IDB CULTURAL CENTER June 1996 No. 16

ENCUENTROS

When Strangers Come to Town: Millennial Discourse, Comparison, and the Return of Quetzalcoatl

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WHEN STRANGERS COME TO TOWN: MILLENNIAL DISCOURSE, COMPARISON, AND THE RETURN OF QUETZALCOATL*

By David Carrasco

I think it was Jorge Luis Borges who said somewhere that there are only two stories really worth writing about: either 'a stranger comes to town' or 'someone leaves home.' In this lecture on the complex and problematic story of Quetzalcoatl's return, I want to reflect on the millennial themes of both kinds of stories by comparing scholarship about the ways in which the Mexicas of central Mexico were said to have responded to the arrival of the Spaniards, specifically Hernán Cortés, in their territory. My approach to end-of-the-world themes and what José Piedra calls the "game of arrival" develops from three directions: first, from my work on the magnetic and centripetal powers of ceremonial centers and Mesoamerican ideal type cities which were the political theaters for the performance of cosmological and social knowledge, for example, my essay "Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor"; second, from my recent focus on the ceremonies of colonialism and millennial encounters as represented in my recent article, "Jaguar Christians in the Contact Zone"; and third, from my work on a handful of Mexican and Chicano writers who employ the "*borderlands/la frontera*" as the major symbolic space of Mexican American existence as represented in my forthcoming essay, "The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Shamanic Space."[1] In my work on the borderlands in Chicano literature I focus not on millennial time, but on the millennial *spaces* of the Mexican American imagination. It seems that in Latin American history and religions, there are always strangers coming to town whether as slaves, stowaways, missionaries, or conquistadors drawn into the hair-raising stories of the New World by the forces of diasporas or magnetic cities.[2] In approaching the Aztec version of the stranger comes to town story, I want to 1) hang my collection of comments on two quotations about comparisons and meetings, 2) summarize the basic narratives about the Spanish strangers coming to Tenochtitlan in 1519 and the belief that it was Quetzalcoatl returning, 3) survey the millenarian discourse on this event, and 4) offer my own interpretation.

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* "When Strangers Come to Town: Millennial Discourse, Comparison, and the Return of Quetzalcoatl" was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank on June 7, 1996 as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lecture Series. This lecture forms part of a series on millennial thought and action in Latin America, developed in collaboration with the Institute for the Advanced Study of Culture.

Quotations

The first quotation comes from Jonathan Z. Smith in that remarkable essay, "Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit," which was the prolegomenon for his much later book, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. He wrote, "The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence. Whether revealed in the logical grouping of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other like activities—comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought."[3] Here, I want us to keep in mind the phrases, *a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence* and *the omnipresent substructure of human thought*. These words of J. Z. Smith sound more like the language we would expect from the great historian of religions, Mircea Eliade.

The second quotation comes from the second chapter of Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*.[4] Entitled "The Conquest of Mexico," Book 12 is the final volume of a monumental work representing the ethnographic research of the Franciscan priest, Bernardino de Sahagún, who with the aid of several native assistants spent over forty years studying the world view, religious practices, and mythology of the Aztecs. One of the sections in Book 12 purports to describe the initial responses *and comparisons* made by the Mexicas about the strangers on the shore. Following a description of ten omens that signaled the collapse of the Aztec empire, the Spaniards arrive on the eastern coast and native reconnaissance begins when local leaders go out to meet the Spaniards. The quote reads, "And when they had drawn near to the Spaniards, then before them they performed the earth-eating ceremony at the prows of the boats: they thought it was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who had come to arrive." I highlight the phrases, *And when they had drawn near to the Spaniards* and *they thought it was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who had arrived.*

Comparing Comparisons

Jonathan Smith's discussion of the general principles of comparative thought include the claim that "comparison can be a means for overcoming strangeness."[5] Any reader of the Spanish accounts of the conquest witnesses, Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, will notice them making short comparisons to deal with the strange. Cortés compares Tenochtitlan's ceremonial centers with those of Seville and Córdoba and Tlatelolco's marketplace to Salamanca, while Díaz del Castillo relates them to "the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis."[6] The Aztecs also compare, as a way to overcome the Spanish strangeness, when they think that the ships are floating temples and that Pedro de Alvarado is named Tonatiuh, the Sun God. The most relevant Aztec attempt to overcome strangeness comes one page after the quote, previously cited from the *Florentine Codex*, where the Aztecs identified the Spaniards with Quetzalcoatl. Now, the narrative places the comparison of the Spaniards with Quetzalcoatl **inside the head** of the ruler, Moctezuma.

> He thought and believed that it was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who had landed. For they were of the opinion that he would return, that he would ap-

> pear, that he would come back to his seat of authority, because he had gone in that direction (eastward) when he left.[7]

This passage contains the vital parts of the millennial kingdom of Quetzalcoatl's return myth which has so engaged scholars and laypeople over the centuries.[8] Those parts are that 1) the Aztec ruler thought that Cortés was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who was 2) returning in order to 3) restore his glorious kingdom and one of the key proofs was 4) directional, i.e. the fact that the new arrivals came from the east which was the direction of his disappearance, i.e. when he left home (Borges's other major story) centuries before.

