

Mexico, From Mestizo to Multicultural

National Identity and Recent
Representations of the Conquest



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behind-altars theory proposes that the indigenous people maintained their gods, their religious beliefs, and their practices by continuing their worship behind a thin veil of Christian practice. In fact, the sixteenth-century Spanish friar and expert on Aztec language and culture Fray Bernardino de Sahagún feared that early indigenous worshippers at the shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe were, in fact, leaving offerings that paid tribute to Tonantzin (Burkhart 1993, 205). Similarly, in the theory of syncretism, elements of one religious system are fused with those of another to create hybrid gods, practices, and beliefs. Mother goddesses such as the Spanish Virgin Mary and the Aztec Tonantzin were worshipped as one, and similar practices (celebrations of fertility or harvest) survive the ages because they encompass the belief systems of both cultures. In her article "The Cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico," Louise M. Burkhart explains, "From these dual roots [Nahua (Aztec) and Spanish Catholic religious traditions] was formed a new cult figure, whose existence both validated and personified the mixture of people and cultures that gave rise to the Mexican nation" (198). These three versions of the indigenous reception of the messages of Christianity affect modern Mexican national identity by altering the way that Mexicans view their past. They suggest scenarios that run the gamut from victimization to active resistance and even thoughtful cultural integration.

The syncretic model of religious assimilation serves as a perfect complement to cultural *mestizaje*, especially in terms of the aforementioned perceptions of racial *mestizaje* as harmonizing and homogenizing. Yet despite the vast imagery depicting amalgamated deities such as Virgin Mary/Tonantzin, the spiritual conquest, as we have seen, was no less violent than the military conquest. As a result, the allegedly serene meshing of Aztec and indigenous gods in Mexico's uniquely syncretic form of Catholicism is no less conflicted than the "hijos de una tragedia" depicted in Solares's novel.

La otra conquista: The Traumatic Road from Loss to Acceptance and Appropriation

The 1998 film *La otra conquista*,²⁴ directed by Salvador Carrasco,²⁵ depicts the Christian conversion of an Aztec man, Topiltzin, during the years between 1520 and 1531. Although the film demonstrates how all three of the theories of indigenous religious conversion discussed previously come into play in the originary moments of Mexican spiritual identity, it ultimately deconstructs the notion of syncretism as an accordant process. Although this issue is treated in more depth ahead, it is worth noting here that first the Spaniards destroy and outlaw Topiltzin's gods. Then, after Topiltzin continues to try to worship Tonantzin secretly, he finds that, for his own salvation, he must syncretically fuse Tonantzin and the Virgin Mary.

By tracing Mexican Christianity back to its roots in the years before Juan Di-

ego's symbolic acts of devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Carrasco demonstrates the violent subtext behind religious conversion that continues to vex modern Mexican national identity five centuries later. As Carrasco comments, when the Spaniards arrived, "the face of the American continent changed forever. . . . Many of the things that happened back then are still unresolved five centuries later. We are still seeking our identity" (quoted in Muñoz 2000, F4). Elsewhere Carrasco elaborates: "The truth is: The conquest is not over. And it's not perfectly clear who is doing the conquering" (Carrasco 2002, 167). Therefore, Carrasco contends that the unresolved nature of Mexican identity—which is akin to the combative duality of Solares's "otredad no resuelta"—results from the violent events of the sixteenth century, indigenous cultural resistance to Christianity, and an incomplete conquest of the indigenous peoples' souls. Even in his weakest moments, for example, Topiltzin yells to the Virgin, "Holy Mother, in your hands I deposit my body but never my spirit!!" ["¡¡Santa Madre, en tus manos deposito mi cuerpo, mas nunca el espíritu!!"] (Carrasco 1998). Although the film focuses on this *other* conquest—the spiritual conquest of Mexico—it also constitutes a journey to the religious roots of modern Mexican identity. In an attempt to better understand a national identity that Carrasco, like Solares, finds unresolved, he highlights the violent origins of Mexico's most cherished cultural and religious icon, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and accordingly the film echoes many of the themes found in *Nen, la inútil*. Carrasco returns to the inception of Mexico's religious beliefs to examine the unresolved nature of modern Mexican national identity—this time in terms of Mexico's syncretic religion, a paramount and key component of Mexico's mestizo culture.

