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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities*

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Aztec Identity Narratives: From Aztlán to the D.F.
 ©Lorena Morales
 Independent Scholar, New York, USA
 &
 EuroAcademia Affiliated Member

Aztec Mexico identity slippage psychic trauma

The Aztecs crafted a hegemonic political, religious, societal, and cultural topography in the basin of Mexico during the fifteenth century. This occurred a mere three hundred years after Nahuatl speakers emigrated from the mythic land of Aztlán to the Lake Texcoco of Central Mexico region during the Middle Postclassic Period (AD 1150 - 1350).ⁱ The Aztecs, a composite and irredentist people of several city-states in the Basin of Mexico, asserted themselves militarily to maintain a cohesive societal structure, extended from the locus of the Mexican capital of Tenochtitlán (Figure 1). Various scholars have examined political, ceremonial, commercial and social roles, before and well after the Hispanic advent. Others concentrate on explicating the identities and roles of the religious Aztec pantheon. However, the branding of an objective / subjective meta-Aztec identity that transcends specific roles (for example: that of the king, the priest, the warrior, the sage, the medic, the mother, et cetera) the me remains for consideration. This paper investigates the problematization of Aztec identity (its constant erasure and re-inscription since the Middle Postclassic Period) through a structuralist assessment of ritual in late PostClassic and Aztec colonial manuscripts. It culminates in equally problematic notions of the resultant Mexican identity manifest in the Mexican visual arts of the twentieth century.

Aztlán, the locus of the Aztec cosmogony,ⁱⁱ existed as an eidetic memory. An example of the Aztec tendency to capitulate new content and context during pivotal moments in their brief history is that of the ruler Huitzilopotchli (Figure 2) marrying the young princess of Coahuacan, who was an heiress to that kingdom. The princess was sacrificed after Huitzilopotchli proclaimed her to be both his mother, Toci (Figure 3), and his bride, Tonantzin (Figure 4).ⁱⁱⁱ Toci / Tonantzin became a double signifier of another point of Aztec origin. According to Jean-Marie Benoist, a structuralist colleague of Claude Levi-Strauss: "... identity ... [is] constitutive of the self, twice: first by the abyss written in the heart of the semantic relationship between self-love--love of the species itself--and its finite, self-esteem ..."^{iv} As a mother, Toci prefigured this new moment in time. This is Levi-Strauss' love of the group: its successful fecundity. As a wife, Tonantzin comprised a partnership that defined the finite, real-time cycle of a human life span requiring self-evaluation that mandated the success of the culture. The social fact of Huitzilopotchli's wedding, followed by the sacrifice to the gods, immediately became Aztec natural fact. The event instantly created a locus of identification for the Aztec populace as it unfolded before them.

Before continuing with the discussion of identity, it is necessary to address the role of myth in crafting identity. Myths are archetypal narratives that provide context for people and events salient to a culture. In terms of forging a collective identity, myth unifies values and characteristics, especially when it involves cosmogony. Given this, Levi-Strauss writes in *Anthropology and Myth*,

There is no myth underlying the ritual as a whole, and when foundation myths exist, they generally bear on details of the ritual which appear secondary or supernumerary. However, if myth and ritual do not mirror each other, they often reciprocally complete each other, and it is only by comparing them that one can formulate hypotheses on the nature of certain intellectual strategies typical of the culture under consideration.^v

Applied to Huitzilopotchli's union with Toci / Tonantzin and her subsequent sacrifice, the operant myths of divine refiguration of heroic rulers, the sacrifice necessary to retain parity in the universe, as well as the sacrifice necessary for spiritual rebirth and feeding the gods to sustain Aztec perpetuity are present. However, these myths are subsumed by the ritual of appropriation. It is an appropriation of the Culhua identity to posit the developing counter identity of the Aztecs. Identity, after all, is abstract -- this is the intellectual strategy behind this particular event. The god Huitzilopotchli's (Figure 5) delegate (or substitute) was the god Paynal (Figure 6). It is fitting that Paynal had among his accoutrements "... the breast mirror"^{vi} that allowed a god or person to see his own likeness when confronting Paynal. This would debilitate an enemy's sense of individuality in contrast to Paynal's appropriating strength.