In fact, this anticipation of a millennial kingdom, the immanent, this-worldly, profound transformation brought on by a miraculous or magical event, is elaborated in two different accounts of the meeting of Cortés with the Aztec *tlatoani*, Moctezuma Xocoyotzin. The earliest account appears in Cortés's Second Letter to Carlos V in which Moctezuma, in the presence of a notary public, welcomes the Spanish Captain as a returning ancestor/chieftain who, according to Mexica sacred history is destined to rule the land and is to be obeyed. Since Cortés arrives from where the sun rises and because of what Cortés has said about the Spanish King, we are "certain that he is our natural lord" and the kingdom is now his.[9] It is remarkable that this speech is recorded in 1520 during the shifting, violent, uncertain military and political events that overwhelmed both the Spaniards and Mexicas. Also remarkable is the other account of this speech which appears in the *Florentine Codex* when Moctezuma welcomes the Spaniards. The *tlatoani* is reported to have said, "O our Lord, thou has suffered fatigue . . . Thou has come to govern the city of Mexico. . . thou has come to descend upon thy mat, upon thy seat, which I have guarded for thee . . . And now it hath been fulfilled; visit thy palace."[10]

Shifting back to Cortés's Second Letter, we find a second abdication speech in which Moctezuma is no longer welcoming Cortés but addressing all of his "chiefs of the cities of the land whereabouts." He repeats the millenarian themes of the imminent end of his reign and the arrival of a sacred ancestor and reminds the allied rulers, ". . . you well know that we have always expected him . . . and according to the direction whence he says he comes, I am certain . . . that this is the same lord for whom we have been waiting . . . from now on you should obey the great King, for he is your rightful lord and as his representative acknowledge this is his captain. And all the tributes and services which, until now, you have rendered to me, render now to him . . ."[11] In this version, Moctezuma is passing his authority over to the Spanish soldier.

No doubt we all hear the clever political hand of Cortés in this account, but there is much more to hear and understand, as we shall soon see.

The Debate: How 'Natives' Think About Europeans

One of the most powerful problems in the history of religious studies and anthropology has been expressed in the question, 'How do natives think?' A quick review of titles from the classical formulations of Lucien Lévy Bruhl and E. B. Tylor to the revisions of Bronislaw Malinowski, Mircea Eliade,

and Claude Lévi-Strauss shows that the study of religion has often been motivated by or at least turned on this problem.[12] Whether the 'natives' are the indigenous peoples of the New World, Oceania, Australia, Africa, or the 'others' of traditional cultures, Western scholarship on religion has sought to get into "other peoples myths," their heads, minds, world views, and thought processes.[13] The complexity of the problem was recently highlighted in Charles H. Long's essays on post colonial studies where he charges that the question of 'how natives think' is part of a grand scholarly signification designed to give interpretive privilege to Western intellectuals.[14] According to Long, the formation of Enlightenment thought was profoundly implicated in the conquests and colonialisms of European cultures from which developed new racial theories, forms of genocide, and unheard-of strategies for human exploitation. The combination of Enlightenment methods and epistemologies with the opening of a New World led not so much to a better understanding of "others" as it did to intellectual strategies which "paved the ground for historical evolutionary thinking, racial theories and forms of color symbolism that made the economic and military conquest of various cultures and peoples justifiable and defensible. In this movement religions and cultures and peoples throughout the world were created anew through academic disciplinary orientations—they were signified."[15] In relation to this charge the question of 'how natives think' has been raised with new polemical force and a turn of focus in the exchanges between two leading anthropologists, Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins.[16] Now the question is, '*How do natives think about Europeans when they meet them invading the islands, beaches, communities, and cities of their own worlds,*' or, with respect to this lecture, '*What kinds of comparisons do natives make when strangers come to town?*' The specific debate/battle between Obeyesekere and Sahlins focuses on the question of whether Captain Cook and his crews were perceived, interpreted, and treated like the Hawaiian god, Lono, by the natives who met, welcomed, exchanged, and eventually murdered the English captain. The depth of the significance of the issue of how natives think and how scholars come to think natives thought about Europeans is reflected in the special intensity of the intellectual salvos which the two anthropologists have fired at one another methodologically and personally.[17] It is very interesting to me that both writers refer to the problem of Quetzalcoatl's return (i.e., quotation #2) to build some interpretive leverage in their argument about Cook and Lono. They both turn, briefly to the debate in Mesoamerican studies about how the Aztecs perceived, conceived of, and tested their cosmomagical view of the world against the invasion of the Spaniards, and especially the arrival of Cortés.

