

ÓCUTL, OR “BEING THE TORCH”: EXAMINING THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN INDIGENOUS VOICES AND COLONIALIST DISCOURSES

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Introduction: Ócutl, Theology, and Critique

The expression *ócutl*, or “being the torch,” is imperative to identifying and understanding an indigenous and liberationist worldview. Within customary indigenous religious ritual, *ócutl* is “the practice of wise men, who dress in red and black, the colours of East and West—symbolical of God. They are the people’s counselors at every moment” (Hernandez 158). Yet *ócutl* remains symbolic of the emboldened political paths that indigenous communities now cross. Indeed, the struggles of indigenous communities time and again are obstructed by political, social, and economic barriers. As the torch, *ócutl*, however, enlightens the pathways of the oppressed without smoke; it guides their actions through a faith perspective. “*Ócutl*” also implies that one must embody this torch, a constant state of being and connection for the individual and his/her collective. More importantly, *ócutl* represents the unification of and conversation between indigenous and Western traditions.

Ócutl is suggestive of the significance of indigenous perspectives and interpretations on several levels. It characterizes religious sentiments of hope among an oppressed people. This notion, because it is currently linked so strongly to contemporary indigenous struggles against social injustice, also inherently recognizes a possible integration of Western viewpoints within indigenous theological perspectives. This raises a variety of questions. Can this integration be fully understood and actualized within contemporary Mayan society with its destructive colonial past? Can a native theology truly critique present-day injustices rooted in Western economic policies while it simultaneously incorporates Western theology and philosophy? Is reconciliation of the voices within this conversation—that is, the dialogue between indigenous and Western cosmologies—even possible without reshaping Western discourses?

The predicament that exists between the economic forces of globalization and its neoliberalist proponents and the theological perspectives of indigenous communities ultimately hints at a larger conflict within the global community. Certainly, within this text, indigenous forms of resistance are at the forefront of a theological and discursive inquest in the context of the global market. Yet closer examinations of this cultural and religious collision reveal an even more troubling dilemma: the issue of Western philosophical logics existing within indigenous or native ideologies. In other words, is it possible to reconcile the convergence, as well as the divergence, between Western philosophical systems and indigenous modes of thought?

Eleazar Lopez Hernandez’s essay “Toward an Indigenous Theology of Liberation,” one of the primary sources in this study, provides a fundamental understanding of indigenous theology and its correspondence with progressive Catholic thought. After examining the sociopolitical and economic remnants of Western colonialism, I will deal extensively with Hernandez’s perspective on indigenous theology. The application of several secondary sources—namely, the works of Gustavo Gutierrez,

Christopher Chiappari, and Leonardo Boff—is used to break down and scrutinize the intricacies of Hernández’s positions.

A central turning point in this essay involves an interrogation of the ways that modern scholarship exists as a discourse that can inhibit indigenous self-assertion and self-creation. I use Michael Kearney and Stefano Varese’s essay “Latin America’s Indigenous Peoples Today: Changing Identities and Forms of Resistance in Global Context” in order to pay particular attention to the conflict between colonialist “othering” and indigenous self-attribution (Kearney and Varese 208). Stephanie Wood’s work *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico* is used to raise several vital queries into Kearney and Varese’s discussion of the creation and elevation of indigenous identities in Mexico.

I will also examine two sources that confront the larger issue of indigenous and liberation theology and the implications for discourse and knowledge: that is, their position within the context of the postcolonial period. First, Henry A. Giroux explores Paulo Freire’s role as a postcolonial writer, as well as Freire’s integration of European and Latin American pedagogies, in an essay titled “Paulo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism.” Interestingly, Giroux asserts that readers of Freire’s work—and, more importantly within the framework of this research paper, readers of postcolonial literature—must “engage in a radical form of border-crossing,” and subsequently surmount the political, linguistic, and ideological structures that suppress “the voice of the other” (178). Likewise, Gayatri Spivak highlights the significance of colonialist historiographical constructions that keep certain groups dominant over others (287). While Spivak is speaking from a feminist perspective, her analysis of the concept of “the subaltern” can be applied collectively toward indigenous groups in Central America.

