been discussed by other scholars foremostly as sites of individual experiences of Catholicism as “lived religion,”¹⁴ we focus on how Church and government representatives make appeals to the Señor’s miraculousness to cloak their public statements and actions in a veil of ultimate truth and moral status.¹⁵ These utterances take on particular significance within Peru’s current neo-liberal democratic regime,

13 Kristin Norget, “Mediatization of the Miraculous: a politics of saint & spectacle in Lima, Peru,” currently under review for publication, 2019.

14 E.g., Robert Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) Marc R. Loustau, “Risking a Miracle: Transcendentally Oriented Improvisation and Catholic Charismatics’ Involvement in a Transylvanian Canonization,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31, no. 3 (2016): 335-350, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2016.1206229>.

15 In an early work, Thomas Kselman takes a similar approach to such a political deployment of “the miraculous,” drawing attention to how the Catholic Church in 19th century France promoted national and regional miracle cults and narratives, especially among members of the middle and upper classes, as a way of defending itself against Enlightenment rationalist philosophers who were weakening its social power and influence (in Andrea Dahlberg, “The Body as a Principle of Holism: Three Pilgrimages to Lourdes,” in *Contesting the Sacred*, eds. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, 30-50 [London: Routledge, 1991], 31). Our approach however highlights the use of the miraculous by a range of institutional authorities besides the Church, and miracle-talk’s performative, experiential dimensions. Thomas A. Kselman. *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983.

where pressures from civil society groups are ever-rising for religious pluralization, secular education, and gender, sexual and reproductive rights, and more transparency in governance, challenging the Catholic Church's previously privileged social and cultural status.

Our discussion thus offers an account of the annual celebration of the Señor de los Milagros not as a simple reiteration of timeless Catholic Peruvian or local Lima-based (*Limeño*) tradition, but as a phenomenon constituted at interlinked local, national and global scales, and across a range of material fields, bodies, and objects. We argue that we should not underestimate the role of such public religious ritual performances in the constitution of governance in contemporary Latin America, where values and desires of secular, global modernity are entangled with public collective events which triumph Catholic tradition, as well as the continued centrality of religion in national social and political life. Our research shows the Señor de los Milagros celebration as an arena that throws into sharp relief what normally remains largely hidden: the deeply religious nature of the constitution of social authority and sovereign rule in Peru.

MEDIATION AND MIRACLE-TALK

The theme of mediation and saints emerges from a basic yet critical concept of Catholic theology, as divine beings like the Señor de los Milagros are seen as critical intercessors of God's will and grace. Yet throughout the contemporary Catholic world, massive public celebrations of certain historically resonant saints, as multi-dimensional triggers of affective forces of identification and attachment, also figure in the *emplacement* of both Catholic Church presence and authority and a divine anchoring of apparently secular national political orders.¹⁶ Attention to the interaction or enmeshment of different scales and material, mobile forms and corps of mediation (saints, brotherhoods and lay organizations, and individual and

16 Kristin Norget, "Popes, Saints, Beato Bones and other Images at War: Religious Mediation and the Translocal Roman Catholic Church," *Postscripts* 5, no. 3 (2011): 337-364, <https://doi.org/10.1558/post.v5i3.337>. Kristin Norget, "The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Spectacle of Catholic Evangelism in Mexico," in *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*, eds. Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano and Maya Mayblin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 184-200, <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520288423.003.0015>. Norget, "Mediatization of the Miraculous."

collective bodies of Catholic devotees), enriches our understanding of contemporary Catholicism, and the material forms and “multiple political, embodied, aesthetic and economic registers”¹⁷ through which it is mediated across time and space. In Peru and elsewhere in Latin America, the deep cultural embeddedness of the cult of the saints and their shaping of national histories, sensibilities, and sociality means that saints and their public collective commemorations are often key mediating grounds or even bellwethers of salient social processes and transformations.¹⁸

In the diverse, unequal and fragmented setting of Peru’s capital city of Lima, what we call miracle-talk both unites and differentiates Peruvians: first, particular contours of the miraculous as a space of consciousness, affect, and devotion are formed out of popular interactions with the saint and faith in his marvellous powers, making the miraculous, “lo milagroso,” a source of agency and autonomy within a deeply unequal social order. The discourse of the CTP representative cited at the beginning of this article is an example of such miracle-talk—a ritual address to the Señor operating as a public claim to the speaker’s moral legitimacy—that articulates such a popular socio-cultural positionality or even broader collective *mentalité*. Yet this is not to reduce such miracle-talk to instrumental social ends, for as part of a meaningful world of devotion it is far more. During our research Limeños told us countless moving stories of the miraculousness of the Señor, as demonstrated by particular occurrences of good fortune or healing in their lives, especially in moments of acute distress, suffering or deprivation (e.g., “When my baby was about to die, the Señor arrived to me [*me llegó*] and saved him”; “At the worst moment, when our family had nothing to eat, and after I prayed and prayed, the Señor appeared to me in a dream, saying everything would be OK; the next day, my father found a job.”). As Robert Orsi has pointed out,¹⁹ in the hands of the faithful, miracle narratives surrounding a saint allow for the expression of human will, desires, imagination, and moral vindication which is not possible in other corners of everyday life. As an all-powerful and compassionate healer, savior, consoler, and companion, the

17 Napolitano, “On a Political Economy of Political Theology,” 252.

18 See Robert Orsi’s *Thank You, St. Jude* for a masterful portrayal of the responsiveness of devotional cultures surrounding saints to important junctures in U.S. social history over the last century.

19 Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude*.

Señor de los Milagros offers a profound, intimate sense of connection for millions of devotees, of all social backgrounds.

