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Subverting the Coloniality of Language and Literacy: Hybrid Visuality in the Post-Contact Americas

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Pre-Columbian forms of writing in the Americas thrived on visual media (coupled with no less crucial oral and performative signifiers) of communication. From Mesoamerica to the Andes even if the exact means of this form of communication changed or showed variation (Mesoamerican pictographic and conventional visual signs and Andean *khipus* and *tocapus)* the visual-oral-performative combine of this communication was a constant and common feature to a large extent. And this worked with and through another constant: varied forms of materiality this combine was inscribed on or communicated through as also we have seen above.

What happened, then, when the Spanish imperial designs following what was to be considered in the Western imperial-colonial accounts as Christopher Columbus' 'discovery' of America started to propagate (if not impose) their colonial discourses on language, literacy and record-keeping of knowledge? The European paper (which still was different from what has been understood above as "native paper" in Mesoamerica) the book and bound material format of the book as their ultimate destinations? In their study aptly titled *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World* Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins explore repercussions of this aftermath, as it were, of the letter in Mesoamerica and in the Andes (Hill Boone and Cummins 1998). Or the territories which Hill Boone identifies as having reached "greatest degree of cultural complexity just prior to the coming of the Europeans" and, consequently, as the territories where "indigenous/Spanish interface was concentrated" (Hill Boone in Hill Boone and Cummins 1998 3).

We have seen how complex and layered cultural-symbolic expressions of these territories were but exactly how did this indigenous/Spanish interface play out? What were its philosophical-cultural settings and what were the forms, structures, layers and formats of such expressions which came out of this interface? In her introductory hypotheses in the study cited above Hill Boone cautions us to be mindful of the fact that this interface took place amidst and through starkly uneven relations of power. Colonial relations of power as they were, these relations were particularly shocking and, hence, damaging for the indigenous communities in Mesoamerica and the Andes (or what the colonial authorities would call *indias occidentals* or *las indias*, which would only later become America and then Latin America) who had no prior experience of hierarchies with fatal consequences for them.

Even though existing dominant polities in these lands (the Aztecs in Mesoamerica and the Incas in the Andes) did have their own imperial, exploitative and destructive designs it is only with the uninvited and definitely unforeseen advent of European colonialism that the body and lives of these communities were treated as perfectly expendable. This while or after extracting labour and riches such as gold and silver with these bodies all of which was converted into wealth and profit to be channelized to only produce more wealth and more profit, a foundation thus of modern capitalism (Quijano 1992 and Mignolo 2005).

Operating in a mutually dependent and explanatory combine with this extremely exploitative economy of the colonial system which together with diseases completely unknown to the indigenous communities led to

massive demographic collapse[1] was the cultural logic of this system. As we have discussed in the previous chapter this logic (or set of logics) denigrated indigenous cultural productions on the pretext of their not fulfilling, as it were, criteria set by this logic of language, literacy, history and, ultimately, 'civilisation'. It is not surprising, then, that pictorial documents existing in the cultural territory of Mesoamerica were ruthlessly destroyed. In her contribution to the earlier cited *Native Traditions*… Frances Karttunen reports that innumerable such documents pertaining to the Maya culture in southern Mesoamerica were burnt in a bonfire supervised by Diego de Landa, a Franciscan missionary, who thus rejoiced in the act:

> We found a great number of these books (referring to pre-Columbian *codices*) in Indian characters and because they contained nothing but superstition and the Devil's falsehoods we burned them all; and this they (the Mayans) felt most bitterly and it caused them great grief (Karttunen in Hill Boone and Cummins 1998 421-22).

A similar fate befell such documents from the Aztec cultural repository. Jaun Bautista de Pomar, who was a *mestizo* (product of indigenous and European conjugal union) in the post-conquest Mexico and whom Karttunen cites, informs in his *Relación de Texoco* (Story or History of Texoco) that royal archives of the area were similarly\ consigned to flames. Pomar further informs that even those indigenous people who had such texts in their possession burnt them for the fear of church authorities such as Juan de Zummáraga (1468-1548), the first bishop of what was to become Mexico.

1 Writing in the aftermath of the letter: hybrid legacies of colonialism

Nevertheless, If the destruction of these documents was far from over for reasons we will discuss later, even more indestructible, so to say, was indigenous' ways of conceiving and symbolically representing their philosophies and notions of/on life which even though were drastically effected still contained many elements of pre-Columbian vantage. This was informed by their particular notion about past which, as discussed above, emphasized its continued presence in the present. And as Tom Cummins remarks: "this presence of the past … was present in the economic, social and cultural practices of everyday life" (Cummins in Hill Boone and Cummins 1998 450).