This debate in Mesoamerican studies has involved Miguel León-Portilla, Tzvetan Todorov, H. B. Nicholson, Inga Clendinnen, James Lockhart, Rolena Adorno, and myself and challenges us to clarify how and by what methods, assumptions, and interpretive tools do we make sense of the dramatic encounters and processes of interaction which resulted from the meetings of Mesoamerican peoples and Spaniards in the sixteenth century. Questions which have arisen in this debate include: 'Did native peoples really think of Spaniards as divine men and the event as millennial or was this

a European invention inserted into the texts?' In the rubric of our theme, 'Was this an Aztec millennium or a Spanish millennium? How could we possibly know what Moctezuma *thought* about the Spaniards since the earliest source is a Spanish letter and the relevant native accounts weren't collected until the 1530s? By what formula of story telling did the native peoples construct the story that the supreme ruler of a pulsating kingdom abdicate his throne to people clearly not his relatives? When does the literary evidence begin to contain the story of Moctezuma's identification of Cortés as the returning priest king? 1520, 30, 50, 70? And what does the answer reveal about post-conquest inventions?' What appears to be at stake, in part, is, 'Who controlled the sixteenth-century discourse about these millennially-tinged exchanges?'

Miguel León-Portilla and the Aztec Millennium

Our generation's problem of dealing with how natives thought about Europeans coming to town and the millennium begins with the immensely popular publication of Miguel León-Portilla's *Visión de los Vencidos: Relaciones indígenas de la Conquista*, known in English as *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico.*[18] The leader of Aztec studies whose sensitive, insightful translations of Nahuatl literature into Spanish, turned the tables on the long-held, privileged Spanish voices about the conquest, represented by the monumental work of William Prescott and his followers.[19] Prescott not only described the conquest with Spanish voices and eyes, he put them up on a magnificent horse parading around the countryside and city. Through León-Portilla's arrangement of sixteenth-century sources under the rubric of "Aztec account," suddenly, we appeared to have access to the voices and eyes of the conquered which like broken spears, lay in the roads scattered in different locations and viewpoints providing the indigenous views of what transpired in the lakes, beaches, causeways, palaces, and temples during the fateful years of the conquest. León-Portilla collected cuttings from a number of colonial sources and created a corridor for the passage of native voices, or echoes of voices, into academic and popular arenas. Some were compiled as early as 1528, some as late as 1560, but all were presented by the Mexican writer as Aztec voices, Mexica views, indigenous accounts. The publication of this book sent León-Portilla's claims about native comparisons around the world and in a sense stimulated the problem we are dealing with here.

One of the outstanding moments in León-Portilla's arrangement of these fragments is the Aztec identification of Cortés as Quetzalcoatl and the indigenous awareness that the world as they knew it was quickly coming to a catastrophic end. Following his presentation of the omens which appeared ten years before the Spaniards arrived, omens which clearly indicate that the Aztec cosmos was beginning to crumble, he presents the above mentioned quotation #2. He writes in his introductory section, simply, that "Moctezuma thought that this was Quetzalcoatl who had arrived."[20] His commentary gives the clear impression that this was the native view of either what Moctezuma thought or what native scribes thought he thought. León-Portilla's presentation in *Broken Spears* is phenomenological in tone, giving little impression of the

complexity of all these fragments and the suspicious circumstances under which they were composed. I suspect that all the scholars mentioned here are reacting with different degrees of intensity to León-Portilla's ordering of the sixteenth-century materials.

Inga Clendinnen: The Aztec Millennium as a Web of Spanish Fictions

In her eloquent article, "'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico," Inga Clendinnen reads the claim that the Aztecs thought Cortés and the Spaniards were the returning Quetzalcoatl as a "splendidly implausible notion—save that so many have believed it."[21] Following the earlier analysis of J. H. Elliott and Anthony Pagden, Clendinnen argues that Cortés's elegant literary craft, especially in his Second Letter to the king of Spain *required* the invention of the analogy, Cortés = Quetzalcoatl, out of a "web of fictions" emerging from "particular strands of Spanish political culture." The Captain from Castille developed a legalistic strategy, a strategy conforming to the requirements of his indebtedness to the crown, which required Moctezuma to abdicate his authority not to Cortés, but to the great ruler Charles of Spain. Cortés presents a "strict narrative unfolding of events" which does not draw its substance from native participation or mythology or even its application by natives. Rather the Spaniard's "art of adaptation and improvisation" is in control of the entire story.[22] She writes that Cortés's narrative guarantees that, "we, like his royal audience, should be impressed by his command of men and events; dominating and duping Moctezuma: neutralizing Spanish disaffection by appeals to duty, law and faith; managing Indians with kind words, stern justice, and displays of the superiority of Spanish arms and the priority of the Spanish god."[23]

I do not doubt that Cortés is striving to impress the royal mind with his management skill. What is disturbing to me is Clendinnen's claim that this Spanish political fiction was picked up by Sahagún who "powerfully reinforced" it, thinking it was an Indian belief when in fact it was "very late dawning story, making its first appearance thirty and more years after the Conquest."[24] The stunning implication is that this Spanish fiction parades down the years through the literature and scholarship and is internalized by commentators, less wary than Clendinnen, all the way to León-Portilla who falls under Cortés's charismatic pen along with the rest of us. This means that León-Portilla's extensive Nahuatl training and sense of the Aztec ethos (not to mention Sahagún's profound familiarity with Spanish-Native exchanges) contribute no real critical stance in relation to the Spanish literary craft. The Spanish ruse and invention which later Spaniards were not aware of and which a number of Indians internalized as their own "bears the hallmarks of a post-Conquest scapegoating of a leader who had indeed admitted the Spaniards to the city in life, and so was made to bear the weight of the unforeseeable consequences in death."[25]