Spivak’s inquiry into the question of subaltern voices remains central to this work for several reasons. While I will seek to analyze Foucault’s methodologies toward a politics of resistance within the context of indigenous communities and voices, it is necessary to counterbalance this examination with Spivak’s critique of the French philosopher’s work. In particular, Spivak critiques Foucault for his inability to conceptualize the capacity of the intellectual to “consolidate an international division of labor” (275). Indeed, this acknowledgement is significant within a discussion of indigenous and liberation theologies, primarily since liberationists adopt the Marxist emphasis on class struggle and conflict. Through this lens, I will seek to further explore the association between colonialist/postcolonialist and indigenous/localized thought.

Initially, this paper will serve to examine how indigenous Mayan perspectives of Christian theology explain oppressive neoliberal macrostructures and call for resistance against socioeconomic and political arrangements in Mexico. However, scrutinizing this interaction of socioeconomic and religious viewpoints must ultimately lead to a larger discussion regarding the legacy of Western thought within native ideology. Thus, the fundamental purposes of this study, which I would like to call an intellectual discursive examination, are to: (1) *study native and liberation theologies as a means of critiquing the discontents of global economic structures*; and, within this context, (2) *engage in a conversation regarding the exchange between Western discourses and indigenous perspectives of resistance*, which is indicative of a more extensive debate over the position of Western logics within the indigenous cosmology.

Economic Injustice and Political Repression, Past and Present

The rationale behind utilizing the idea of *ócutl* in the title of this paper may still seem arbitrary to some and confounding to others. What is the correlation between this ancient indigenous ritual

phraseology and modern Christian theological perspectives, especially within the context of critiques of neoliberal structures? Why, even, would we create a correlation between these discourses? Certainly “being the torch,” evocative of the illuminated path toward liberation stands as a valid metaphor for the struggles of the marginalized. But does this fit within progressive theological thought, particularly within liberation theology? I will argue that the theology of liberation has magnified and diffused the cry of the marginalized against the tides of demagoguery and persecution in the world. Furthermore, it has served as “the torch” for indigenous and impoverished peoples not only in Latin America but throughout the world.

Indigenous Mayan populations have long endured the blunt end of global economic explorations and exploitations with little hope of regaining autonomy. As borders extant from the colonial era have shifted over time, often dividing cultures and communities, indigenous people have continually been subjected to oppressive political rule. What represents a localized divergence in notions of potential opportunity is an indicator of a global struggle. Later in this paper, I will draw extensively upon anthropological resources to analyze and deconstruct the causes of indigenous subjection, which I argue lie in the Western emphasis on Greco-Roman aesthetic paradigms.

A close examination of historical narrative in the developing world points to the contemporary crises of poverty as a consequence of fraudulent visions of global expansion and colonization through cultural, ideological, or racial supremacy. An even closer inquiry into the dilemma of poverty in Latin America reveals a tragic fusion of all these supremacist perceptions, a synthesis that has bred political volatility and socioeconomic disparity. Yet the pervasive climate of exploitation in Latin America was not conceived in modern times, by any means; its existence has plagued Central and South America for centuries.

Vestiges of Iberian colonial power and supremacy over indigenous Mayans exist through corrupt political and economic structures. Rooted in the political and economic interests of European monarchies and the Catholic Church, colonization almost immediately generated a systematic approach to the advantageous exploitation of native populations. As regions of Central and South America struggled for “independence” in the nineteenth century, these newly formed states retained the governmental hierarchies constructed in the colonial era. In turn, political and economic reform constructive to the redefinition of indigenous sovereignty was merely implausible from a bureaucratic standpoint. Indeed, postcolonial rulers refused to engage in a gradual realization of indigenous destitution, not only because of the limitations of organizational barriers, but also through an ideological preconception of “native inferiority” (Bakewell 150).