Yet, unlike *Nen, la inútil*, *La otra conquista* returns to the conquest not to romanticize history but to visually represent the past in all its tragic splendor. Instead of romanticizing a traumatized origin, Carrasco's film traumatizes an idealized beginning. By doing so, the film works against the now untenable notions of *mestizaje* and syncretism as harmonious blends of different races and belief systems. As Carrasco notes, "I think we sometimes fall into the trap of exalting *mestizaje* and syncretism as if they were themselves values, as if they were more or less peaceful cultural processes, carried out within a framework of symmetrical power—as if Mexican identity fused two cultures of equal condition. . . . We wish to highlight . . . the violence implicit in such processes" ["Creo que, incluso, a veces hemos caído en la trampa de exaltar el mestizaje y el sincretismo como si fuesen valores en sí, como si fuesen procesos culturales más o menos pacíficos, llevados a cabo dentro de un marco de simetría de poderes—como si en la identidad mexicana se fundiesen armoniosamente dos culturas en igualdad de condiciones. . . . Deseamos subrayar . . . la violencia implícita en dichos procesos"] (quoted in Velazco 1999, 4).²⁶ Here Carrasco implies that the concept of transculturation better encompasses and explains modern Mexican identity and the foundational events that were taking place on Mexican soil in the sixteenth century.

Carrasco, then, bases *La otra conquista* on theories of transculturation more so

than on those of *mestizaje*. *Transculturation*, as defined by Fernando Ortiz in his 1940 *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (*Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*), is an attempt to describe “the complex and multidirectional processes in cultural transformation” (quoted in Mignolo 2000, 167) that are integral to Cuban—and indeed all Latin American—history. Transculturation, then, combines the notion of acculturation (acquiring another culture) with violent deculturation (the loss or uprooting of a previous culture) and neoculturation (the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena) (Ortiz 1947, 102–103). Most important to Carrasco and *La otra conquista* is the notion of multidirectionality and the contention that every group, from the elite down to the most devastated of slaves, is “always exerting an influence and being influenced” (98). Although firmly based in the tragedy of conquest, transcultural processes demonstrate cultural resilience and adaptation among all sectors of a society. They also underscore the inherent imbalance of power in such processes.²⁷

Carrasco’s interest in and understanding of transculturation, therefore, allows *La otra conquista* to delve into myriad thorny issues that surround Mexico’s current spiritual identity and to represent them from innovative perspectives. First, the film takes on the myth of harmony that surrounds Mexican cultural *mestizaje*, especially in terms of the origins of the syncretic cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Apparitions and spontaneous conversions are replaced with violent culture clashes,



Figure 2.2. Topiltzin, the protagonist in Salvador Carrasco’s 1998 film *La otra conquista* (*The Other Conquest*) is first seen climbing the ruins of the Templo Mayor [Aztec Great Temple]. He has just survived the Spaniards’ 1520 massacre of hundreds of Aztec men, women, and children. Courtesy of the photographer, Andrea Sanderson.

forced abjurations, and profound loss. Next, *La otra conquista* also posits evangelism and conversion as multidirectional pursuits wherein resultant syncretic beliefs affected the ways that both indigenous peoples and Europeans worshipped.

Although the film consciously treats the decade leading up to, but not including, the Guadalupan events, the Mexicans’ devotion to her plays an important role as the subtext of the film. Because the Virgin of Guadalupe has been so closely associated with Aztec goddesses, especially Tonantzin, and because her cult in Mexico has been deemed “the prototypical example of religious syncretism” (Burkhart 1993, 198), she is a culturally mestizo figure, a new being sprung from two identifiable roots. Carrasco intends to interrogate and ultimately comment on the process by which the Virgin’s profound hybridity was born. Just as the story of Guerrero sets up contrasting tales of *mestizaje* in *Nen, la inútil*, the Virgin of Guadalupe serves Carrasco’s audience as a foil for Topiltzin’s experience: surreptitious conversion versus total loss, free and unfettered devotion versus forced abjuration, harmonic syncretism versus painful mixed signs. In this way, Carrasco, refocuses Mexicans’ sense of their religious beginnings on the violent culture shock and resultant destruction wrought by the Spaniards as they penetrated the Aztec empire.

Topiltzin: Symbol of Mexico’s Orphaned Identity

La otra conquista tells the tragic and compelling tale of Topiltzin, an Aztec scribe who witnesses the unspeakable destruction of his people at the hands of the Spaniards. Topiltzin, a lone survivor, is first seen as he climbs from the ruins of the Templo Mayor after the 1520 massacre (Fig. 2.2). In every sense, his world is in ruins as he calls for his mother goddess, Tonantzin, with no response. In the wake of this trauma, Topiltzin dedicates himself to documenting his culture’s downfall in detailed pictographic codices. As the camera moves from his paintbrush to the scene he is drawing, the pages of the sixteenth-century Aubin Codex literally spring to life on the screen to depict the death and annihilation of his people (Fig. 2.3).