Identity also is constructed in negative opposition to the Other. The Culhua princess was a signifier of the Other (the Culhuas were “... the most advanced people in the valley at the time of the arrival of the Mexica-Aztecs”^{vii}). Huitzilopochtli’s marriage first legitimized the Aztecs as being an equitable counterpoint to the Culhua, followed by positioning the Aztecs as superior by defeating the Culhua through the sacrifice. Benoit states that “... a rough and immediate identity, a superficial identity must give way to a search of deep structures that shape identity in its relational aspect: the question of the Other appears as constitutive of identity.”^{viii} The ruler embodies the state and its values. As representative of Aztec history and Aztec quantitative traits (such as military might, order, divine rule, commercial savvy), the question remains as to how being Azteca manifests value at the objective and subject level. As mentioned earlier, the Aztecs appropriated and established quality through negative opposition.

The marriage of Huitzilopochtli and Toci / Tonantzin occurred as the Aztecs remained geographically transient. Durán writes of Huitzilopochtli, Alarcón stating at this point in the Aztec history, “This is not the land where we are to make our permanent home, this is not yet the site I have promised you, it is still to be found.”^{ix} This statement is metaphoric of the Aztec experience itself. According to Cooper Alarcón, Durán’s text functions as an erasure and inscription of Aztec history. He argues that this parallels the practice “often encountered in classical studies or in archeology,”^x of scraping parchment or stone to make way for new content: that is the palimpsest (Figure 7). Invariably, illegible traces of the former content still remain, complicating the new text. Aztec history has been series of such erasures and re-inscriptions of layers of historical content and context. Cooper Alarcón supports Susan Gillespie’s conclusions written in her *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of History in Mexica Rulership*:

... the native authors continued a long tradition of altering history in order to explain the present, a tradition grounded in the Mesoamerican belief that time was cyclical. Current events were thought to be repetitions of earlier ones, and Mesoamerican historians were often faced with the task of scouring the past for an even corresponding to the present, one similar enough that it could be slightly altered or embellished to establish a precedent.^{xi}

Such practice destabilizes previous signification as it modifies both the signifier and the signified to fit present circumstances and aims. Cooper Alarcón continues: “The palimpsest, because of its network of intricately linked narratives of different types, makes impossible any sort of devaluation of myth vis-à-vis history, nor does it allow one type of narrative to be considered in isolation from others.”^{xii} Neither is any one narrative privileged over another while framing new content.^{xiii}

The sixteenth century missionary, Bernardino de Sahagún, provides an encyclopedic account of the Aztecs, based on interviews with Aztec informants conducted by his former Nahua students. In Book I, Sahagún cites the regular practice of fashioning figures, mountains and amaranth seed cakes as offerings to the gods (Figure 8). Often, the amaranth seed figures were of the particular god being worshipped. Chapter 21 details “the Tepictoton (the Little Molded Ones), who belonged among the Tlalocs (Figure 9) ... he who formed mountains made their image only of amaranth seed dough, made in human form, made to look like men.”^{xiv} Apart from the instances where the amaranth figures were made in the likeness of an actual god or an ancestor, it is noteworthy that Sahagún doesn’t mention the existence of individuals characterizing themselves as figures. I would argue that the insertion of a plain amaranth figure into the infrastructure of ritual functions as an insertion of a subjectivity that inherently lacks a concrete idea of Aztec identity, both at the metaphysical and at the individual levels.

Philip Arnold states that these “... *tlaloque*, Tlaloc’s rain dwarfs ... were responsible for bringing snow, hail, mist and lightening from deep mountain caves ... With most of the significant geological features being accounted for, an assemblage of ancestor / mountains would produce a deified map of the Basin ... on family altars.”^{xv} The caves of the *tlaloque* were thus a locus of ancient, primal creation and power that still influenced present circumstances. Offering the undifferentiated amaranth seed figure (although it is an image of Tlaloc’s “helper”) takes on the semantics of Cooper Alarcón’s palimpsest. A general ancestry is signified conceptually in the ritual yet the figure lacks the concrete visual signifiers of individual identity or lineage. The signifier is actually merely a place holder ready to receive content from anyone’s identity. In its plainness, the figure is symbolic of undifferentiated Otherness.