There is much to admire in Inga Clendinnen's exploration of how natives and Spaniards thought about and fought each other. Her dramatic qualities of interpretation almost bring the antagonists back to life for our enjoyment and understanding. But like Prescott and Tzvetan Todorov she provides an

almost transcendent status to Cortés and his literary powers. Does the idea of a Spanish invention, whether Sahagún contributed or not, adequately account for the complex and powerful meanings and extensive versions of Quetzalcoatl's kingdom and return? Does Cortés's Second Letter and Sahagún's Book 12 spring only out of the Spanish web of fictions? Did not the Cholulans, Tlaxcaltecans, and Mexicas have their own web of fictions which influenced how the Spaniards experienced, saw, and interpreted the encounter? Clendinnen is rather content to argue that it was the Spanish pen and story which "tinctured" the native accounts of the conquest. What happens if we view the theme of Quetzalcoatl's return, written down in the **early** as well as later years after the Conquest as a product of *a shared, contested cultural landscape in formation*, a landscape where diverse political necessities and desires vied for a hearing and played on each other. It is clear that Cortés's narrative strategy to achieve political legitimacy with the king in Spain influenced Indian and other Spanish accounts. It also seems likely that the tincturing went both ways and that Cortés and others were influenced by and drew upon indigenous agendas and interpretations.

Tzvetan Todorov and the Semiotic Millennium

The most influential and, in my mind, problematic interpretation of the millenarian themes of the Mexica-Spaniard encounter is Tzvetan Todorov's widely read *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* which is partly based on the claim that "our genealogy begins with Columbus." [26] Almost all discussions about the invasion of the New World as well as the Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate on Captain Cook react to Todorov's semiotics. According to Todorov, the European encounter with America was "the most astonishing encounter of our [the West's] history."[27] This coincidence of discovery and destruction was enhanced, even joined, in part by a semiotic style and hermeneutical privilege in how we exercise scholarship today. For in the complex process of the discovery and destruction of Mesoamerica, Todorov sees "that a great change has occurred—or rather was revealed at the dawn of the sixteenth century." This change was the systematic attempt of Western Europe to eliminate the other, "to do away with the exterior alterity" through the development of a hermeneutics that combined understanding not with love or even authentic knowledge of the other, but rather with conquest and the elimination of the other's voice and physical subjugation. Following his analysis of the semiotic exercise of Christopher Columbus who performed a finalist strategy of interpretation, i.e., the ultimate meaning is given from the start and derived from Christian teaching, regardless of what the objects of the New World presented, Todorov turns to the most powerful interpreter of Mesoamerican realities, Hernán Cortés. It is here that Todorov makes a series of distinctions which are grounded almost entirely in his own semiotic project and fail to do the one thing that Todorov demands of other scholars—allow the voice of the Aztecs to be heard. He argues that Cortés and Moctezuma represent two major distinct forms of communication which contributed substantially to the Spanish victory. While Cortés's perceptions of messages, political events, and symbolic behavior emphasized human to human communication (Cortés exercises a

praxeological interrogation: What is to be done?), Moctezuma made decisions on the basis of communications between humans and nature, humans and supernatural beings, and finally humans and humans (Moctezuma takes a very different epistemological approach: How are we to know?). While Moctezuma, who possessed a "fatal broadmindedness," sweated out calendrical patterns, omens, and dream messages, Cortés established a superior military and political information network which he manipulated to ensure conquest. The result, writes Todorov, was that "by his mastery of sign, Cortés ensure[d] his control of the ancient Mexican empire."[28] The prime example of Cortés's capacity to understand and speak the other's language and turn this capacity into forms of conquest is his participation in the development of the myth of Quetzalcoatl's return. Cortés discovers, according to Todorov, during the march from Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz to Tenochtitlan, the millenarian Aztec belief that a great ancestral hero and military leader, Quetzalcoatl, was transformed into a god following his flight from Tollan and promised to return from the east to reorganize his kingdom. It appears to Todorov that Moctezuma and others may have initially interpreted Cortés as the returning Plumed Serpent. And Cortés, perceiving the opportunity which this identification gave him, agrees to the role and plays the myth. This contributed to the eventual abdication of Moctezuma. While Todorov admits the importance of superior Spanish weapons, the impact of disease, plus Indian rebellions against Moctezuma in the conquest, it is through the semiotic skill of Cortés that the Aztec capital is subdued and transformed. Conquest by semiotics!

In spite of my attraction to the remarkable mental agility of Todorov, there are several serious problems with his conquest-by-semiotics approach. First, Cortés is too much the hero. While there is no doubt that the cunning, bravery, and tactics of the captain played a powerful role in the Spanish victory, Todorov does not take seriously enough Ralph Beals's insight that the "conquest of Tenochtitlan was less a conquest than it was a revolt of dominated peoples."[29] It was the Tlaxcaltecans, Texcocans, and other Mesoamerican warriors in the over ten-thousand-strong infantry who "read the signs" of Aztec society and determined the outcome of the war. Like so many other scholars of the early colonial period, the Spaniards are given enormous and exaggerated roles in the events of 1521 in Tenochtitlan. Todorov's bias for Cortés's semiotic style relates to another unwarranted distinction, namely that the Aztecs live in an "over structured society" within which "hierarchic distinction acquired a primordial importance." He has defined in these words aspects of any traditional urban society, including the Spanish. Of course the Aztecs appear overstructured compared to the Spaniards—the drama takes place in their city, in their structure, against their social and primordial order. The Spaniards are far from home and an unruly, understructured, confused army that spent a significant portion of time bickering and fighting within itself.