Topiltzin’s initial reaction to the Spaniards’ hostile presence and motives for collaboration is intense resistance. He defiantly opposes his own brother, a collaborator, who tells him, “I am still the same person, but I have two halves inside of me: One belongs to lost time; the other has to adapt to survive” [“Sigo siendo el mismo, pero llevo dos mitades dentro de mi: Una pertenece al tiempo perdido; la otra tiene que adaptarse para sobrevivir”]. Topiltzin simply replies, “I am made of one single piece” [“¡Yo estoy hecho de una sola pieza!”] (Carrasco 1998). Yet Topiltzin is later captured and forced to renounce his culture and his gods through the burning of his feet as he is forced to face a statue of the Virgin Mary. After this cruel punishment, Topiltzin escapes death because he is the half-brother of Tecuichpo, Cortés’s favorite courtesan. Tecuichpo informs the conquistador that



Figure 2.3. Topiltzin records the history and destruction of his people in a pictographic codex. This scene reinforces both the cultural and personal levels of one of the central themes of the film: loss. Courtesy of the director, Salvador Carrasco.

Topiltzin is an illegitimate son of Moctezuma and therefore an heir to the empire. Topiltzin's life is spared, but he is forced to convert to Christianity under the tutelage of the Spanish clergyman Fray Diego de la Coruña²⁸ in the Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Luz. Topiltzin's resistance continues but is thwarted at every turn. At last, he makes love to Tecuichpo in a desperate attempt to ensure the survival of their lineage. Cortés learns of the transgression and strangles Tecuichpo, killing both mother and unborn child.²⁹ At this point, Topiltzin's loss is total, and he begins the ambiguous and complex process of accepting and appropriating the Spanish Virgin Mary through debilitating fevers and hallucinations. Throughout Topiltzin's trials, Fray Diego has prodded, encouraged, and punished him. When Topiltzin commits his final act of assimilation or appropriation and dies under a statue of the Virgin Mary as it falls into his arms, the friar, believing his work is done, declares the scene "a miracle that reflects how two different races can be one through tolerance and love" ["un milagro que refleja cómo dos razas tan diferentes pueden ser una sola a través de la tolerancia y el amor"] (Carrasco 1998). The movie ends with the camera panning up and out the window of Topiltzin's cell on the dawning of a new day.

In addition to embodying the origins of modern Mexican faith symbolically through his spiritual journey, Topiltzin embodies many of the popular traditionally held beliefs about the Mexican national character. His identity is painfully unfixed—or unresolved, as both Solares and Carrasco have termed it—for he is conquered, victimized, Westernized, baptized, and renamed Tomás. As an illegitimate son of Moctezuma whose mother has been murdered by the Spaniards, he

is a bastard orphaned son. Yet he also encompasses many of the positive myths of *lo mexicano*: As an heir of Moctezuma, he is a proud representative of the glorious indigenous past. He is a resistant but punished rebel, much like Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, who also suffered the torture of having his feet burned by Cortés. Although we understand that, as an indigenous protagonist, he does not entirely encompass modern Mexico's mestizo identity, he does embody one aspect of that identity: the indigenous. His actions and experiences will therefore ultimately speak to the place of the indigenous in modern Mexican consciousness, how it came to be, and the reasons that Carrasco believes that Mexican national identity remains unresolved.

Like *Nen, la inútil*, which was organized around the principal of encounter between the Spanish and the indigenous, *La otra conquista* bases its tale of culture shock and religious conversion on a principal concept: the indigenous population's total loss. Topiltzin's physical and spiritual worlds have been laid to waste in a matter of years. His ultimate appropriation and difficult acceptance of the Virgin Mary can be understood only within the context of these losses. Significantly, Carrasco points to the source of this concept: "I think [Octavio] Paz is right in suggesting that la Virgen de Guadalupe is the answer to the orphaned state of the indigenous after the conquest" ["Creo que (Octavio) Paz tiene razón al sugerir que la Virgen de Guadalupe es la respuesta a la situación de orfandad en que quedó el indígena después de la conquista."] (quoted in Velazco 1999, 4).³⁰ Paz's depiction of orphanhood as the incarnate emblem of loss appears in *La otra conquista* as early as the textual prologue, which reads in part, "After two years [of the Spanish penetration into Tenochtitlán], the Aztec civilization found itself in a state of orphanhood, and the survivors were trying to adapt themselves to a new world without families, homes, language, temples . . . and gods" ["Al cabo de dos años (de la penetración de los españoles en Tenochtitlán) la civilización azteca se hallaba en estado de orfandad y los sobrevivientes trataban de adaptarse a un nuevo mundo sin familias, hogares, lengua, templos . . . ni dioses"] (Carrasco 1998). Of note in these opening words is the use of the word *orfandad* [orphanhood], where one might expect to read *ruina* [ruin]. Here, yet again, we see the stubborn resurgence, the pervasiveness of Paz's thinking with respect to the interpretation of Mexican history and national identity.