At the same time, during the Señor de los Milagros procession in Lima the Catholic Church and the state dedicate themselves to a theologico-political staging of the miraculous force and presence as they assert their social vision and authority. It is here that miracle-talk—an utterance made in a register of both ambiguity and expectancy—dovetails with the potentiality that Agamben underlines as key to the power of systems of sovereignty in relation to the state of exception, a sovereignty exercised in part by the potential “legal” suspension of law. In fact, in his *Political Theology*²⁰ political theorist (and ex-Catholic) Carl Schmitt, following Rousseau, uses the divine miracle as the theological paradigm of the state of exception, as both manifest sovereign or divine power, by means of the interruption or suspension of the order of normal or natural law.²¹ Along these lines, we seize on the discursive force of miracle-talk as allowing the invocation of the miraculous nature of the Señor de los Milagros in its reference to a transcendent, indisputable truth, one that is outside of itself and which forecloses all openings to contestation. In this way then, representatives of both Church *and* state undergird their social and moral authority and status by means of their simple presence during the procession, or through public addresses they make to the Señor. Moreover, miracle-talk acts through “devotional bodies”²² by cultivating specific or preferred modes of “being Catholic.”²³ In such public declarations, miracle-talk should not be seen as a sincere petition of the devout, or mere rote, ritual utterance, but rather a practical bid to directly influence the social world.

Given the excess of signification inherent to the miracle, it occupies unstable social ground, and is vulnerable to epistemic rupture. As an idiom of experience, the

20 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922).

21 Bonnie Honig, “The Miracle of Metaphor: Rethinking the State of Exception with Rosenzweig and Schmitt,” *Diacritics* 37, no. 2-3 (2007): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.0.0029>. Jeffrey Bussolini, “Critical Encounter between Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault: Review of Recent Works by Agamben,” *Foucault Studies* 10 (November 2010): 108-143, <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i10.3121>.

22 Napolitano, “On a Political Economy of Political Theology.”

23 Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude*.

miraculous is constituted as much by theological teachings or Church directives as it is by the diverse existential worlds of the devout who place their faith in the saints. Yet miracle-talk as a discursive genre, either as saint apparition story, hagiography, miracle narrative, or as public ritual petitions like those we examine here, has a particular performative force. It substantiates and affirms the authenticity of a saint's omnipotence, and establishes both a regime of verisimilitude or truth-likeness to the claims of which it speaks, as well as a horizon or background for the interpretation of quotidian reality.²⁴ Moreover, in Lima, as a material embodiment of the miraculous the Señor de los Milagros is the consummate mediator of baroque Catholicism, a sacred aesthetic that has emphasized, over the centuries, extravagance, lushness, beauty, sentimental illusion and emotional excess as a mode of performance and devotion. This baroque aesthetic form also enfolds a deeply felt intimacy and familiar knowledge (*conocimiento*) of the Señor de los Milagros as a vital, sentient human/non-human being, which reflects indigenous and African sensibilities within the performance.²⁵

HISTORY: THE PERFORMATIVE MAKING OF A SAINT

Appreciating the cultural phenomenon of the Señor in the context of his procession requires conceptual frameworks alert to the meaningful landscape from which the Señor emerges in a phenomenological, experiential sense. In his repeated tracing, over many centuries, of a sacred path through the heart of Lima's evolving colonial urban terrain, the procession of the Señor has played an important part in creating the city as a palimpsest in De Certeau's terms, a cumulative layering of heterogenous places which still bears the inflections of previous significations and practices.²⁶ The procession of the Señor is hence replete with an array of "spatial

24 Margarita Zires, *Las Transformaciones de los Ex-votos Pictográficos Guadalupanos (1848-1999)* (Madrid: Iberoamericana/Verveut, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.31819/9783964563040>.

25 Norget, "Mediatization of the Miraculous."

26 In De Certeau's words, "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body." Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 108. See also Gandolfo, *The City at its Limit*.

practices”²⁷ imbricated within the “moving layers”²⁸ that produce Lima as a distinct place, throwing into relief the saint’s procession as a dynamic, exceptional space in which multiple fields of force, and worlds of experience and being, converge.

From its origins in a poor neighborhood on the fringes of colonial Lima, the history of the cult of the Señor de los Milagros in Lima maps out his gradual appropriation by Church and viceregal authorities—a movement from the social and political margins of the city to the core of institutions of colonial power and control. The cult began in the mid-17th century within the mostly African and indigenous peripheral neighborhood of Pachacamilla, among mostly African slaves and free blacks who, as members of a *cofradía* or religious brotherhood gathered regularly in a small building where one of them had painted an image of a crucified Christ.²⁹ After an earthquake in 1655, the building collapsed, except for the wall containing the Christ image. Spurred on by this miracle, and promoted by Jesuit catechists, the saint’s cult gradually gained visibility and popularity among local *criollo* (American-born European) elites and regal authorities, who made attempts to contain and manage it.³⁰ Eventually, in 1671, the Viceroy ordered the shed holding the painting to be converted into a chapel, and the subsequent co-optation of the saint’s image and his cult by crown and Church authorities enabled the transformation of the Señor into a public *institutional* spectacle.

Most city residents we spoke to during the procession and members of the Hermandad of the Nazareñas acknowledged the African-inflected origins of the cult. This association lingers today in the conspicuous predominance of black and *mulo* Peruvians in the Brotherhood, despite the fact even they and other Limeños still affirmed their perception of the “mestizo” character of the procession’s significance in its contemporary form. Nevertheless, signs of indigeneity and afro-identity are evident throughout the celebration, troubling the dominant homogenizing narrative of Peruvian nationalism. The multiple facets of the Señor’s identity, for

27 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991).

28 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

29 Rubén Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del Santo Cristo de los Milagros* (Sanmartí, Lima, 1966). Costilla, “Guarda y custodia.”