But this attitude reflects a more serious problem when it comes to understanding the Cortés/Quetzalcoatl identification— namely who was improvising on whom. Todorov's central argument, reflecting the conquest society he claims to detest, is that writing results in improvisation while oral

cultures are inhibited by ritual and over organization. "The Aztecs' symbolic conduct leads me to observe not only the difference between two forms of symbolization, but also the superiority of one over the other. There is a technology of symbols which is as capable of evolution as the technology of tools and in this perspective, the Spaniards are more 'advanced' than the Aztecs (or to generalize: societies possessing writing are more advanced than the societies without writing) even if we are concerned only with a difference of degree."[30] But if his point is improvisation, he has failed to study the 'others' in Mesoamerica carefully. Mesoamerican history seen from its own horizons, is marked by improvisations, innovations, and adaptations in systems of economics, technology, and communication. The Aztecs and Maya, who transformed the art, architecture, and religious traditions of central Mesoamerica in innovative and traditional ways, especially in times of eccentric political order and social revolts, can be considered an improvisational people. It is impossible to believe that any tradition urban or otherwise oral, written, sculptural, or painted could develop for 1500 years unless they were improvisational in their mythology, technology, warfare, and semiotics. If the last twenty years of scholarship on the Aztecs and Maya have taught us anything, it is that Mesoamerican peoples combined their primordial commitments to a series of effective adaptations, applications, and dexterous maneuvers. It is not that the Spaniards are improvising on Aztec myth, but that the Aztecs are improvising on Aztec myth and Spanish advances, that improvise on the Aztecs who improvise on the Spaniards. And Todorov is involved in his own semiotic improvisation that returns him to a disguised and improvisational form of Lévy Bruhl's "primitive mentality." Todorov's natives *think* the way Lévy Bruhl's natives *thought*. But this shows no sense of superiority because it is written. This only shows a technological privilege in the hands of Todorov!

James Lockhart and the Periodic Millennium

One of the most significant and welcome developments in Nahua studies has come in the form of James Lockhart's remarkable translations and interpretations of Nahuatl documents relating to the conquest and the Nahuas after the conquest.[31] Lockhart's years of Nahuatl studies result in a new reading of the texts concerning the encounters of the Spaniards and the Aztecs and in a new publication, *We People Here*, which is, in part, his answer to Miguel León-Portilla's *Visión de los Vencidos*. Lockhart translates a handful of Nahuatl texts about the conquest and puts them side by side for comparative reflection.[32] Elsewhere, in an article, "Sightings: Initial Nahua Reactions to Spanish Culture," Lockhart presents a slight revision of his method and interpretation of Sahagún's Book 12 and the initial Nahua reactions to the Spaniards.[33]

He argues that Book 12 of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* contains two types of memory and narration. The second part of the document, in chapter 18, which depicts the massacre of natives by Spaniards at the festival of Toxcatl, contains descriptions Lockhart finds based on eyewitnesses and "represents authentic oral traditions preserved in relatively unchanged form from the time of the events. Only someone who had actually been there

and seen (though not heard) could, it seems, have originated such as the story of the catapult."[34] This material which does not include the Cortés/Quetzalcoatl material represents Nahua voices untainted by Spanish or colonial life. But the first eighteen chapters describing the omens announcing the Spanish invasion and the identity of Cortés and Quetzalcoatl is the "result of posterior reinterpretations and reconstructions, an explanatory process highly interesting in itself, but carried out by different people, with a different purpose using the concept and attitudes of a different time." In other words this section was composed by a group of "Mexica intellectuals" involved in an "extensive and conscious re-writing, if not full fledged original composition." The implication, though Lockhart could make it clearer, is that the omens and the association of Quetzalcoatl with Cortés is a post conquest fabrication of the second generation of Nahua speakers reported by Sahagún's informants whose narrative efforts reflect a provincial, competing Tlatelolcan view and not an oral tradition traced back to the events of 1519–21.

Lockhart's critical position depends in part on the detailed analysis of the sources in *Aztec Kingship* by the anthropologist, Susan Gillespie.[35] This maneuver to Gillespie is done in order to locate the application of the Quetzalcoatl myth onto the Spaniards late into the second generation of the colonial period. In an otherwise admirable example of concentration, while analyzing complicated sources and contexts of sources concerning the Aztec tradition of rulership, Gillespie slips into an idiosyncratic shuffling of the dating and messages of the primary sources about Quetzalcoatl and Tollan to claim in Lockhart's words that the "Quetzalcoatl myth only gradually took shape over the post conquest years, again as a posterior explanatory device, not reaching its full and definitive form until around the 1570s when the *Florentine Codex* too was receiving the final touches."[36] The point is that the Quetzalcoatl myth was a late-breaking story and therefore an invention of the second generation who did not draw from either eyewitness accounts or indigenous traditions.