From the very first scenes of the film, Topiltzin's losses characterize him as an orphan, yet as a positively cast, resistant orphan. In the aftermath of the Templo Mayor massacre, Topiltzin regains consciousness, finds himself surrounded by murdered compatriots—among them, his mother—and screams out to his mother goddess, "Tonantzin!" (which is translated in the English subtitles as "Mother!")³¹ Although the depiction of Mexicans—or at least their indigenous ancestors—as orphans supports Paz's or Carrasco's contentions that transculturation, syncretism, and *mestizaje* followed profound loss and victimization among the Aztecs, it is my contention that to a certain extent it serves to infantilize them. The charac-

terization of the indigenous as orphans frames their experience within the rubric of childhood and highlights their status as abandoned victims. Unfortunately, this infantilization undermines the indigenous capacity for cultural and military resistance, a function that works against Carrasco's filmic intention to show the evangelization of the New World as a difficult and unfulfilled project thanks to indigenous tenacity.

Still another encapsulation of the film's theme of loss appears prior to the prologue, when the screen is filled with the graphic emblem of the movie: a skull superimposed on a Christian cross. It is important to note that this graphic emerges from one of the film's first images. We see a codex page with a skull centered on two intersecting red lines (which form a simple cross with four arms of equal length) (Figs. 2.4 and 2.5). The combination of the two, to Western eyes, conjures thoughts of death (the crucifixion) and Christianity, perhaps suggesting the crucifixion and resurrection as a symbol of transculturation. The visual symbol might even evoke a syncretic reading of a Christian cross and an indigenous *calavera* (skull), suggesting either the ultimate sacrifice that was paid by Mexico's indigenous population during Christian evangelization or the promise of life everlasting (the cross as victory over death) that enticed the indigenous to convert. Yet contemplated from an indigenous point of view, the two symbols—especially the cross of equal arms—represent death as spread throughout the four corners of the earth, the cross indicating the four cardinal points of the compass. The four cardinal points also represent the four sons of Omecíhuatl, or Tonacacihuatl, (Caso 1988, 9–10) and thus the truncation of Tonantzin's lineage.

These early images, then, prepare the audience for the tragic events that follow and for the need to read the film's visual signs from a variety of perspectives. Yet Carrasco's intention is not merely to produce a sad tale of Mexico's distant history (though he does so artfully and accurately).³² Carrasco has set out to explain the cultural process of syncretic transculturation in real human terms. As he has commented, "We have tried to imagine what this fascinating period of our history could have been like, full of complexities and ambiguities; how an indigenous man, faithful to his beliefs and traditions, would have reacted to the series of losses brought by the conquest, and how his cultural resistance would affect those around him" ["Hemos tratado de imaginarnos cómo pudo haber sido este período tan fascinante de nuestra historia, lleno de complejidades y ambigüedades; cómo pudo haber reaccionado un indígena fiel a sus creencias y tradiciones a la serie de pérdidas que trajo consigo la conquista, y cómo su resistencia cultural afecta a quienes le rodean"] (quoted in Velazco 1999, 4). Carrasco envisions this process of loss and resistance as the cornerstone of indigenous willingness to accept and adore a Spanish Virgin and therefore as the basis of Mexican national identity. He does not, however, limit his film to a representation of the difficult and incomplete conquest of the indigenous spirit. When he deals with transculturation, Carrasco