30 Costilla, “Guarda y custodia,” 154.

example, are reflected in the names by which he is known—the Lord of Pachacamilla (*Señor de Pachacamilla*), the Brown Christ (*Cristo Moreno*), the Lord of Earthquakes (*Señor de los Temblores*), and the Lord of Marvels (*Señor de las Maravillas*).³¹ The Señor is hence interpellated in complex ways, his identity performatively constituted in the course of sacred spatial practices throughout the route of his procession and in people's everyday lives. He bears the traces of an Andean or African telluric deity while being a powerful symbol of Catholic faith and the Peruvian nation. Hovering on the edges of many surfaces of signification, the Señor embodies the threat of transgression—the potential for the abrupt carnivalesque release, through acts, behaviors, or other expressive modes, of repressed identities and desires into the public sphere of dominant, acceptable society.³² This may partly explain the clear concern with the demonstration and maintenance of order within the procession, as we describe later.

The urban terrain through which the Señor travels is heterogenous also in religious terms, for although the procession (and the majority of the national population) is Catholic, over 14% of Peruvians are now evangelical Protestants, a figure that appears to be steadily on the rise.³³ Moreover, Peruvian society is dominated by a particular breed of conservative Catholicism, which has its origins in the beginning of the 20th century, and has shaped the mode of neoliberal governance that first arose in the 1980s.³⁴ Espoused by several prominent Peruvian Church leaders since the republican period, including Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, current Archbishop of Lima, this fundamentalist, “integral” Catholic ideology sees Catholic faith as

31 See Gómez Torres, “The Procession of the Señor de los Milagros,” for more focused discussion of the significance of the names by which the saint is known.

32 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Gandolfo, *The City at its Limit*.

33 Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI), 2017, <https://www1.inei.gob.pe/prensa/noticias/inei-difunde-base-de-datos-de-los-censos-nacionales-2017-y-el-perfil-sociodemografico-del-peru-10935>. The National Evangelical Council (CONEP) however estimates that evangelicals represent at least 15 percent of the population. Evangelical Christianity arrived in Peru in the early 1900s.

34 Jeffrey L. Klaiber, *Historia Contemporánea de la Iglesia Católica en el Perú* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2016). Matthew Casey, “Del fascismo a la pastilla del día siguiente: La derecha católica y sus propósitos en el Perú contemporáneo” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Lima, Peru, April 30, 2017).

the rightful foundation for all social and political action, and rejects *a priori* the separation of church and state that is the lynchpin of secularism.³⁵ Thus, while a new Constitution implemented in 1979 finally legally formalized the principle of “religious freedom” and the separation of church and state, the Constitution also declares that “the State recognizes the Catholic Church as an important element of Peruvian historic, cultural and moral formation and cooperates with it.”³⁶ Also marking the beginning of Peru’s ambiguous status as a modern, “confessional” yet nominally secular nation was the government’s signing, in 1980, of an official agreement or “concordat” with the Holy See.³⁷

Alongside this ambiguous secularization, neo-liberalist reforms and successive campaigns of urban renewal in Lima in the 1990s have resulted in the privatization of public properties and natural resources, and an alteration of the meaning of public, civic space, as exemplified by various attempts (through, for example, vast projects of architectural restoration, or the expulsion of street vendors) to recuperate the “lost splendor”³⁸ of its colonial center. In this context, the Señor de los Milagros procession today is a defiant, lavish enactment of vibrant, syncretic divine presence within and across contested (and ambivalently and unstably secular) public city space. The accord between Church and State in Peru, and the meanings of the categories of the secular and the religious, are made and re-made through constant negotiation, a friction that contributes to the potency of public Catholic

35 Cipriani is also a member of Opus Dei, a semi-secretive rightist Catholic organization active in Peru since the late 1950s. Another prominent conservative movement in Peru is Sodalitium Christianae Vitae. Catalina Romero, “Religión y espacio público: catolicismo y sociedad civil en el Perú,” in *Religión y Espacio Público*, ed. Catalina Romero (CISEPA, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú [PCUP], 2008), 17-36.

36 See Article 50, Political Constitution of Peru (Congress of the Republic, September 2009), 18, http://www.congreso.gob.pe/Docs/files/CONSTITUTION_27_11_2012_ENG.pdf.

37 The Concordat guarantees clergy salaries similar to state employees and exemption from certain taxes, and that Catholicism remains the only religion taught in public schools. Romero, “Religión y espacio público.” Carlos Valderrama Adriansen, “Religion and the Secular State in Peru,” in *Religion and the Secular State: National Reports*, eds. J. Martínez-Torrón and W. Cole Durham, Jr. (Provo, Utah: International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University, 2010), 549-557. The dominance of integral Catholicism and its authoritarian nature belies the internal diversity within the institutional Church in Peru, which saw the rise of liberation theology and the intervention of Church representatives in public political arenas, sometimes in opposition to the government.

38 Gandolfo, *The City at its Limit*.

performances in Lima like the Señor's main October procession. Thus, while many city residents do not attend or participate in the celebration of the Señor, the President and other politicians make a special point of doing so. Below we move on to examine why this is so.

THE PROCESSION

The procession of El Señor de los Milagros is what Mauss called a “total social fact” (*fait social total*), one of those unique phenomena that condense domains of significance across a wide range of social and cultural spheres. The Señor is a gift, a sacrifice that flows into both affective and material economies, the complexity of the celebration posing a considerable challenge in ethnographic terms. Our account below balances some important details of the procession—an overwhelming experience for either a devotee or a researcher—with attention to its overall mediating form, concomitant modes of sociality, and aesthetic tone.