The establishment of the imperial era by Western powers sparked the continuous development of a global market through the exploitation of resources in colonial regions. Indigenous communities were stripped of local resources in order to support and stabilize the construction of a new global market. Such economic subjugation was impeded by Western logic and Catholic hierarchical structures within Central America. What we are currently witnessing in southern Mexico is an impoverishment and a silencing of indigenous communities encumbered by the sociopolitical and cultural remnants of Western colonialism, as well as a creation of borders that strip peoples of their cultural identities, turning them into suppliers of labor for capital production.

An Analysis of Liberation and Indigenous Theologies

An expanded investigation into the complexities of liberationist viewpoints is necessary in order to assess the need for a revitalized image of Christians as pilgrims to their impoverished brothers and

sisters. Again, several issues must be examined. I will consider Gutierrez's notions of praxis and salvation within liberationist thought. Gutierrez's perspective, as well as the works of Leonardo Boff, ultimately expresses many profound and complex insights into the nuances of a theological critique and praxis focused on oppression. His insights into the liberationist emphases on the significance of praxis and eschatology lay the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of liberation theology.

An initial examination of liberation theology reveals its multifunctional role in responding to and critiquing the pervasive dilemmas of poverty and misery:

1. Liberation theology is an interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the impoverished.
2. It is a critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it.
3. It is a critique of the activity of the Church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.

This definition regards the theology of liberation both as interpretive of the contemporary conditions of the destitute (in other words, localized investigations into the causes of poverty) and as a judicious assessment of the structural and ideological impediments to development.

Yet critical interpretations of the roots of social injustice are irrelevant without theological reflection upon praxis. Philosophical musings concerning human suffering—what John XXIII called the “signs of the times”—certainly require intellectual scrutiny. Yet John's observation implied a commitment to pastoral activity and service to liberative endeavors. Accordingly, liberation praxis embraces the historical task of transformation vis-à-vis human action. Praxis must embody the revolutionary potential of history to facilitate liberation.

Indeed, just as it embraces the potential of history as a driving force for salvation, the notion of liberation praxis implies a focus on eschatological concerns. Traditionally, Christian perspectives of eschatology placed literal emphasis on the end of humanity and the Second Coming of Christ. The theological objectives of liberation flow in a similar vein, yet its focus is ultimately on the deliverance of human beings from material and spiritual suffering. Gutierrez states that “if human history is above all else an opening to the future, then it is a task through which we orient and open ourselves to the gift which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the Lord and other humans” (8). Praxis binds the historical with the eschatological; it interweaves time and truth.

Ultimately the concept of *orthopraxis* has been derived out of this notion. Gutierrez recognizes the intrinsic problems of the word. Critics regard the term “orthopraxis” as the liberationist replacement for “orthodoxy.” Not true, states Gutierrez:

The intention [of orthopraxis] is not to deny the meaning of orthodoxy, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, almost obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. (8)

Rather, orthopraxis builds upon the truths of orthodoxy through action based on critical reflection: “In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life” (Gutierrez 8). The Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx notes that the dichotomy between orthodoxy and orthopraxis is found in the Church's deep-rooted fixation with the formation of doctrine. The evolution of Enlightenment perspectives in Europe coincided with a growing progression away from the Augustinian notion of theology as an

analysis of the “signs of the times” toward a focus on truth formation. In other words, “the Church focused on orthodoxy and left orthopraxis in the hands of nonmembers and non-believers” (*Los católicos holandeses*, qtd. in Gutierrez 11). Schillebeeckx’s careful assessment of the Church’s past indolence represents a critical departure in liberationist perspective on praxis: it cannot be separated from doctrine and truth.

In order to come to a basic understanding of liberationist critiques of society and its supportive ideologies, we must realize that the liberationist movement is based on what Boff characterizes as the “ethico-religious indignation at misery,” or, in simple terms, *protest* (3). Thus, liberationist critiques are based primarily within the context of popular resistance. Indeed, the Church can not only *walk to* the poor (that is, extend “assistance” to impoverished communities), but must also *walk with* the poor. In other words, the institutional Church must work in solidarity with the Church of believers, wrestling with localized socioeconomic injustices. This assertion is at the crux of Christian praxis: to truthfully engage with social dilemmas is not solely to challenge their underlying causes (while this is a critical stage in the process of social critique), but rather to embrace their painful authenticity.