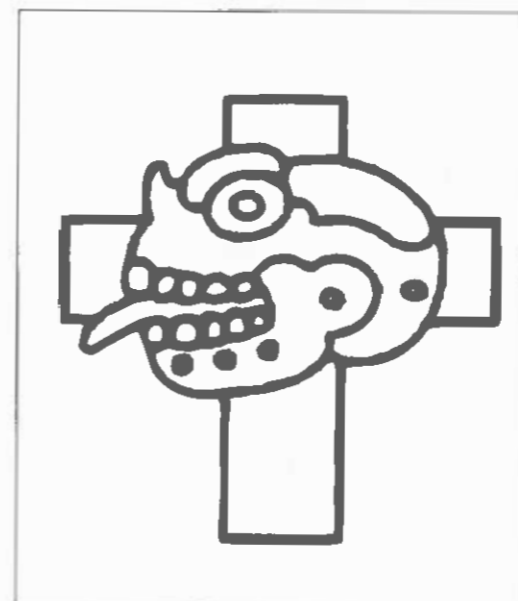


Figure 2.4. The skull atop a Christian cross is a graphic emblem of the film. It not only echoes the theme of loss but also suggests the transformational nature of syncretism, where elements of two religions mesh to form a hybrid belief system. The Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico has been described as a syncretic mixture of the Spanish Catholic Virgin and the Aztec goddess Tonantzin. Courtesy of the director, Salvador Carrasco.

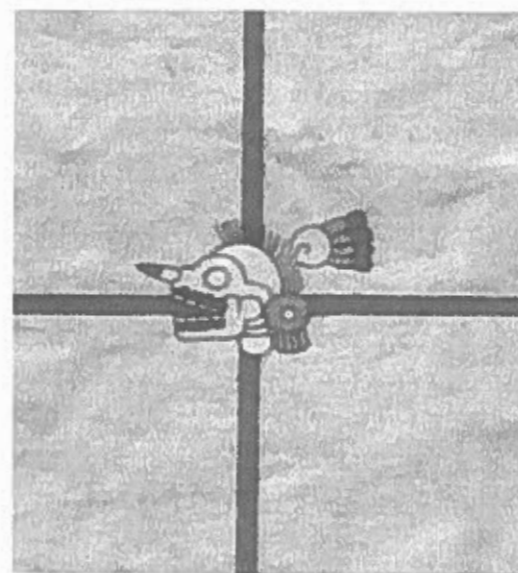


Figure 2.5. The Aztec skull atop two intersecting red lines is an image from the pages of an indigenous codex that lends itself to interpretations that range from hopeful to despairing. These interpretations, in turn, reflect the ambivalence with which many Mexicans view the sixteenth-century conquest. Courtesy of the director, Salvador Carrasco.

also treats the transformation of Fray Diego as a result of his experiences in the New World.

The two protagonists, Topiltzin and Fray Diego de la Coruña, are symbolic of not only the indigenous and Spanish components of Mexico's early syncretic Christianity but also Mexico's mestizo heritage. They also demonstrate the popularly held version of how modern Mexican faith was born. Despite the initial trauma, Topiltzin converts by becoming Tomás (his baptismal name) and by ac-

cepting Catholic beliefs. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the film complicates this popular but simplistic vision of early evangelization and strives to represent multi-directional transculturation rather than harmonious syncretic mixing. Fray Diego is also “converted” by Topiltzin and by his close contact with Aztec culture. Fray Diego not only learns to speak Nahuatl but also visits Cihuaccóatl, an indigenous *sacerdote* (priest), to seek guidance about Topiltzin’s failing health. Upon Topiltzin’s death, Fray Diego delivers a benediction in Nahuatl: “Now that you have left us, wake up. May our venerable mother keep you forever with dignity” [“Ya pasaste rápidamente a dejarnos. Despierta. Espero que nuestra venerable madre te guarde dignamente”] (Carrasco 1998). Although the spiritual evolution of Fray Diego’s character is not treated in the same depth as is that of Topiltzin, it is, at least, consistent. In the opening scenes that depict Topiltzin’s death in 1558, Fray Diego’s colleagues discover a hidden piece of Topiltzin’s codex stashed secretly in the tome that Fray Diego clings to so tenuously on his deathbed. A piece of Aztec history therefore survives in Fray Diego, and he has been changed by it.