There are a number of problems with Lockhart's and Gillespie's alliance on this problem. The most direct is that they attempt to make what is just as likely a 1540s story transmitted and collected by Motolinía and Sahagún into a much later story with "its full and definitive form . . . around the 1570s" in order to fit the material into the linguistic periodization developed by Lockhart. As Susan Cline ably points out in her work on Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*,

> Sahagún began collecting information on the Conquest early in his career, during a lengthy period of residence (1542–58) in Tlatelolco. Not later than 1555 and perhaps as early as 1547 he [Sahagún] had elicited information from surviving native participants. When Sahagún completed his revised account of the conquest in 1585 he noted in his address "To the Reader:" that "this manuscript was written over thirty years ago." In the relevant Spanish text of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún said that "this history . . . was written at a time which those who took part in the conquest were alive." The *Florentine Codex* describes who the informants were, "And those who gave this account were principal persons of

> good judgment, and it is believed they told all the truth." In the 1585 revision, Sahagún provides more details on the informants. "Those who helped write it were prominent elders, well versed in all matters, relating not only to idolatry but to government and its offices, who were present in the war when this city was conquered.[37]

It is very interesting to me that these scholars tend to ignore the most detailed and focused analysis of the formation of the Quetzalcoatl return story, i.e., the work of H. B. Nicholson.[38] Nicholson's work shows clearly that Motolinía, or Fray Toribio de Benavente, one of the original twelve Franciscans who arrived in New Spain on May 13, 1524, collected the information for his two works, *Historia* and *Memoriales* before 1542 and found evidence of the belief in the return of Quetzalcoatl and that the Aztecs believed *initially* that Cortés was the ancestor.[39] According to Nicholson, Motolinía's research represents "the work of a vigorous personality who was intimately associated with the Indians until his death in 1565, during the great outburst of proselytizing enthusiasm which swept the mendicant orders working in New Spain in the first half of the sixteenth century."[40] Motolinía, in the period which is certainly the first generation (parallel with Lockhart's genuine eyewitness section of the *Florentine*—well before 1540), collected material about Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who left "Tulla" and went toward "la costa de Covazacualco." Nicholson summarizes the material: "His return was always awaited and when the ships of Cortés appeared, seeing their tall white sails, that said that it was Quetzalcoatl coming, bringing temples (*teocalis*) over the sea. But when they disembarked, they said that it was not their god, but many gods."[41] What Nicholson's research makes clear is that the Quetzalcoatl return story and its application to Cortés was just as likely an 'early-breaking story' and certainly drew upon prehispanic patterns of sacred history that were taught in the many *calmecac* (priestly schools) of the Aztec empire.

Millenarian Places, Millenarian Times

In a recent series of reflections on these matters, I have developed a different approach to the Aztec millennium and Quetzalcoatl's return. Remembering Borges's claim that there were only two stories worth writing about, 'either a stranger comes to town or someone leaves home,' I am impressed by the power of *place and space* in both stories! In one story the wandering strangers find a new center while in the other the prodigal leaves home behind but the category of place is what also matters. My work on ceremonial centers and capital cities has led me to realize that the Aztec sense of place, social and symbolic place, is never located exclusively in space but also always *in time*. Places in time, places like Tenochtitlan and Moctezuma's Palace, but also Cortés' Letters which are also a 'place' can only be understood in relation to time. This is particularly true when thinking about the Aztec way of viewing the rhythms of time in their universe which always involved at least three kinds of time. As Alfredo López-Austin has shown so brilliantly, the Aztec cosmos was an interlocking of, 1. the time of the primordial era before the gods acted, 2. the time of the gods' adventures, and 3. human time. Each moment *in human time* was permeated by the

influences of the gods' adventures so that there was never a simple, one-dimensional historical event. One way to approach the myth of Quetzalcoatl's return is to ask the question, 'What was the Aztec sense of their place in time; what was their view of time's origin, patterning, return, and ending?' In my view, this is the key to understanding more about the Aztec millennium. Writing in another cultural area, the anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah, has shown how sacred time, especially as it is contained in myths and mythic structures, constantly influences a culture's sense of place in time. Speaking of cosmologies he noted that they "nearly always, and classifications frequently, tend to be viewed as enduring arrangements of things and persons, their underlying premises and initial ordering seen either as having an existence outside the flux of ordinary and everyday changing events and expectations, or as motivating and generating to some degree the surface everyday phenomena of the present time."[42] In my view, the prehispanic traditions about Quetzalcoatl and the wider cosmic myths were just such an enduring arrangement of things and persons which contributed to the interpretation of everyday phenomena, including the arrival of the Spaniards, during and long after the encounter.