Returning to the idea of establishing one’s identity in counterpoint to the Other, Benoit asserts that it is in the interstice of “... the differential [of] the source of the symbolic ... where the possibility of taking the subject in the symbolic order is affirmed.”^{xvi} The posit in this *tlaloque* figure practice, between “ancestry” and “general

individuality” is evidence that there was not a concretized sense of a subjective Aztec identity. Aztec identity was not concretized in a permanent manner, however the individual’s own personage (i.e. outside of nationhood) did figure within the ritual itself. After fasting throughout the night, the *tlaloque* were ritually beheaded and consumed at dawn, with a party of priests.^{xvii} The only way that an Aztec citizen could place him / herself in the symbolic order was through the empty signifier. Levi-Strauss claims that identity functions within subjectivity as the locus of community. It is clear that a meta-Aztec identity could not have been a totality at the level of the collective group, as it could not be expressed at the individual level.

It is useful to consider the *tlaloque* figure practice through Kubler’s treatise on the development of form and style in his canonical book, *The Shape of Time*. Kubler uses the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs as an example of the arrested development of form. He writes that the Aztec “... series ... was cut off before its time. It never had any later occasion to find its natural conclusion. It gives us the clinical example of the incomplete cultural series cut off by an extended one.”^{xviii} The Aztecs necessarily had to re-contextualize themselves in the post-Hispanic moment in order to situate themselves intelligently within the new set of Spanish colonial paradigms.^{xix} If the *tlaloque* figure practice is evidence of attempts to capitulate Aztec identity within a personal expression of the self, then the development of that identity wasn’t so much arrested as much as filled with a new set of referents. This peripatetic frame of “Aztecness” remained in force after the conquest. It was not that Aztecness was reinforced or absolutely defined by virtue of the Conquest (i.e. a new era).

The reconsidered verbal transmission of Aztec culture to the mendicants meant that the tentative efforts at establishing Aztecness would never fully realize into a set of independent and recognizable Aztec characteristics and values.

Hybrid cultural forms emerged (Figure 10). Edgerton writes of the Christian Convento as an Indian cosmos. By implementing Indian building techniques, materials and concepts into the Christian framework, the mendicants literally established a practicum for the Aztecs to redirect their conquered and displaced psyche. Kubler argues that the displacement of Aztec methodologies is akin to learning a new routine in which “every moment ... contains ... discontinuity between the two types of past knowledge, that of the learner who does it for the first time and that of the teacher, who does it for the *n*th time ...”^{xx} The Aztecs had no way of replicating the example of Huitzilopotchli marrying the Culhua princess to reframe the present within the cyclical temporality of their universe. There was no capitulation nor catharsis. Aztec eidetic memory was compromised.

Kubler writes of the Hispanic moment in terms of the replica-mass. The replica-mass circulates signs that have been broken. This is comparable to “... certain habits of popular speech, as when a phrase spoken upon the stage or in a film, and repeated in a million utterances, becomes part of the language of a generation and finally a dated cliché.”^{xxi} This *mestizaje* (the phenomenon involving the intermarriage of culture and people) of the Aztec and Spanish cultures disrupted a clear development of linear history exemplified by the transition in Western culture from Medieval forms and practices, to those of the Renaissance, et cetera. Citing the example of the Americas in the sixteenth century, Gruzinski writes that “... the metaphor of contiguity, succession, and replacement that subtends an evolutionary interpretation is no longer valid, not only because the temporality of the vanquished was not automatically replaced by that of the victors, but because it could coexist with it for centuries.”^{xxii} As such, *mestizaje* resists clear analysis: the organizing structures of society, religion, politics, economy, art, culture must be considered together, and not theorized as independent disciplines.^{xxiii}

The developing sense of a meta-Azteca identity was shattered by the Conquest: the Azteca essence was left in parts without formulation. Mexica identity thereafter repeatedly attempted to redefine itself. The *casta* paintings of the nineteenth century testify to the segmentation of personhood through ethnography. Erica Serge confirms that Mexican identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries “... has historically been predicated on a crisis of legitimacy and a pursuit of singularity”^{xxiv} This paper’s examples of the Azteca search for identity through Otherness and legitimization through appropriation agrees with this. She advocates turning “... the notion of a problematic heterogeneity, an ontological as well as semantic anxiety which has traditionally stoked nation-conscious reflection in the arts, into the missing place of origin conceived as a practice rather than a place or destiny.”^{xxv} Locating Mexican identity in process rather in a generalizing universal (such as Aztlán) allows for valency. It allows for the combining power of many elements.