Yet, just as Solares does in *Nen, la inútil*, Carrasco depicts as similar in important ways his two polar opposite protagonists and the societies from which they come. The first notable similarity between Topiltzin’s and Fray Diego’s worlds is behavioral. Early in the film, Topiltzin and his surviving family members have clandestinely arranged a human sacrifice to Tonantzin. At the moment that the human heart is raised as an offering, the Spaniards arrive, covered in metal suits of armor, and Fray Diego gasps, “Truly you come from another world” [“De verdad venis de otro mundo”] (Fig. 2.6). The Spaniards are shocked by the cruelty of the sacrifice, but they respond by imprisoning and brutally murdering the Aztecs, causing Fray Diego to lament, “You are behaving just like them!” [“¡Estáis comportando a la altura de ellos!”] (Carrasco 1998). The violent behavior of both societies highlights for the audience the relativity of their culturally held beliefs.

On an individual level, both Topiltzin and Fray Diego demonstrate deep spirituality and cultural pride. After arguing about the bloodthirsty practices of both cultures—Aztec human sacrifice and such Spanish military massacres of civilians as the massacre at the Templo Mayor—Topiltzin says to the friar, “You and I, deep inside, share the same beliefs, Fray Diego, even though we come from worlds so different. We live in all places and in all times” (Carrasco 1998). This culturally relativistic attitude on Topiltzin’s part is, however, one of a series of mischaracterizations of Aztec and Spanish culture that serve only to subvert Carrasco’s attempt to underscore the trauma of the spiritual conquest and Mexico’s early Christian roots.

First, Topiltzin’s allegation that he and Fray Diego share similar cultural beliefs allows the audience to draw a dangerously facile assumption. By omitting discussion of the sacred and ritualistic aspects of human sacrifice, the film oversimplifies Topiltzin’s conversion process. He is no longer being asked to renounce all that is sacred and meaningful to him but simply to change one violent society for an-



Figure 2.6. When the Spaniards come upon this human sacrifice, Fray Diego mutters, “Truly you come from another world” [“De verdad venis de otro mundo”]. The Spaniards then imprison and brutally murder the indigenous people, causing the friar in their midst to lament, “You are behaving just like them!” [“¡Estáis comportando a la altura de ellos!”]. Courtesy of the director, Salvador Carrasco.

other. Moreover, although the treatment of Topiltzin’s journey toward acceptance of the Spanish Virgin Mary is poetic and provocative, it does not address troublesome issues such as monotheism that Aztecs who converted to Christianity faced. If Topiltzin and Fray Diego share a similar spiritual fervor, we can understand that Topiltzin’s conversion to Christianity might be of comfort to him in that it at least affords him a chance to worship in some way. Yet despite the polytheistic nature of Aztec religion, Topiltzin is characterized as virtually monotheistic in his devotion to Tonantzin. By the same token, Topiltzin does not confront the difficult concepts of the triune god (the trinity), or the concept of a soul, or the ways that European or Christian thought conflicts with his own culture.

The film therefore not only eases much of the spiritual conflict that Topiltzin would have faced but also attempts to characterize him in broadly Christ-like strokes. Like Christ, for example, Topiltzin is betrayed by those closest to him: first by his brother and then by his mentor. His brother turns him over to the Spaniards for captivity, and Fray Diego turns him over to Cortés for punishment (thus unwittingly causing the death of Tecuichpo as well). Bringing to mind Jesus’ words on the cross, “Father why have you forsaken me?” Topiltzin also screams to the heavens, after the massacre of his people, “Sun god, why have you abandoned us?” These characterizations serve only to confuse the audience. Topiltzin is no longer the orphaned symbol of Mexican national identity but a strange parallel to the

Christian savior. He will indeed be sacrificed in the end, but his redemption and resurrection, as we will see, are uncertain.

Fray Diego and Topiltzin in combination, then, are meant to represent the two components of Mexican spiritual mixing in contact and in conflict. Topiltzin, for his part, represents a lost Mexico, and, through his experiences over the course of the movie, embodies the spiritual conquest in real human terms. Through Topiltzin, viewers experience one of the major processes by which current-day Mexico was born. Although the two protagonists demonstrate the give-and-take relationship of transculturation, they do not go as far as Nen and Felipe do toward representing the components of mestizo identity—perhaps as an indication that spiritual mixing is less essential to the Mexican essence than is biological mixing or perhaps as an indication of the incomplete nature of the spiritual conquest. Certainly, however, they mirror the imbalance of power present in the transcultural path toward Mexico's syncretic form of Catholicism.