A good example of how and to what effect this past-informing-the present worked is what quoting Louise M. Burkhart Cummins explains as "Nahua Christianity" (Burkhart in Cummins 1998 454). That is, amidst and despite the colonially-sponsored Catholic Christianity there remained, and somehow thrived within this Christianity, notions and practices with which Nahua people (those having Nahuatl as their lingua-franca in Mesoamerica) understood and lived their religiosity. A very remarkable and still hugely impactful symbol of this is the cult Virgin of Guadalupe in present-day Mexico.

Followed by scores of Mexicans (including still sizable indigenous and *mestizos*) which prepares its massive socio-political appeal, characteristics of this figure become important here in that the face and the skin of this Virgin is dark and not white (as seen in the image below). The un-European appearance of this Virgin also revealingly called "brown virgin[2]" apprises us of the fact that indigenous communities having to face the Catholic figure of Virgin of Mary, instead, inserted their own pre-Columbian goddess of care and protection *Tonantzin* (seen in the image in figure 34) in this eventual un-European appearance of the figure. This instance

[1] Damian Baca informs that the estimated indigenous population in what today comprises Mexico was 40 million in 1491, just a year before Columbus' discovered' America, which was reduced to just 10 million in 1650! (Baca 2008 23)

[2] http://www.theyucatantimes.com/2014/12/our-lady-of-guadalupe-or-tonantzin/. Accessed on 07/02/2017 at 10:48 hrs.

is telling of this Nahua or, in contemporary context, popular Christianity and, even more, of the resilience of indigenous belief systems in the colonial context.

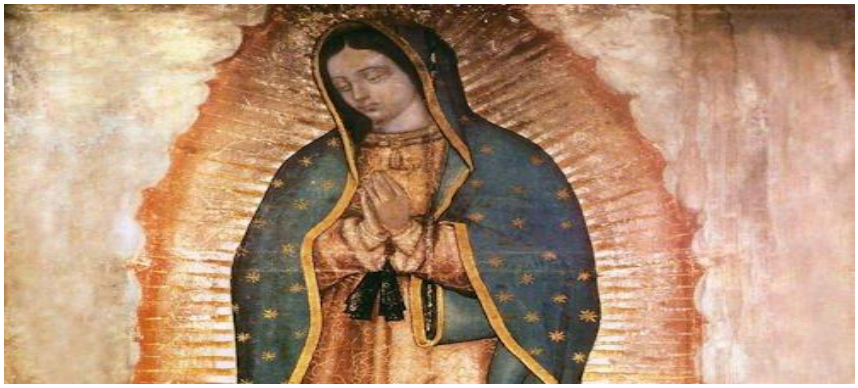

Figure 1. The cult of *Virgen de Guadalupe* (Virgin of Guadalupe). https://www.google.co.in/search?q=Virgen+de+Guadalupe&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiZwf. Accessed on 07/02/2017 at 10:35 hrs.

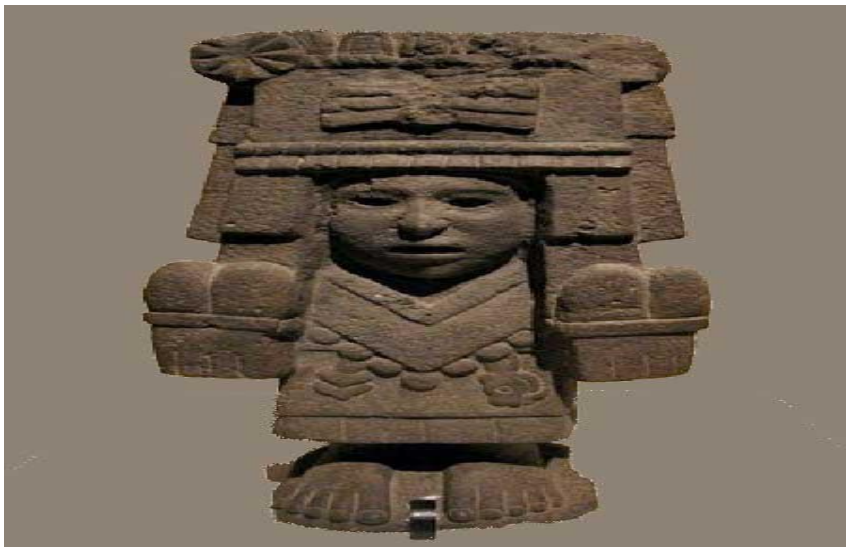

Figure 2. The pre-colonial Aztec goddess *Tonantzin* who was considered goddess of motherly care and protection. http://www.theyucatantimes.com/2014/12/our-lady-of-guadalupe-or-tonantzin/. Accessed on 07/02/2018 at 10:55 hrs.