Working in the wake of the Chicano movement's 1969 to galvanize the Mexican diaspora under Aztlán,^{xxvi} the Mexican contemporary artist Gabriel Orozco works in a tradition of plurality of form and content. He was born in Veracruz, maintains his practice in the Distrito Federal, and is active in canonical group exhibitions such as Documenta XI in Kassel, Germany in 2002 as well as in the 50th and 51st Venice Biennale of 2003 and 2005, respectively.^{xxvii} Orozco most recently exhibited his works in a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 2009. Here we consider "My Hands Are My Heart" of 1991 (Figure 11). The pivotal form of the composition is a heart, fashioned by Orozco by squeezing clay scavenged from "a brick factory in Cholula, Mexico"^{xxviii} (Industrial residue is a serial motif in Orozco's oeuvre. One could liken this to the cultural residue in the wake of 1521).

Orozco invokes Aztec ritual, Catholic rosary and votive prayers, industrial mass-production and politics of the body as systems which circulate around the clay heart. Claspéd as though in prayer and then held in the open palms as though in supplication, this work proposes a narrative of becoming. For this reason it poignantly express the identity politics extant in Mexico today. (The Colección Jumex in the Distrito Federal (Mexico City) recently opened a group exhibition titled, "Glimmer," that explores the very topic of identity).

Benjamin H.D. Buchloch responds to Orozco's oeuvre in the accompanying MoMA catalogue, by saying that "when it comes to cultural production, nation-state identities now have to be acknowledged as a system of determination."^{xxix} Identity shapes the constructs of collective and individual memory subtended in culture.^{xxx} This will manifest in the work of art.^{xxxi} In the Aztec moment, collective and individual memory were constantly reworked according to events in the present. A clear view of Aztecness did not exist in this young nation. In conclusion, I argue that a set of identifiable Azteca characteristics that could have evolved into twenty-first century Mexican identity did not occur. The psychic trauma of the Conquest exists today.

Biography

Lorena Morales received a B.A. in Art History from Fairfield University while managing a contemporary art gallery in Southport, Connecticut for over five years. With an M.A. in Modern and Contemporary Art History, Criticism and Theory from SUNY Purchase College, she also became a Neuberger Museum Curatorial Fellow, curating and authoring the catalogue for *American Gothic* featuring works by Andy Warhol, Robert Motherwell, Melvin Edwards, Ronald Gonzalez, Larry Rivers, Isamu Noguchi, Richard Estes, and Hans Richter. Ms. Morales continued an academic career with Ph.D. coursework at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. Research interests in art history include modern and contemporary American and European art, identity narratives, propaganda, as well as Aztec culture and the art of the Mexican diaspora.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Diego Durán, "The Founding of Tenochtitlán," *The Histories of the New Indies of Spain*.

Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 2. The god Huitzilopochtli, God / Idol, *Tovar Codex*, Plate XIX. Web 1. Apr. 2011



Figure 3. The goddess Toci, *The Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 3R. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 4. Detail of the goddess Tonantzin. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 5. Huitzilopochtli, the god, *The Codex Borbonicus*, page 34. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 6. Paynal, Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex, Book I*. Web. 1 Apr. 2011



Figure 7. Archimedes Palimpsest, 12th Century. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 8. Man Harvesting Amaranth, Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, page 99. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 9. Tlalogue, Codex Vaticanus A, page 20R. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.



Figure 10. Mary, Convento of Meztitlán, Mexico. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.