As Carrasco demonstrates, the process of Topiltzin's transculturation borrows elements from all three theories of indigenous reception of the Virgin (the cataclysmic, or replacement, theory; the idols-behind-altars theory; and the syncretic theory). Topiltzin, we find, experiences and exhibits all three processes in varying degrees before his last gesture and the ending to the film. As the film progresses from the first scenes of the massacre at the Templo Mayor, Topiltzin is isolated from his spiritual touchstones, demonstrating the cataclysmic model of religious conversion. As part of this process, his brother bemoans the fact that the Spaniards have forbidden them to be with their gods. While Topiltzin clandestinely consecrates to Tonantzin (in a sacred human sacrifice) the codices that depict the carnage of the conquest, the Spaniards interrupt him and (succinctly representing their "images at war," as Gruzinski phrases it) destroy the stone image of Tonantzin. Fray Diego tries to supplant native goddesses with the Christian Virgin (as in the replacement model of evangelization), when he tells Topiltzin to behold the image of the Virgin Mary instead of Tonantzin: "Look at her closely. Maria, mother of God. Yours is nothing more than a pile of rocks" ["Miradla bien. María, madre de Dios. La vuestra es nada más que un puñado de piedras"] (Carrasco 1998). Later, in the monastery, after Fray Diego has been charged with Topiltzin's conversion, he also instructs him that Mary is the "new word" ["nueva palabra"]. Spiritually, Topiltzin has been emptied of the ritual practices, the physical representations, and the symbolic mother figure that are all central to his religion.

As a demonstration of the syncretic mode, near the end of the film, Topiltzin appears to resist conversion resolutely and successfully—that is, at least until the statue of the Virgen de la Luz is delivered to the convent. Then he experiences strange hallucinatory dreams concurrent with the arrival of the blonde Virgin, which seem to signal his spiritual capitulation. In one vision, fearing that he will be branded with the sign of the cross by a conquistador, Topiltzin sees the statue of the Virgin and child being lowered into the chapel by a rope. The Christ child

is jarred from her grasp and falls into Topiltzin's arms, magically transforming into a flesh-and-blood infant (Fig. 2.7). Thus, it appears that Topiltzin has received Christ as a gift from the Virgin and must respond by becoming Christian. Perceiving himself as a high priest, Topiltzin then poises to sacrifice the Virgin as his grandmother whispers to her, "You are the chosen one." The Virgin's face transforms into that of Tonantzin, and Topiltzin awakens. This dream seems to be a simple and straightforward depiction of Topiltzin's transition into the realm of syncretism. One goddess's image blends into another as their respective signs become blurred. The image of the Aztec sacrifice of the Virgin implies that the cult of the Virgin will, in fact, feed and sustain Tonantzin's worship. The Virgin has, in a way, saved Tonantzin, and Topiltzin, upon embracing the Christ child (or the Christian savior crucified), keeps Christianity alive. With this, however, his own culture has been sacrificed, just as Christ will be crucified, and in the end he will be crushed.³³

This dream's jumble of images, however straightforwardly syncretic it may seem, does not quite represent the blending of components that occurs in syncretism. Instead, the images reaffirm the overlapping of various theories on religious reception (Fig. 2.8). For example, the Virgin Mary appears as a façade that conceals Tonantzin (as in the idols-behind-altars model), for as the Virgin's face transforms into that of Tonantzin, Topiltzin can be seen as merely accepting the Virgin as a stand-in for his Aztec mother goddess and thus worshipping the "idol" behind the Virgin on the altar. The Virgin also appears to be the answer to Topiltzin's



Figure 2.7. Hallucinatory visions signal Topiltzin's spiritual capitulation, or conversion. Here the Christ child falls from the arms of a statue of the Virgin. Topiltzin catches him, and the baby is transformed into a flesh-and-blood child. Courtesy of the director, Salvador Carrasco.



Figure 2.8. Facing the statue of the Virgen de la Luz, Topiltzin may be adoring his new mother goddess, the Virgin, or merely accepting her as a replacement for his lost mother goddess, Tonantzin. The scene artfully reflects the ambiguity of Topiltzin's religious conversion. Courtesy of the photographer, Andrea Sanderson.

orphanhood. As such, the images of the Virgin-goddess suggest that he accepts the replacement of Tonantzin by Mary (according to the cataclysmic/replacement model). Still another reading of this ambiguous dream supports the view of the Virgin as a syncretic icon, because she embodies a mixture of feminine figures and deities that include his grandmother, sister, and mother goddess. Despite its ambiguous meaning, the dream sequence clearly shows that, as the bloodline of Moctezuma ends with Tecuichpo's death, the Virgin offers the indigenous people new life and a new identity. Topiltzin, holding the living Christ child, is transformed into a son of the Virgin, or *hijo de la virgen*, when he accepts her—and Christ—in Tonantzin's place. Instead of demonstrating the fusion that syncretism connotes, *La otra conquista* ultimately represents Topiltzin's conversion as based on replacement and on the total decimation or loss of his past cultural identity.