Recent scholarship on pilgrimage-like phenomena like the Señor de los Milagros procession has moved beyond the classic Turnerian universalist structural paradigm fixated on the liminality, holism and *communitas* seen to underlie such events,³⁹ or the “contestation” analytical frame focused on the divisiveness and struggle between secular and religious discourses,⁴⁰ to regard pilgrimage as an event imbricated in a much larger and semiotically layered field. Simon Coleman for example, has pointed out the limitations of both *communitas* or contestation perspectives in their common conceptualization of pilgrimage as a unique and bounded sacred context and category of action, which has placed it in, “an ‘apart’ culture within a theoretical and ethnographic ghetto.”⁴¹ The result, Coleman underlines, is a problematic elision of pilgrimage’s articulation with processes of social and political transformation both within the lives of individual pilgrims or devotees and within

39 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Transaction Publishers, 1969). Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

40 E.g., Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*.

41 Coleman, “Pilgrimage as Trope,” 186. See also Simon Coleman, “Do you believe in pilgrimage?: *Communitas*, contestation and beyond,” *Anthropological Theory* 2, no. 3 (2002): 355-368, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499602002003805>. Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman, *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (University of Illinois Press, 2004).

a wider cultural, institutional, and material landscape. We agree with Coleman's criticisms of the conceptual ghettoizing tendencies in the theorization of pilgrimage, but aim to push this critical approach even further by highlighting the unique, rich baroque semiotic fabric of the Señor de los Milagros procession as situated within the ideological shifts within the broader secularizing context of neo-liberal Peru and within the Catholic Church at local, national, and global scales.

At many world-renowned, mass Catholic pilgrimage shrines in Latin America and elsewhere (e.g., the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City), the divine image awaits visitors passively at an altar or other sacred site. Similar to a pattern seen in other saint and festival celebrations throughout the Catholic world, however, the Señor de los Milagros commemoration sees the saint image literally take leave of the church (in Lima, the Templo de las Nazarenas) his "residence" (*hogar*) during most of the year and, on top of his elaborately adorned litter or *anda*, moves under the safeguard of the Hermanos through the core of Lima, only to return at the end of the two days to his symbolic "home."⁴²

The procession of the Señor de los Milagros affects not only individual pilgrims as part of a trajectory of personal devotion as people seek out the Señor for favours, for healing, or to fulfill a *promesa* or vow. People may come to accompany the image for only part of the procession or for several hours at a stretch. The event is also a (controlled) rupture in the daily life in civil, religious and political spheres in which these spheres blend, and the profile of the city is thereby transformed visually, symbolically, and materially. Limeños hang purple balloons, images and banners from the balconies of homes or on businesses aligning the streets. Traffic is re-routed, wreaking havoc and eliciting complaints from many members of the general public. The celebration is a cultural performance in the most capacious

42 In Lima there are actually two images of the Señor de los Milagros: the original painted image is in the Church of the Nazarenas, and is visited throughout the year by pilgrims from all over the world, while the image of the Señor that moves in the procession is a replica or surrogate of this original painted image. This replica, and the Holy *anda* or litter on which it sits, remain housed in a special room within the church. Politicians and members of elite families request private audiences with the Señor to pray and request his blessings. At one moment in the year the two images are side by side, an occasion that attracts more visitors since anyone is allowed to touch, even if briefly, the image and the *anda*. Gómez Torres, "The Procession of the Señor de los Milagros," 32-33.

Figure 2: Map showing the route of the procession on October 18, 2017. From a pamphlet issued by the Hermandad de las Nazarenas and the Archdiocese of Lima.

sense, stimulating local trade in traditionally associated items such as small images of the Señor, *estampitas* (printed saint images), purple habits and veils, and foods such as the iconic sweet pastries or *turrone*s.⁴³ The procession is replicated at various local and regional scales throughout the country, and in Lima, in schools, businesses, hospitals, and prisons. The Señor de los Milagros becomes the leading topic of local newscasts, and his image is splashed across the front pages of newspapers and magazines sold everywhere on stands and shops across the city. During the “Purple Month” of October, football teams stake their claim on the Señor for good fortune in their matches. Reproductions of his image appear in homes, cars, businesses and taxis. Narratives of the devout—thanks or petitions made to the Señor by individuals, families, organizations, and companies—proliferate in the newspapers, and are further examples of the way that the devotional culture of Señor extends into all domains of everyday life.⁴⁴

The procession is an assault on the senses: the flows and eddies of the multitude; the procession’s plodding, laconic pace; the ever-cycling mournful, sonorous, plaintive music; the vivid, sumptuous splendor of flowers and sea of bodies uniformly clothed in purple and white lace; the thick clouds and pungency of incense, all within the shabby elegance of the historic center of Lima itself. In this unfolding

43 Our point is that “cultural performance” does not preclude such commercial elements as part of the web of relationships and flows of significance and value encompassed by the celebration.

44 Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude*.

ritual drama, the Señor—alive and interactive—is a central actor and interlocutor. He is “charged” (in all senses) as the consummate mediator, joining the individual bodies of Limeños (and national body of Peruvians) of all classes and races. He is addressed in the procession not as “just” an image, a mimetic copy or representation of “something else,” but as a vibrant, sentient entity. Along his path of movement, the Señor engages in a dialogue with devotees, and they welcome him with affectionate and reverential greetings and thanks: “*Fuerte el aplauso para el Señor de los Milagros!*” (Let’s give strong applause for the Lord of Miracles!); or “*Le damos gracias por el amor de la familia, por la salud...*” (We give him thanks for the love of our family, for our good health...). Thus, without saying anything, the Señor communicates volumes. He is shown love, devotion, passion, and respect and, according to Limeños we spoke to, he returns it in abundance, bestowing on devotees the gift of his spectacular presence and divine blessing. He moves, greets, and sometimes interacts with other saints (e.g., the Virgen de Santa Rosa de Lima, the Virgen de Corchacas, and San Martín de Porres), with whom the Señor engages in a dynamic, gestural mutual salutation. He is also said to “sleep” on the night of October 18 (the first main procession day) in the Church of Carmen in the popular, poor Lima neighborhood known as Los Barrios Altos. Adding to this conflation of divine aura and everyday familiarity, Señor is both the Spanish version of “Mister” or “Sir,” but it is also “Lord,” denoting his sacred status. The saint is spoken of as “visiting” each place where he stops, and he is greeted with terms of endearment—my Padre, *Mi Viejo* (my Old Man) or *Papa Lindo* (Beautiful Father), *Nuestro Cristo Moreno* (Our Brown Christ)—as people welcome him as a beloved and extra-ordinary (i.e., sacred) guest. At each of the Señor’s programmed official stops, he receives an official homage (*homenaje*), and act of tribute, which consists of an offering (*ofrenda*) of a welcoming speech by representatives, and an instrumental or choral musical performance, from “*criollo*” or “*chicha*” (popular genres blending African, European, and Andean music), to classical genres, and extravagant flower bouquets.