Fortunately, we have three major stories from Aztec sacred history that show their understanding of their place in time. The first story suggests that they had a sense of dwelling within a millennial cosmos. The story of the Myths of the Suns that brought the Aztec era into existence reveals an unstable, tense, dynamic cosmos. The universe, prior to the Aztec age, had passed through four eras but each was destroyed by a catastrophe. The first age was destroyed by jaguars who descended to earth and devoured all living beings. This age of 4 Jaguar was followed by 4 Wind, when the hurricanes blew across the world and swept everyone and everything away. Then came 4 Rain of Fire and 4 Water repeating the millennial story of a total, this worldly destruction. Finally, the Fifth Age was created when the gods gathered in the darkness in Teotihuacan and sacrificed themselves so the sun would be created and move across the heavens. This was the Aztec place in cosmic time, a cosmic time of repeated millenniums, each one with the name that emphasized the forces of destruction.[43]

Another story tells us that the entire community, under the inspiration of a god who appeared in a dream, left home and faced homelessness and a series of crises for decades as they wandered the earth in search of a new home. It is the story of the millennial city, the city that was sought and which promised to be "the queen of all cities" to which the nobles and warriors of other societies would come and be amazed. They were outsiders carrying a millennial hope that their suffering in history, as they knew it, would end in a miracle. This is the Mexica story of the migration from Chicomoztoc, the "Place of Seven Caves," and their eventual arrival in the Basin of Mexico. Throughout the different versions of this migration narrative, there are references and images of the year they left Aztlán, the years spent in such and such a place, and the year of their arrival. They were looking for a new center or mode of being where they could be the strangers who came to town. Given the widespread knowledge of this story, it was no surprise for the Mexicas to have the Spaniards appearing on the edge of their civilization with hunger in their eyes seeking for a place to rule.

The third story which was crucial to the Mexicas and especially their rulers told of their great ancestral space in the time of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. H. B. Nicholson and I have worked with a number of primary sources depicting the rise, apogee, and fall of the kingdom of Tollan under the rulership of one of the great man-gods of Mesoamerican history, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. The Aztecs were constantly aware and teaching this tradition to their priests and kings. In a nutshell, the Aztec sense of place depended on replicating the *time* of Quetzalcoatl's Tollan where agricultural abundance, artistic excellence, military prowess, and a harmony with the gods was achieved. This is the story of a millennial repetition! But the story of Quetzalcoatl's Tollan also contained a subversive genealogy in which the paradigmatic ruler was ruined when strangers came to town in the form of the "Smoking Mirror"—Tezcatlipoca—and drove Quetzalcoatl out. This was accomplished, in one account when Tezcatlipoca smuggled a magic mirror into the ruler's palace and exposed his aging body, enticed him into a drunken debauchery, and twisted his heart. He wandered until he arrived on the eastern shore where he was either burned up and transformed into the Planet Venus or was carried away on a raft of serpents in the direction of the sunrise. In either case, the Quetzalcoatl who was remembered as part of the "enduring arrangements" which motivated contemporary events and interpretations of events, was *both a ruler who left home and a ruler who was expected, as were all Aztec heroes and deities, to return one day as an ancestor if not a stranger coming to town.*

As is often the case, poets speak louder and better than scholars. Let Mexico's most famous poet, Octavio Paz close this reflection on Mexico's millennial hero Quetzalcoatl. In his *Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz takes on the French writer Claude Lévi-Strauss and turns to the millennial Quetzalcoatl as his case. He said,

> For Lévi-Strauss there is an essential difference between poetry and myth; myth can be translated and poetry is untranslatable. I believe the opposite: I believe that myth and poetry are translatable, though translation implies transmutation or resurrection. A poem by Baudelaire, translated into Spanish, is another poem and it is the same poem. This holds true of myths too: the old pre-Columbian goddesses are born again with the Virgin of Guadalupe, which translates them into the Christianity of New Spain . . . The case of Quetzalcoatl is very different . . . in the popular imagination, many of our heroes are only translations of Quetzalcoatl. They are, in fact, unconscious translations. This is significant because the theme of the Quetzalcoatl myth is the legitimization of power. This was the obsession of the Aztecs and of New Spain's Creoles.[44]

We could add, it was an obsession with millennial power that was shared by both the surviving Aztecs and the ascendant Spaniards as they struggled to negotiate their new places in the time of colonial reality!

ENDNOTES

[1]Davíd Carrasco, "Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor," in Johanna Broda, Davíd Carrasco, and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in Aztec Religion*, 124–162 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); "Jaguar Christians in the Contact Zone," *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples' Religions among Latinos*, 69–79, Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Andrés I. Pérez Y. Mena, eds. (New York: PARAL/Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1995); and "The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Shamanic Space," paper given in February 1996 at the "New Directions in the Study of Chicano Religion" conference, University of California at Santa Barbara, which will be published in an upcoming volume from the University of California Press.

[2]See, for example, Nelida Piñon, *The Republic of Dreams* [*A república dos sonhos* (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1984)], Helen Lane, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 5, in which one of the protagonists, Madruga, arrives in Brazil: "After a night of fitful sleep down there, Madruga would lie waiting for dawn. He knew that they would be landing in Rio de Janeiro almost any moment now. And was all set to descend upon a city seething with lust and peopled by strange creatures who'd been the subject of many a hair-raising story. On that continent he was about to find himself confronted with a predominantly Indian culture, where whites were a minority."

[3]Jonathan Z. Smith, "Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit," *History of Religions*, 11, no. 1 (August 1971): 67–90.