The complexities of Latin American history unmistakably identify a people—a Church—in distress and despair, bearing the heavy burden of subjugation. For Catholics, the broad visions of the Church’s social doctrine drifted in expanses known only in European theological circles. The pervasiveness of social injustice and the relative lack of a “Third World” doctrine of liberation necessitated a cohesive, intelligent, and measured theological approach. While the Second Vatican Council clarified the formal Catholic approach to issues of poverty and human development, Latin American theologians viewed their contemporary circumstances as unique and in great need of a concrete methodology for liberation through the vision of the Church and from the perspective of the indigenous.

Moreover, the reemergence of indigenous theologies has been supported by the increasing relevance of liberation theological perspectives in Latin America. Indeed, the vocal intensification of suffering native individuals and communities is a growing trend toward the creation of an extensive mutual identity. The contemporary character of the impoverished native self is no longer despondent; it is unmistakably optimistic in its inclination to defy neoliberal constraints. The progression of collective identity, therefore, resides solely in struggle, an emphatic avowal of the necessity of socioeconomic reform. For the impoverished, true freedom and egalitarianism means the liberation from the discriminatory temperament of corporate land ownership and the eradication of economic practices that redirect capital away from the hands of marginalized workers.

In the centuries since the peak of the age of colonialism, native forms of theology have risen out of the pervasive suffering of indigenous peoples. As socioeconomic and political hierarchies continue to perpetuate oppressive methodologies in Latin America, the progressive Church has responded to and resisted these macrostructural obstacles through the creation of intellectual discourse. As Father Eleazar Lopez Hernandez acknowledges, “[t]o speak of indigenous theology, or a theology of the native peoples of this continent, is to raise issues that are as controversial for indigenous communities as they are in the predominant society” (139). Hernandez’s affirmation conveys two differing observations of the indigenous worldview: first, that indigenous theological perspectives challenge a pre-established conception of economic reality in the developing world; and second, that indigenous theology acknowledges the existence of a dominant social class that is placed above the impoverished working class of the indigenous. In other words, it recognizes the struggle between the established dominant and the oppressed “other.”

The materialization of indigenous theology has been necessitated by the emergence of a grow-

ing voice of protest from marginalized communities. However, Hernandez continues to affirm that this form of religious reflection and analysis also serves as “a promise as the poor offer to build a better world and a new way of being the church” (140). Indigenous reactions point to a great sense of popular religiosity, responding to the deep-rooted as well as the modern challenges facing native cultures.

Indigenous forms of theology are unique within the broader context of Catholic perspectives because they represent “the body of millennia-old religious knowledge that our indigenous peoples possess and by which we explain our faith experience” (Hernandez 140). Indigenous theologies embody the summation of ancient and contemporary indigenous histories and religious rituals. Particularly, out of the struggles of colonial dominance, indigenous theologies have served as a “storehouse of popular theological wisdom from which we draw the resources to face the new and ancient challenges of life” (Hernandez 140). It is necessary to note that the origins of indigenous theology do not reside within traditional modes of Catholic-Christian thinking. Rather, the roots of this native ideology exist through what Hernandez terms a “mythical-symbolic language,” incorporating ancient beliefs into Catholic thought. As Munro Edmundson elucidates in his essay “The Mayan Faith,” the Mayan worldview (on which this paper explicitly concentrates) encompasses the entirety of its cultural attributes:

The Mayan faith may be seen as the point of intersection, articulation, and integration of all other salient domains of Mayan experience. Environing geography, the human body, animals and plants, feelings, morals, aesthetics, meteorology, astronomy, social relations—the whole world of things seen and unseen provides a matrix of interlocking metaphors that link one domain to another in a highly redundant synthesis of all that exists. (66)