The Señor de los Milagros, this Lord of Miracles, is a transcendent yet immanent and earthly presence that is nurtured and re-nurtured during his traversal through the city. The celebration’s aesthetic fabric is that of a baroque, passionate solemnity, manifest in the dirge-like hymns of the *cantoras* and the music of the band, the

sea of purple bodies of the Hermanos synchronized along the long and slow path, the heavy odor of the plumes of incense, in the tears that can be seen in so many devotees, and in the majestic gold- and silver-laced image of the Señor. The procession then is solemn but not reserved, both hugely public and painfully intimate; its atmosphere at times loud and intense, at others, calm and peaceful, even almost silent.

Within the elements of anti-structure in this extra-ordinary event—its disruption of the routine, pace, tone and texture of everyday urban life in Lima—a rigid structure also prevails, exemplified by members of the Hermandad who are responsible for carrying out the core events of the procession.⁴⁵ If the Señor de los Milagros is the star of this ritual show, the Brotherhood (composed of around 6,000 members—men and women) distinguishes itself from the crowd as the event's central *collective* actor. It performs, at least for the duration of the Señor's *recorrido* or perambulation, a microcosm of harmonious yet hierarchical order. The procession is tightly orchestrated, with members of the national police corps (PNP), other municipal police officers and security personnel, sometimes even soldiers, strictly maintaining the separation between members of the crowd and those of the Hermandad by means of a thick rope or *soga*. Thus, the *soga* marks an arbitrary dividing line between the potentially unruly crowd outside of it, and the sacred space inside, focused on the Señor's litter or *anda*, and the group or *cuadrilla* of Hermanos bearing it at any given time.

The strongly hierarchical internal order and hermetically sealed exclusive nature of the Hermandad (Brotherhood) de las Nazarenas can be seen as reproducing a certain kind of Catholicism which mirrors certain deeply entrenched moral ideals of traditional Peruvian society. These principles of order extend along the lines of a starkly gendered division of labor in the procession. Brothers of the Hermandad conduct themselves according to masculine ideals of physical might, stoicism, and

45 Here we draw on Turner's conceptualization of structure as "an ordered and rule-governed arrangements of relationships between groups and institutions and between statuses and roles that persists through time despite changes in the identity of individuals who occupy particular positions" (in Badone and Roseman, *Intersecting Journeys*, 3.), and anti-structure as aspects of ritual that reflect a liminal freedom or release through a behavioral or symbolic inversion or subversion of the constraints that structure imposes. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

honor. Carrying the Señor is a matter of physical strength but also encompasses an experience of suffering and penitence (sacrifice) that is profoundly corporeal and sensual. In the words of one Hermano, who had carried the anda in the early morning and would continue his accompaniment until the next afternoon, “Afterwards there is no pain, you don’t feel tired; it’s magic.” (*“Luego no hay dolor, uno no siente cansado. Es magia.”*)

As *sahumadores* (incense blowers) and *cantoras* (hymn-singers), the veiled women in the procession perform with a different kind of sacrificial devotional body, walking, sometimes barefoot, slowly backwards in rows for hours at a time before the image, *limpiando* (cleaning or purifying) the path of the Señor, singing his praises, as they gaze at the image of the Virgen de la Nube painted on the other side of the Cristo image that is the Señor. “The Señor is rarely without song; the whole route we sing to him, the whole route,” Gisela, the leader of the Cantoras explained to us. “For all of us the Nazarene [*el nazareno*] is a marvel; the emotion is indescribable My Señor! He is omnipotent, he softens the heart of even the toughest [*mas rudo*] men and women, the toughest human being.”⁴⁶

At many of the pre-designated anda stops there is a change in the cuadrilla, following a script of elaborate gestures and acts (the placement of the litter on the ground, the removal and replacement of the candles and flowers, the arranging of the new cuadrilla of Hermanos and the raising of the litter), down to the last detail. On occasion the raising of the anda departs from the predictable script if the Brothers’ raising of the massive weight has not been perfectly executed and a suspenseful wobbling ensues, only to be recovered moments later and synchrony reestablished. Having borne the anda for the length of their assigned trajectory of a hundred meters (roughly an hour), and thus fulfilling (*cumplir*) their obligation, the Hermanos walk toward the back of the saga and then out of the core area.

Thus, by means of a continual series of repeated ritual action, a scripted and patterned constant flow of people, objects (candles, flowers), the Señor performs a poetic mapping of sensorily vibrant divine space. Yet as mentioned, the spaces

46 Interview with GF, leader of the Cantoras, Hermandad de las Nazarenas, May 2017.

through which the Señor moves are tightly managed in terms of public accessibility of the public to the anda. The controlled division and occupation of space in Lima's civic core creates an impression that the Señor de los Milagros is a seamless extension of ecclesiastical property and identity, even while the diverse devotional and spatial practices of other participants along the route (e.g., the impromptu cheers, and shout-outs to the Señor as he passes, the intimate personal prayers and petitions whispered in his presence, devotees who sneak into the sacred cordoned off area around the anda to get closer to the Señor, etc.) may seem to contest this total control. The procession can thus be seen to encompass a continuous vacillation between elements of "timeless" ritual *communitas* and apparent fixedness of structure, and others that signal toward the heterogeneity of Limeños' experience of the Señor, even if this diversity almost never translates into people's outright acts of opposition within the event itself.