Another instance of this resilience is the calendar seen in the work *El Primer Nueva Coronica y el Buen Gobierno* (The First New Chronicle and Good Government 1615) by Guaman Poma de Ayala to whom we will return later in our discussion on the colonial Andes. Here, as Cummins quoting Sabine MacCormak informs, Andean notions on time and agricultural calendar are infused with Christian notions and organization of time. A fusion, which as Cummins notes, can only be completely or comprehensively understood with and through the Andean conventions on the matter (Cummins in Hill Boone and Cummins 1998 459-462).

The resilience of indigenous traditions in the colonial context contained elements of both continuity and change. In his overview of this resilience Cummins reminds us that presence of this resilience does not mean that indigenous traditions, be they in cultural or political or religious sphere, remained stagnant or fixed in time and

that we just need to trace and capture 'authentic' meanings and forms of these traditions. Voicing a similar opinion, Hill Boone further adds that these traditions underwent a complex and opaque process where at the same time that some newly arrived (with colonization) modes of expressions were appropriated leaving behind some of the pre-Columbian modes (Hill Boone suggests this was the case as these modes were no longer of use in the colonial context) many of these last were maintained and/or adapted to the new context.

This condition of "holding on or reaching back" to the already available corpus of signifying tools and practices while also partaking of the colonially introduced ones, a condition some of whose expressions we will see below, contained potential voices of contestation to the colonial order (Hill Boone in Hill Boone and Cummins 1998 149-201. Walter D. Mignolo understands this condition of indigenous and later *mestizo* sensibility of irreverently and strategically using multiple references and means of representation for some destabilizing effects as an instance of "Border thinking". (Mignolo 2005 9-10). Delving into the specific nature of colonial encounters in what today is Latin America, Mignolo recognises certain necessary conditions of this encounter: to begin with, it was the Europeans who violently surprised indigenous communities in that alleged 'discovery' where the latter had to confront and make sense of an entirely unforeseen and unaccounted for reality.

Mignolo borrows an Aymara (one of the indigenous languages still spoken in what today are Bolivia and Peru) term *pachakuti* which literally means "a total disruption of time and space, a revolution in reverse" and connotes this whirlpool of a state where these communities had their land, population, cultural expressions and cyclic cosmology displaced and denigrated (Mignolo 2005 Preface, xiv). Now, the indigenous communities had very few options but to use the colonizer's language and other symbolic systems and to refer to the latter's frame of reference in terms of time, socio-cultural-religious organisation etc.

However, far from getting disappeared or happily given up world views shared within these indigenous communities found new, unexpected and myriad ways to assert themselves. The extended cultural repertoire which was now made available and which had indigenous and the new colonial references was strategically used and moulded to provoke this assertion. This assertion created a symbolic in-between space, very much tied to the in-between material landscape emerging out of the highly unequal and colonial encounter of the *Nuevo Mundo* with the Old World (Europe), where they could use dominant references and imageries to eventually counter-act them with popular ones without making any essentialising claims of 'authenticity'. This subjectivity or what Mignolo calls "subjectivity of the border" which irreverently deploys contrasting and incompatible, as it were, references for highly political ends is very much at work such as Guamán Poma's *Pontifical World* to which we will return later (Mignolo 2005 125).

Here it would be pertinent to go back to Cummins who opines that colonial discourses which underpinned economic, political, religious and cultural facets of the colonial enterprise sought to define and categorize indigenous realities and expressions so as to justify this enterprise. Now, and as Cummins notes, the meanings or discourses which emanate from the dual and heterogeneous cultural expressions such as those explained by "border thinking" work to counter the colonially-imposed ones.

These cultural expressions and their particular aesthetic of conjuring their signifying elements can be understood as part of what Mignolo discusses as "colonial semiosis" (Mignolo in Del Sarto Ana, Ríos Alicia y Trigo Abril 2004 262). Here, cultural encounters in a colonial context are recorded at and through these symbolic expressions which due to their very multi-referential configuration carry diverse meanings. More often than not, these meanings explicitly or subtly interrupt 'normal' acceptance of dominant colonial notions such as those on language, history, religion etc. discussed above and propose others potentially counter-hegemonic as will be seen in the instances to be discussed here.

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