However, this combination, particularly the amalgamation of two respective faith traditions, is increasingly contested in the contemporary context. Indeed, indigenous theologians recognize the imposition of the Catholic worldview via Iberian conquerors within Central America’s extensive history. In an essay titled “Toward a Mayan Theology of Liberation,” Christopher L. Chiappari illustrates the unwillingness of believers in traditional Mayan ritual (what Hernandez would term “indigenous fundamentalists” or “archaeological idealists”) to accept the Western logics and practices of Christianity. Chiappari recounts his narrative of an indigenous shaman named Don Miguel. While raised Catholic, Miguel asserts that Mayan spiritualism cannot be integrated with a foreign tradition because “it is simply not his religion nor the religion of the Maya” (55). Hernandez takes an alternative approach, instead emphasizing:

Most of us have forgiven the churches for what happened 500 years ago and are seeking to dialogue with them, from within. This is why we struggle within the ecclesiastical structures for the word of indigenous peoples to be heard and taken into account. We want to take an active part in the institution in order for our people and our culture to be taken seriously. [. . .] In sum, we christianized indians no longer want to be permanently treated as children, as the property of the church, but as adults who are part of the church and who, furthermore, *are* the church. (144)

Whereas Don Miguel embarks on an approach that excludes the possibility of Christian discourses within indigenous theology, Hernandez ultimately embraces Catholic tradition and practice as a means of reconciling the imposition of European Christendom on native communities. At the same time, his rhetoric seems to suggest that the event of colonialism as placed within a Catholic context has ultimately passed, which indeed it has not. Although Christianized indigenous groups may *forgive* the

institution of the Church for its colonialist exploitations, Hernandez's emphasis on the "struggle within the ecclesiastical structures for the word of indigenous peoples to be heard" certainly realizes that indigenous voices have not dismissed the silencing effects of postcolonialist logics and discourses.

The relationship between indigenous and liberation theologies has been revealed through an inherently religious form of native resistance. The rise of liberation theology has "opened doors to other forms of theology in Latin America. A major expression of this influence is indigenous theology, or better, Mayan, Andean, or other theologies which rest on distinct cosmologies which are not European" (Cleary 171–72). Certainly a relationship exists, but can indigenous and liberation theologies be integrated in order to share their common faith experience in light of economic marginalization? Chiappari's account is rather pessimistic:

While on an abstract level liberation theology and Maya religion share some general goals in common—liberation from suffering, spiritual advancement, improved social and moral conditions for society and the world at large, greater harmony in the cosmos—they proceed from different orientations and have different means of achieving those goals. (61)

For Chiappari, the divergence between indigenous and liberation theologies, which ostensibly resides within their respective traditional origins, is overwhelming, as a "true" Mayan theology of liberation cannot be achieved. Yet Chiappari's argument—and clash with Hernandez—is ultimately indicative of the larger conversation between Western logics and indigenous voices. While Boff points to the need for "open dialogue," is there any room within the contemporary structures of Western discourse for this dialogue? How do Western discourses silence subaltern voices, and is it possible to reshape and reframe these discourses to finally open a conversation with indigenous peoples?

Rewriting Discourse, Creating Discursive Spaces

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, director of the International Research Institute for Maori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland, zealously emphasizes the reprehensible practices of Western modes of analysis on colonized indigenous groups. In the introductory paragraph to her work *Decolonizing Methodologies*, she assails the abusive consequences of colonialist and imperialist conquests in the indigenous world. I will quote her at length:

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, "research", is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. Just knowing that someone measured out "faculties" by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportu-

nities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. It angers us when practices linked to the last century and the centuries before that, are still employed to deny the validity of indigenous peoples' claim to existence, to land and territories, to the right of self-determination, to the survival of our languages and forms of cultural knowledge, to our natural resources and systems for living with our environments. (9)

These imperial objectives are embedded within the Eurocentric voracity for economic expansion, growth, and stability. Furthermore, although phrenology—the measuring of skulls to which Smith refers—has vanished from the physical disciplines of modern science, yet a sociological phrenology—the relentless Western evaluation of indigenous discourses vis-à-vis intellectual production in “traditional” academic spaces—persists to plague indigeneity.