MIRACULOUS ACTS OF LEGITIMATION

The procession thus allows a constant and compressed interaction between Peruvians, the Church, state institutions, and the Señor himself. The event is organized over several months by the Hermandad del Señor de los Milagros, yet this coordination is supervised by the Archbishop of Lima (in the years of our fieldwork, Cardinal Luis Cipriani). The Señor's planned trajectory changes slightly from year to year: petitions for stops of the anda are vetted first at the Archdiocese by the Archbishop, who then chooses what he deems as the appropriate stops (24 in total) before they can be made official.

Many public and political institutions appear during the procession offering *homenajes*, each with their own agenda, and the Señor can be seen as the mediator or judge of these intentions. This highly visible and conspicuous space possesses a moral resonance that has the transcendent referent of the Señor de los Milagros, making the event is a very public site or arena of interlocation: rich rhetorical statements are made at each stop of the Señor, when people take advantage of the moment to thank the saint for his protection and blessings, and to solicit more for the year to come; the saint is asked to "illuminate those governing," "protect the workers," and so on. Discourses emitted at some of the official stops in the

procession emphasize how collective fates are placed in the hands of the Señor de los Milagros: the good performance (*desempeño*) of the institutions, the well-being of the economy, and so on—in other words, the life-blood of the development of the country of Peru as a whole.

In this context, the space of the miraculous serves its role of sanctifying and legitimating political action, as a potentiality at least. On the Señor's sacred stage, everyone's behavior is also scrutinized and judged carefully: there are firm, deeply entrenched expectations of how one should demonstrate respect to the saint, and so the site becomes a space for evaluating people's moral worth. The pragmatics of this ritual context demand that each interlocutor be recognized as a visible and credible addressee of the Señor, to insert themselves in a particular language of identification vis-à-vis the saint, and to appeal to the Señor de los Milagros, as interlocutor, to accept their petition. With their discursive actions, such speakers can be seen to claim public space through a delicate balance of improvisation and routine, a script of sanctioned and expected techniques and gestures. If such public acts of discourse deviate from acceptable themes of address (as illustrated by the case of the CTP union representative mentioned at the beginning of this article) their speakers run the risk of being rebuked or even ostracized. For such moments represent communication ruptures, a break-down of the tacit, delicate pact of sacrifice and exchange—one of words, of affect, of physical touch and acts of penitence and devotion. These ruptures expose the heavy weight of the Señor in the creation and disciplining of political credibility and integrity, and of moral Peruvian (Catholic) subjects.

At certain stops (*paradas*) on the official route expectations of propriety of comportment are particularly elevated, for these are sites most closely associated with social status and state/Church authority. Nowhere is more exemplary of this point than the Señor's stops in the Plaza de Armas (Plaza Mayor) of Lima, where Peru's religious and political powers are concentrated. When the Señor arrives at the Plaza on October 18 (the first of the main procession days), he makes stops, in turn, at the Governmental Palace (where he is received by the President), the Municipality of Lima (where the saint is "greeted" by the city's mayor), the Archdiocese

of Lima, and the Cathedral (where the Archbishop delivers an important speech), and then the national Congress building, where he is paid homage by the *congresistas* (congressmen and women). At this stage in the anda's route, many people have accumulated in the Plaza, and several media units are erected just in front of the governmental palace, the symbolic seat of national government. Here, the close physical juxtaposition of buildings and of representatives of Church and State makes manifest a symbiosis of religious and secular powers that, as we discuss, goes deeper than mere appearance.

When the Señor arrives at the governmental palace, the President (accompanied by his cabinet members) is expected to come out to welcome him and pay him homage—presenting him flowers and sometimes even kneeling before him—and customarily stepping in to help carry the litter for a few minutes. While such displays of deference to religion and religious-political collaboration would likely evoke upset in more virulently anti-clerical yet still predominantly Catholic countries in Latin America such as Mexico, where liberalist secular ideologies shape public opinion more strongly, here in Peru such gestures of pious humility are part of the stuff of the everyday. Our point here however is not so much the flagrant openness of this apparent collusion, but rather its strongly moral aura. Such formal, official greetings made to the Señor are utterances and actions that index this particular space of Lima as part of the core of national authority.

In this potent encounter of the respective heads of earthly and heavenly realms, the actions and behavior of the president are closely monitored and subject to public judgment. Since the president makes no public verbal greeting, but remains entirely silent throughout his interaction with the Señor, his “proper” or competent execution of expected rites and his conduct as a faithful devotee are especially salient. This point in the procession is covered carefully by local and national media outlets, who tend to focus on matters seen to demonstrate apt moral character: for example, did the president carry the image? Did he don the purple tunic? Was he respectful before the Señor? Behavior deemed appropriate becomes the stuff of photo-ops, while breaches of expected comportment are severely condemned. In 2012, during the first time we witnessed the procession, in President Ollanta Humala's second

year in power, he and First Lady Nadine Heredia exited the Palacio de Gobierno to greet the Señor over ten minutes “late,” and were subject to boos, jeers and whistles from the crowd, and harsh criticism both in news stories and via social media. One man in the crowd outside the Palacio commented loudly: “He [Humala] thinks that even God is going to wait for him!”; “He lacks manners!” yelled another.

The gaff was also seized upon by television and newspapers, which sported headlines such as, “Ollanta Humala and Nadine Heredia booed [*pifiados*] in the procession of the Brown Christ [*el Cristo Moreno*].”⁴⁷ One tweet we read that day said, “What a terrible boo-ing Humala and the First Lady received, after leaving in the lurch the Purple Christ! Ambition and power made you blind!” The next year, in 2013, Humala appeared quickly from the governmental palace and that year even carried the Señor, thereby redeeming himself in the eyes of the public. And over the remaining years of his tenure (which ended in July 2016), it seems he made sure to fulfil his *compromiso* (obligation) to the saint, down to the last detail. There is a vicarious excitement here, in this reversal of roles, the sight of the head of

Figure 3. Screenshot of website showing former President Ollanta Humala carrying the *anda* of the Señor de los Milagros with members of the Fourth Cuadrilla of the Hermandad de las Nazarenas, outside the Palacio de Gobierno, Lima, Peru, October 18, 2014. Source: Peru.com.