[4]Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* (13 volumes), Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, eds. and trans. (Santa Fe: School for American Research and University of Utah, 1955–1982), Book 12: "Conquest of Mexico." For a full-color facsimile edition, see *Códice Florentino* [*Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*] (3 volumes) (México: Secretaria de Gobernación, 1979).

[5]Smith, "Adde Parvum," 67.

[6]Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico* [*Cartas de relación*], Anthony Pagden, ed. and trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 102–103; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517–1521* [*Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España*], Genaro García, ed. Alfred P. Mauslay, trans., intro., and notes (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1956), 190.

[7]James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 63.

[8]See Jacques LaFaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531–1813* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), for an excellent summary of these concerns.

[9]Cortés, *Letters*, 86.

[10]Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 12: 44.

[11]Cortés, *Letters*, 98–99.

[12]For example, Lucien Lévy Bruhl, *How Natives Think* [*Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétiés inférieures* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1910)], Lilian A. Clare, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Edward Burnet Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1864); Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1926); Mircea Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* [*La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962)] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

[13]Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

[14]Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

[15]*Ibid.*, 4.

[16]Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Marshall

Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think, About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[17]Clifford Geertz writes about this debate: "What is at stake here is thus a question that has haunted anthropologists for over a hundred years, and haunts us even more now that we work in a decolonized world: What are we to make of cultural practices that seem to us odd and illogical? How odd are they? How illogical? In what precisely does reason lie? This is a question to be asked not only about eighteenth-century Hawaiians, parading noisily about with birdskin images, taking a coconut tree ("a man with his head in the ground and his testicles in the air") to be the body of a god, and enfolding their lives in so elaborate a skein of sacrality and prohibition—the notorious tabu—that they sometimes can barely move. It is to be asked as well about eighteenth-century Englishmen, sailors and navigators, wandering womanless about the oceans in search of discoveries—arcadias, curiosities, anchorages, delicacies, and the Northwest Passage—and of the inquisitive, aggressive society, the knowledge-is-glory world that, hoping ultimately, for a temporal salvation, sent the Englishman there" ["Culture War," *The New York Review* (November 30, 1995): 4–6, 6].

[18]Miguel León-Portilla, *Visión de los vencidos: Relaciones indígenas de la Conquista* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1959) and *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, Lysander Kemp, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

[19]William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico: With a Preliminary View of the Ancient Mexican Civilization* (New York: Harper, 1843).

[20]León-Portilla, *Broken Spears*, xxv.

[21]Inga Clendinnen "'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico," *Representations*, 33 (Winter 1991): 65–100, 69.

[22]*Ibid.*, 69.

[23]*Ibid.*

[24]*Ibid.*

[25]*Ibid.*

[26]Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* [*La conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982)], Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

[27]*Ibid.*, 4.

[28]*Ibid.*, 119.

[29]See Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), especially, 152–175. Quote by Ralph Beal on 154–155.

[30]Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 159–160.

[31]James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[32]Lockhart, *We People Here* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[33]Lockhart, "Sightings: Initial Nahua Reactions to Spanish Culture," in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the early Modern Era*, Stuart Schwartz, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 218–248.

[34]*Ibid.*, 235.

[35]Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

[36]Lockhart, "Sightings," 246.

[37]Susan L. Cline, "Revisionist Conquest History: Sahagún Revised Book XII," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, 93–106, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber (Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York and Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 97.

[38]H. B. Nicholson, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1957.

[39]Motolinía, Toribio de Benavente, *History of the Indians of New Spain* [*Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*], Elizabeth Andros Foster, trans. (Berkeley: Cortés Society, 1950) and *Memoriales, o Libro de las cosas de la Nueva España y de los naturales de ella,*

Edmundo O'Gorman, ed., notas, estudio, y apendices (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1971).

Gillespie reports this but leaves its significance largely out of her summary position.

[40]Nicholson, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl," 72.

[41]*Ibid.*, 75.

[42]Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 85.

[43]The Aztec myth of five suns, also known as the "Leyenda de los soles," can be found in *Codex Chimalpopoca: The Text in Nahuatl: With a Glossary and Grammatical Notes*, John Bierhorst, ed. and trans. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992).

[44]Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude; The Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth, Mexico and the United States, The Philanthropic Ogre*, Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 335.

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In 1982 Dr. Carrasco founded and continues to direct the Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project. In 1986 he received a ten-year grant from the Moses Trust to organize scholarly seminars in the study of Mesoamerican religions. He is a frequent lecturer on Aztec religion and ritual, the creative hermeneutics of Mircea Eliade, Mesoamerican mythology and cosmology, and contemporary Latino and Chicano culture.

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He is the author of numerous articles and book reviews, and his books include *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in Mesoamerica.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982 (revised 1992); *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective.* Co-edited with Jane Marie Law. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985 (revised 1991); *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in the Aztec World.* Co-authored with Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Johanna Broda. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; *The Imagination of Matter: Religion and Ecology in Mesoamerican Religions.* Editor. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 515, 1989; *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990; *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes.* Editor. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991; *Moctezuma's Mexico: Visions of the Aztec World.* Co-authored with Eduardo Matos Moctezuma. Niwot: University of Colorado Press, 1992.

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