Reading this incensed and ardent statement from *Decolonizing Methodologies* essentially reshaped the focus of this paper. When deliberately *researching* indigenous theological perspectives, how is it possible that I abandon the confines of a Western writer? Why should I even proceed when Linda Tuhiwai Smith effectively argues that it is “appalling” that Western intellectuals and academics engage in “research” of indigenous groups and their respective discourses? Primarily, I will continue writing for two reasons. First, I, too, find it appalling that Western methodologies have refused to abandon the rituals and conventions of research that perpetuate colonialist “othering” and deny voice to indigenous peoples. Second, I argue that it is indeed possible for Western academics not only to abdicate an inherently colonialist/imperialist linguistic approach to research but also to reshape and rewrite oppressive Western discourses in their entirety.

To derive meaning out of the notion of colonialist “othering,” one must engage in a deconstructive approach toward the genealogical origins of particular supremacist discursive methodologies. European intellectuals—past and present—envision indigenous ideological production within the context of classical perspectives of “native inferiority.” Specifically, the application of Aristotelian notions of “natural slavery” in Spanish colonies in Latin America remains the critical origin of Eurocentric endorsements of repression and subjugation throughout the postcolonial world. The roots of oppression and poverty have been cultivated from classical philosophical understandings of anthropology. I will be continuing not with an historical discussion of the Spanish utilization of Aristotelian anthropologies, but rather with a radical, historical investigation of colonialist “othering” and indigenous exploitation.

Initial uses of Aristotelian theories of “natural slavery” arose out of a need to resolve a political dilemma: how could the Spanish crown justify the colonization and consequential subjugation of American Indians? The answer was the application of a philosophical conjecture that essentially devalued the human being. The “natural slave,” for reasons unexplained, failed to use his intellect to achieve proper mastery over animal passions. An absence of “true reasoning” also pervades the temperament of the natural slave:

For Aristotle such a failure to “possess” reason would seem to mean that the natural slave, while incapable of formulating instructions for himself, is none the less capable of following them; he may be said perhaps to be capable of understanding but incapable of practical wisdom, for “practical wisdom issues commands . . . but understanding only judges.” (Pagden 43)

What we must understand, however, is what Aristotle means by practical wisdom, or *phronesis*. Classical perspectives of *phronesis*, especially prevalent in *Nicomachean Ethics*, emphasize the abili-

ty of the human intellect to develop and practice virtue. Thus, from the viewpoint of the Spanish colonist, the inhabitants of Latin America were unable to share in virtue without the guidance of a superior whose intellect and reason could cultivate goodness: the master. For both Christian theologians and Spanish colonists, peoples of the Americas were, by nature, indebted to their “masters” for the fostering of goodness. By the fault of nature, the slave was condemned to a life of natural servitude to the master.

Colonization subsequently perpetuated Aristotelian theories of the natural slave toward an impression of man no longer as a slave, but as a child—a psychologically immature being in need of rational development. Thus the “master” served as a psychological parent, nurturing the individual toward full manhood, even if only through imitation and the infliction of informed psychological capabilities on physical instincts. Regardless, the remnants of natural slave ideologies lingered: a lack of true reason and a full commitment to the needs of the master pervaded the Western understanding of the American peoples.

After Aristotle established an extensive theory of natural slavery, he began to speculate upon the physical manifestation of his hypothesis. In essence, Aristotle’s problem was distinguishing the slave from the master, developing an aesthetic standard by which to judge human bodies in relation to their social standing. The result was an injudicious description of the slave within his social context:

Ideally the natural slave should always be equipped with a powerful body capable of performing the labours nature has assigned to him. He should always be a slouching beast of great physical strength, while the natural master, in keeping with his superior powers of reason, should be both delicate and well-proportioned. “Nature would like to distinguish between the bodies of free men and slaves,” wrote Aristotle, “making the one strong for servile labour, the other upright and although useless for service, useful for the political life in the arts of both peace and war.” (Pagden 44–45)

Thus Aristotle bound physiological aesthetic standards with individual psychological capabilities, a thesis that came to effectually pervade Western thought. During the Enlightenment, philosophers drew upon this correlation, emphasizing the idea that “a man’s intellectual faculties should, in some measure, be reflected in his physical appearance” (Pagden 45).