47 “Ollanta Humala y Nadine Heredia pifiados en procesión del Cristo Moreno,” *Peru 21*, October 18, 2012, <https://peru21.pe/politica/ollanta-humala-nadine-heredia-pifiados-procesion-cristo-moreno-50882>.

government deferring to the Lord of Miracles, the savior of the poor and powerless. Yet while the rules of gift and sacrifice enjoined in the performance are accessible to all, they must be followed in an exact manner.

The Catholic Church too uses the space of the miraculous to couch its political statements as transcendent, absolute Truth. We cite one polemical homily Archbishop Roberto Cipriani delivered in 2015 during the main procession day (October 18) to illustrate such a deployment of miracle talk:

The Señor de los Milagros has passed through all the stages of our fatherland [*patria*]. He has seen governments change, whether Peru has won in football. The Señor de los Milagros is the great witness of the history of Perú, that's why we love him so much, because he is Peruvian. [...]

We ask the Señor de los Milagros, protect the family, so that they may be close to their children and grandparents and so the family may be the central place [*el lugar central*] of the entire country: the family, made up of father, mother, children, grandchildren, grandparents. *The Señor de los Milagros wants that miracle.* That the family rises again, united, and so we say to him: "have compassion."

The Señor de los Milagros *takes care of human life*. We don't want to treat anyone badly, but we cannot say that abortion is a right. Abortion is not a right, it's a crime. So we ask the Señor de los Milagros, *please make for me that great miracle*: "abortion no, life yes." These are *normal* things: life, the sick, the marriage of a man and a woman. The Church, with much love [*cariño*] is holding out its hand to everyone to help us, but it is not saying that we should keep quiet about what Jesus has taught us.⁴⁸ [author emphases]

Cipriani's words here address the Señor as an interlocutor, the recipient of his solicitation. Yet by means of statements such as "The Señor de los Milagros wants

48 Homily of Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, "Santa Misa por la Nación y la familia peruana," Plaza Mayor de Lima, Sunday, October 18, 2015, <http://www.arzobispadodelima.org/blog/2015/10/18/homilia-en-el-santa-misa-por-la-nacion-y-la-familia-peruana>.

that miracle...,” Cipriani can also be seen to ventriloquize the Señor, conveying the saint’s (supposed) message in his stead. In this discourse, and many others, the Archbishop uses the public space of the celebration of the Señor de los Milagros to elaborate on the Roman Catholic Church’s current theological discourse of “life,” centered on the heterosexual family, as the basic building block of a locally and nationally rooted *Peruvian* way of life.⁴⁹ In this and other homilies, the Archbishop speaks to Peruvian Catholics (both in Lima and the millions in Peruvian migrant communities around the world) through the image of the Señor, and bodily, affective metaphors such as love (*amor*, *cariño*, compassion) and the (nuclear, heterosexual) family, the privileged unit for the reproduction of (“integrist”) Catholic faith and moral society.⁵⁰

The above examples illustrate how the Catholic space of the Señor’s procession both defies and counters the public “secular” space of the state and at the same time, articulates and upholds it. The question remains, however, of how to explain the evident concern by political leaders to follow through with the enjoined protocol of the event. Our survey of television and newspaper coverage during our research brought up several news stories commenting on other politicians, from judges, to ministers and members of congress, who have made a point of being seen to take part in the ritual, including all of Peru’s presidents during two decades of military dictatorship and since then.⁵¹ Alan García (president 1985 to 1990; and from 2006 to 2011), often carried the image as an Hermano (for almost fifty years) in the 9th Cuadrilla. Politician Alberto Andrade carried the Señor during his first year as mayor of Lima in 1996. Yet the Señor de los Milagros also serves as a theologico-political instrument even outside the official days of his annual celebration. Few Peruvians can forget, for example, May of 1990 when, during a heated presidential campaign, then Archbishop Augusto Vargas authorized the “taking out” of the saint in a procession protesting the support given by evangelical Christian

49 For an explanation of the “culture of life” in the Church’s theology of the “New Evangelization,” see Valentina Napolitano, *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return: Transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823267484.001.0001>.

50 Norget, “Mediatization of the Miraculous.”

51 Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975); Francisco Morales Bermúdez (1975 to 1980).

groups to Fujimori's presidential candidacy. The event was firmly disapproved of by progressivist Catholic bishops who accused the Archbishop of using the Señor in promoting a "crusade-like" Catholicism (*catolicismo de cruzada*)⁵²—once again exposing the cracks in the apparent coherence of local and national Peruvian Catholicism and in the Church's dominance of Lima's public sphere.

Such acts would seem to support our argument that the procession of the Señor de los Milagros is a public performance of the miraculous, a resource created from the dialectic of history and theology, which is key in the public affirmation of the rightness and moral legitimacy of rule, or even simply the assertion of a political position. Again, an opposition between structure and anti-structure is at play, for such performances of piety and moral rectitude contrast with the reality beyond the purple curtain of the Señor de los Milagros. For example, both presidents whose tenure spanned our research (2011–2017)—Ollanta Humala and Pedro Kuczynski—are currently, respectively, in prison (Humala) and a fugitive from justice (Kuczynski) for human rights crimes or corruption.⁵³ Humala's predecessor, Alejandro Toledo (2001 to 2006) was also entangled in a corruption scandal, and in April 2019 committed suicide in the United States before he could be extradited back to Peru to face trial. Alan García is currently under investigation for "financial irregularities" during his two presidential terms. García's second presidency followed, of course, that of Alberto Fujimori, Peru's autocratic ruler from 1990 to 2000, who in 2009 was sentenced to 25 years in jail for human rights breaches in the war against the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) guerrillas, and was later convicted of embezzlement and corruption.