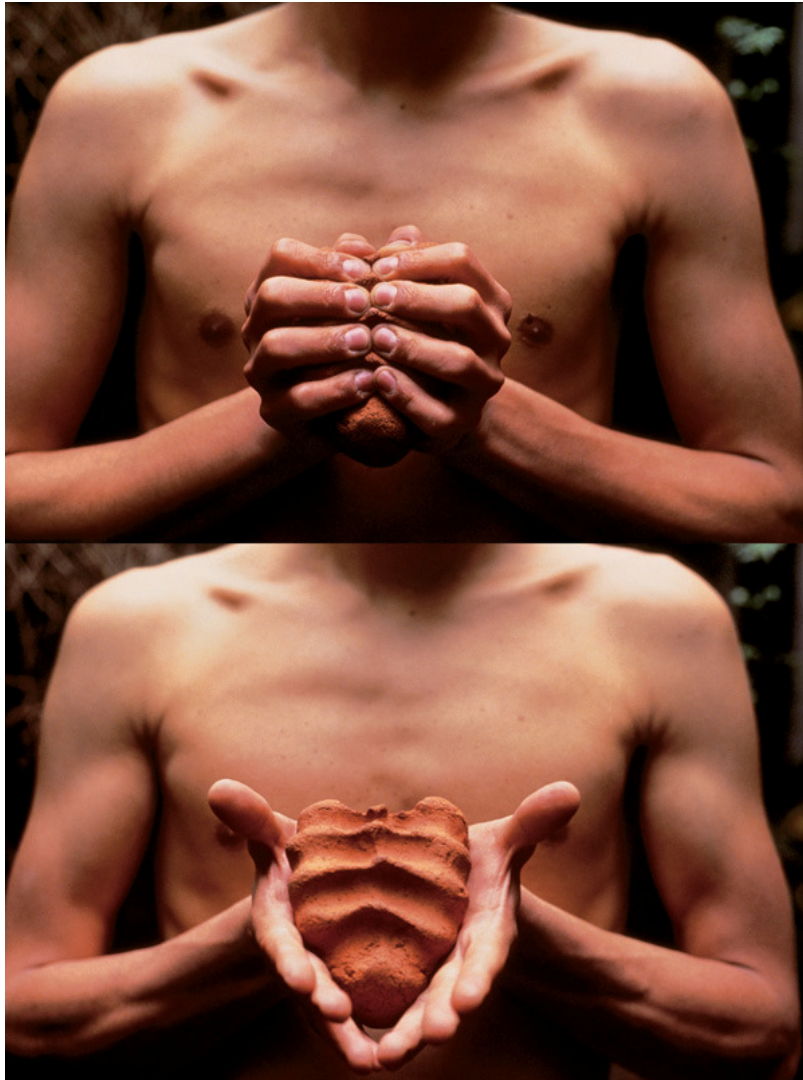


Figure 11. Gabriel Orozco, My Hands Are My Heart, 1991. Two silver dye bleach prints. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.

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- ⁱ Michael Smith, "The Rise of the Aztec Civilization" in *The Aztecs of Mesoamerica* (Blackwell, 1998), 32-34.
- ⁱⁱ The term "Aztec" is derived from "Aztlán," the mythic locus of the tribes that emigrated from the general direction of the north to the Basin of Mexico. Aztlán is often conflated with the myth of the Seven Caves, another point of origin.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 37.
- ^{iv} Jean-Marie Benoist "L'Identité" in *L'Identité*, ed. Claude Levi-Strauss (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977), 21.
- ^v Claude Levi-Strauss, *L'Identité* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1977), 204.
- ^{vi} Bernardino de Sahagún, *Of The Gods*, Book I of *The General History of the Things of New Spain: The Florentine Codex*, eds. C. Dibble and A. Anderson (Salt Lake City: Utah University Press, 1950-1982), 3.
- ^{vii} Durán, 36.
- ^{viii} Benoist, 17.
- ^{ix} Durán, 36.
- ^x Daniel Cooper Alarcón, *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in Modern Imagination*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1997), 3.
- ^{xi} Cooper Alarcón, 17.
- ^{xii} Cooper Alarcón, 19.
- ^{xiii} Cooper Alarcón, 20.
- ^{xiv} Sahagún, Book I, 47.
- ^{xv} Philip P. Arnold, "Paper Rituals and the Mexican Landscape," in *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, ed. Eloise Quiñones-Keber, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2002), 231.
- ^{xvi} Benoist, 22.
- ^{xvii} Sahagún, Book I, 47.
- ^{xviii} George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 101.
- ^{xix} Kubler, 101.
- ^{xx} Kubler, 101.
- ^{xxi} Kubler, 35.
- ^{xxii} Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Routledge, 2002), 29.
- ^{xxiii} Gruzinski, 27.
- ^{xxiv} Erica Serge, *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth-and -Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture*, Vol. 5 of *Remapping Cultural History*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 2.
- ^{xxv} Serge, 2.
- ^{xxvi} Cooper Alarcón, "Toward a New Understanding of Aztlán and Chicano Cultural Identity," 20-35.
- ^{xxvii} White Cube Gallery, "Gabriel Orozco," <http://www.whitecube.com/artists/orozco/> (accessed May 5, 2011).
- ^{xxviii} Paulina Pobocha and Anne Byrd, "Chronology, 1992: Migrations," in *Gabriel Orozco*, ed. Ann Temkin, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 62
- ^{xxix} Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Sculpture Between Nation-State and Global Commodity Production," in *Gabriel Orozco*, ed. Ann Temkin, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 41.
- ^{xxx} Buchloh, 41.
- ^{xxxi} Buchloh, 41.