The prominence of comparative aesthetics (that is, relative ocular analyses of physiological attributes) permeates contemporary cultural attitudes of oppression. Even centuries after the eras of colonization and imperialism, these notions remain profoundly ingrained within the approaches of the powerful toward “lesser” human beings. Beliefs in the intellectual deficiencies of those straddling the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy are placed within a subjective context. The de-objectification of the impoverished and the deconstruction of comparative ideologies are only initial steps in abandoning and reshaping “othering” modes of research and writing.

Standard “objectifications” of indigenous peoples, however, immediately raise questions of Western intellectualisms when treating this subject within a rigid sociological lens. Immediately, the tendency is to place indigenous groups within geographical, historical, and class-based stratifications. In particular, interpretations of class vis-à-vis Marx’s historical materialism are especially relevant. Discussions of contemporary indigeneity also raise certain questions about exploitative postcolonialist rhetorics, which often seem to rest on a type of research that usurps localized discourses without crediting their indigenous creators. One instance of modern scholarship abusing indigenous self-assertion and self-creation is an essay written by Michael Kearny and Stefano Varese, titled “Latin America’s Indigenous Peoples Today: Changing Identities and Forms of Resistance in Global Context.” Kearney

and Varese make an attempt at creating a just picture of indigenous identities within Latin America, but instead view them through a sociocultural and anthropological “microscope” (Smith 7).

The authors’ treatise immediately becomes problematic within the context of indigeneity. They place indigenous groups within the context of economic production, recognizing their role as “an essential economic resource that needed to be protected so that it might be perpetually exploited” (Kearney and Varese 207). However, I must also critique their inherent assumption that indigenous identities were formed merely out of resistance to Spanish colonialist and imperialist conquests (208). While Kearney and Varese seek to delineate the divergence between colonialist “othering” and indigenous self-attribution, are they submitting to a modern form of “othering” in this regard? Indigenous groups in Latin America—and around the world—were continually creating their own identities and forming their own perspectives before colonial powers arrived.

In *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico*, Stephanie Wood, professor of Latin American history at the University of Oregon, also critiques Kearney and Varese’s endeavor to create tension between “othering” and self-attribution. From Wood’s perspective, the vast majority of scholarship on indigenous identities within Mexico and Central America does not draw “from their internal historical sources and discourse” (6). The primary difficulty of their work, and indeed the work of many scholars, is a lack of information from indigenous groups themselves. Her argument is constructive and raises an interesting question: How can writers engage in this conversation while ignoring the fundamental ideas spoken through indigenous perspectives?

Cultural critic Henry A. Giroux, professor of English and cultural studies at McMaster University, proffers a pedagogical explanation for Wood’s problematic. Through a critique of Paulo Freire’s work, Giroux formulates an understanding of cultural workers—or what Cornel West dubs “intellectual freedom fighters”—as border-crossers. For Giroux, the role of the border-crosser is

to take leave of the cultural, theoretical, and ideological borders that enclose him or her within the safety of “those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways.” Being a border-crosser suggests that one has to reinvent traditions not within the discourse of submission, reverence, and repetition, but “as transformation and critique.” (178)

In particular, Giroux expresses “transformation and critique” as essential for the border-crosser through the effective abandonment of traditional discourses. Thus, the border-crosser is “an exile for whom being home is often tantamount to being ‘homeless’ and for whom his own identity and the identities of Others are viewed as sites of struggle over the politics of representation, the exercise of power, and the function of social memory” (178–79).