We bring up the cases above since they point to something striking in the apparent normalization in Peru of such instances of crisis, scandal, hypocrisy and betrayal at

52 Evangelical Christian members of Congress are also expected to pay respects to the Señor. (Dr. Véronique Lacaros, personal communication, Lima, Peru.)

53 In 2017, Humala and his wife were arrested on charges of corruption and currently are serving 18 months of pre-trial detention while being investigated on money-laundering and conspiracy charges. Humala's successor Pedro Kuczynski resigned in 2018, just ahead of the public exposure of another corruption scandal. See, for e.g., Sonia Goldenberg, "Does Peru need a Special Prison for Former Presidents?" *New York Times*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/opinion/does-peru-need-a-special-prison-just-for-ex-presidents.html>.

the same time as these politicians' elaborate, carefully regimented displays of humility and piety before the Señor. Even with the regular publicizing in the media of politicians' alleged acts of corruption and other ethical breaches, including those of the president, in our experience open articulations during the procession of criticism or opposition to such public performances of devotion were extremely rare.

The miracle and the miraculous thus express both the limitation of power and its legitimation. Public performative solicitations—in word or deed—of the blessing or help of the Señor de los Milagros made by such political figures are only entreaties, not perlocutional statements. In Peru, as elsewhere, the miracle makes sovereign or divine power evident by means of the arrest or interruption it represents in the normal or natural law governing the mundane order; it refers to an exceptional, unassailable reality and truth whose potency lies in invisibility, in faith. Miracle-talk in this sense can be understood as a “sacrament of power” in Agamben’s terms; like the oath, miracle-talk is “situated at the junction between religion and politics,” a speech act “that only possesses a signifying content, without stating anything in itself. Its function is the *relation* it establishes between the word uttered and the *potential* invoked,”⁵⁴ the potential here residing in the “efficacy” of the connection with the realm of the divine.⁵⁵ The invocation of *lo milagroso* through miracle-talk by Peruvian politicians thus appears as a sincere demonstration of faith, a sincerity not manifest by behavior or actions in the mundane world, but rather in the ritual space of the Señor, which appears to allow a moral status to “stick,” even if not permanently, to its speaker.

CONCLUSION

As a staple performance of Peruvian national and Catholic tradition, the annual procession of the Señor de los Milagros in Lima condenses struggles between multiple social sectors, even if these struggles may never be openly articulated during the event itself. By analyzing the procession in relation to socio-political transformations, we have pointed out how it cannot be understood as a boundable, inherently unique sacred phenomenon. The procession of the Señor is not merely

54 Benaviste, in Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 11; emphases added.

55 Bussolini, “Critical Encounter.”

a timeless reiteration of an annual religious ritual, but a baroque Catholic performance with specific affective registers and a multi-sensorial materiality of power which operate on the bodies of individual participants within Lima's vibrant urban landscape. Through processes of repetition, the differentiation of space and actors, and the privileging of certain ritual acts and discourses, the procession projects an elaborate baroque worlding of ideal Catholicism. The resulting potent ritual defies certain neo-liberal and other democratizing forces in Lima that push toward the recognition of religious diversity and a stronger civil society, and *laicización*⁵⁶ or a greater separation of religion (i.e., as represented by the Catholic Church) from education, public affairs and state governance.

We have focused on lo milagroso and miracle-talk as key aspects of legitimation processes for various social actors. Miracles hover at the tenuous fold between the visible and the invisible, the potential and the impossible, of inner, subjective personal experience and "exterior" socially accepted extraordinary reality.⁵⁷ As a mediation of personal, intimate faith, the framework or field of lo milagroso is an ambiguous experiential ground as it draws from both popular sensibilities and theological, doctrinal categories and logics.⁵⁸ The Peruvian Church appeals to lo milagroso, a discursive genre and an affective tone of experience, as a way of producing a certain visceral register of Catholic experience and mobilizing the mystical foundations of the Church's moral and social authority.⁵⁹ But a harnessing of the potency of miraculousness surrounding saints in this way is not just a Peruvian phenomenon, since it is part of the *modus operandi* of today's Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, post-Vatican II teachings, policies and practices point toward the Church's reinvested energy in a neo-baroque promotion of saints and saintly relics in the mapping of the contemporary Catholic regime.⁶⁰

Miracle-talk and other public interactions of actors of the state with the Señor de

56 Roberto J. Blancarte, "Secularism and Secularization," in *The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America*, eds. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston, and Stephen C. Dove, trans. José Adrian Barragán (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 331-345.

57 Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude*.

58 Norget, "Mediatization of the Miraculous." Margarita Zires, "Los imaginarios del milagro y la política," *Versión 17* (2006): 131-160.

59 Norget "Mediatization of the Miraculous."

60 Kristin Norget, "Blood, Wax and Papal Potencies: Neo-Baroque Catholic Relics in Mexico," forthcoming in *Material Religion* (2019).

los Milagros, especially those of the president, expose the merging of (Catholic) theology (transcendence) and its immanence in Peru's earthly institutions. As "a situation in which God decides to suspend or contravene the normally operating laws of nature,"⁶¹ the miracle exemplifies Agamben's idea of the state of exception, key to sovereign power. The current increasing incorporation of media technologies in the production of public Catholic performances like the Peruvian Señor de los Milagros procession and other saint celebrations in Latin America allows *lo milagroso* to multiply its effects through augmented dimensions, potentially reconfiguring in the process both subjects and publics. Given these circumstances, we need to take seriously the mode of the miraculous, including its potential for fortifying transcendent authority, as a critical source of social and political power.

61 Bussolini, "Critical Encounter," 119.

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