Giroux’s notion of “homelessness” is not associated with the living spaces that human beings inhabit; rather, his “home” is a creative space in which individuals find comfort in their cultural and discursive environments. Yet the border-crosser—and, I argue, any intellectual seeking to forsake and reshape “othering” logics—is unendingly restless; that is, the border-crosser

ruptures the relationship between individual identity and collective subjectivity. He [here Giroux is speaking specifically of Freire] makes visible a politics that links human suffering with a project of hope, not as a static plunge into a textuality forged in the political and material dislocations of regimes that exploit, oppress, expel, maim, and ruin human life. (180)

Thus, in the context of indigenous and liberation theologies, the border-crosser is especially relevant, as liberationist/indigenous persons seek to forge a politics that reexamines Latin America’s his-

tory of colonial Christendom. Liberationist politics struggle to move beyond the histories of imperial domination and their contemporary manifestations, or what Gutierrez would call *transcending history*. Rewriting the relationship between colonialist discourses and repressed indigenous voices deconstructs the ideologies that structure Western knowledge, texts, and social practices (Giroux 185).

Of course, the notion of the border-crosser is instructive to help the intellectual move away from colonialist discourses. Yet Giroux's articulation of the border-crosser and intellectual "homelessness" becomes problematic when introduced to Gayatri Spivak's question of subaltern voices. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak critiques the work of both Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Contrary to Foucaultian and Deleuzian perspectives, she argues that reenvisioning class structures allows the intellectual to further create discursive spaces where indigenous voices become transcendent.

Spivak's work raises a larger question about the role of the writer/intellectual within the context of this conflict. Spivak's predicament lies not with the position of the writer, as it does with Giroux, but rather the *task* of the writer. For Spivak, there is a discrepancy in Deleuze's work between representation and re-presentation: "Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art or philosophy" (275). Representation of subaltern voices renders the intellectual transparent, while re-presentation merely causes subaltern voices to be silenced. Spivak notes that this has been a primary concern of Western discourse: that academics paint a picture of indigenous groups as exploited resources processed within the neoliberal modes of production.

Spivak seems to conclude that the subaltern cannot speak without intellectuals who will stand for indigenous voices. But is this the case? For there to be a space where discourses and voices encounter one another, the writer must approach a significant discursive shift. Jacques Derrida notes that "the most radical programs of a deconstruction [. . .] would like [. . .] not to remain enclosed in purely speculative, theoretical, academic discourses but rather to aspire to something more consequential, to change things and to intervene in an efficient and responsible, though always, of course, very meditated way, not only in the profession but in what one calls the *cit  *, the polis and more generally the world" (931, 933). Derrida's assumption that Western and indigenous discourses should interact, exchange, and converse in a public space—"the polis"—implies a certain democratic unraveling of the domineering ideological structures within Western discourse.

This incessant unraveling—this ongoing deconstruction—opens wide the voices of indigenous peoples more than any representative scholar could. In fact, strict intellectualism is problematic within the clash of discourse, even when seeking to adopt the role of "border-crosser" or to "speak for the subaltern." As Nobel Peace Prize winner and Quich  -Mayan author Rigoberta Mench   notes in her autobiography *Crossing Borders*: "[Intellectuals] are not secure in their volcanoes or their rivers, or even with the peoples of this beautiful pluri-cultural continent. They are always looking for another point of reference. They often have one foot in the Americas and the other in Paris, a fact that has helped slow down the cultural development of peoples" (223). Thus Mench   refocuses our perspective: interactions between indigenous academics and Western discourses are often insufficient. More importantly, "[u]nderstanding indigenous peoples today [. . .] will surely help us understand the world we live in." Certainly, understanding the spaces in which discourse is constructed, exploited, and conflicted will surely help us distinguish the world we must mend.

Epilogue

This is a project that should have no end. If we are to approach the convergence of Western discourses and indigenous voices open-endedly, then this discussion must not have an end; that is, there cannot be any teleological point where we as writers can say that the creation of discursive spaces has fully recognized the transcendence of the indigenous voice above oppressive logics. Thus, I feel like my own work on this subject is incomplete; it is only natural to assume so. Continuing to abandon the discourses that I have previously—and unknowingly—embodied will undoubtedly advance the cause I so adamantly advocate. I hope that I have assumed the role of writer that Spivak encourages, one who stands for indigenous voices by abandoning the logics that repress them. I hope to do so relentlessly in the future, gradually bringing *ócutl* to fruition.

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