Often in creative works, dream-like, surreal narrative perspectives serve to highlight the very scenes that contain the author's most provocative and potent message. It is important to note that not only is this the case in *La otra conquista*³⁴ but also the dreams or hallucinations occur just as Topiltzin's spiritual and familial losses culminate. His last act of resistance, in fact, involves an incestuous return to

his roots as he and his half-sister, Tecuichpo, attempt to conceive a child who will continue their royal Aztec line, maintain their people's traditions, and symbolically herald the survival of the indigenous people in the New World. But Cortés strangles Tecuichpo, killing her and Topiltzin's child. Topiltzin's hallucinations, then, are most likely caused by a sexually transmitted disease—or the *mal de amor* introduced to the New World by Europeans—that Tecuichpo contracted through Cortés. In addition, in a manner similar to the unproductive union of Nen and Felipe, Topiltzin and Tecuichpo's unproductive coupling and truncated bloodline again signal the falsehood of indigenous survival in modern Mexican national identity.

This pessimistic view of the place of the indigenous in modern Mexican identity and consciousness extends, similarly, into the religious and spiritual realms, as analysis of the film's ending will show. In addition to Topiltzin's problematic conversion and the tragic termination of his lineage, the ambiguous and open ending that follows is a tinderbox of signifiers and symbols. Recall that, in the film's last scene, Topiltzin pulls the statue of the Virgin Mary to him in his cell—embracing her from behind—and falls, thus crushing himself with her likeness. Even with the detailed analysis of the film contained herein, this last gesture and Fray Diego's commentary on it remain vexing.

¿Todos somos Topiltzin? Indigenous Presence —Past and Present—in Mexico

In light of Carrasco's intention to speak to and elucidate the conflictive nature of modern Mexican national identity, the film's ending is of paramount importance in understanding its key argument. The ending scene, I contend, refocuses and explains the unresolved nature of Mexican national identity. Through an exploration of transcultural processes, Mexicans' sense of their religious beginnings can encompass the violent, the syncretic, and the resistant. Topiltzin brings that all to life. However, Carrasco fails to capture in the ending scene one aspect of Mexican spirituality: the open-ended sense that the conquest is incomplete. Because it drastically undermines the film's overarching message, this shortcoming is of utmost significance.

With respect to the film's ending, Carrasco contends that Topiltzin is “on a personal crusade to conquer her in whose name inconceivable things have been done. If he absorbs the Virgin's powers, if he fuses with her, redemption will follow. For Topiltzin, to conquer is not to destroy but to appropriate the main symbol of his oppressors in order to regain what he had lost” (Carrasco 2002, 167–68). Yet the viewer is nowhere clued in to either these individual intentions of Topiltzin or the redemption that the director attempts to demonstrate.³⁵ Instead, the audience is faced with a pessimistic ending that signals—perhaps unintentionally—the absence of the indigenous in modern Mexican spirituality and identity, for if in-

dividual Aztecs appropriated the Virgin into their lives in order to regain a lost Tonantzin, we understand that they did so in an ardent effort to continue to worship. Topiltzin *dies* in the process. If he is, then, redeemed and his mother goddess is, in fact, regained, then the visual representation of this process makes no sense. His death merely signals the annihilation of Topiltzin as an individual, the subsuming of Aztec culture as a whole, and the absence of the indigenous in Mexican spirituality today.

Finally, upon finding the two motionless figures, Fray Diego sends for Cortés so that he too might witness “a miracle that reflects how two very different races can become one through tolerance and love” [“un milagro que refleja cómo dos razas tan diferentes pueden ser una sola a través de la tolerancia y el amor”] (Fig. 2.9). These poetic words inexplicably echo the mestizophile ideal of harmonic fusion. To Fray Diego’s Western eyes, Topiltzin’s end embodies love, tolerance, and fusion, yet it is clear that the visual reality reinforces a message of death, cultural loss, and the silencing of the indigenous. With respect to this ending, Carrasco has written, “Providence, God, fate, historical necessity, or life’s mutability—whatever one calls that mysterious force that holds the strings of our existence—chooses *mestizaje*, the fusion of indigenous and European bloods. And thus, from unhealed wounds, a new nation is born, leaving Indians bleeding on the fringes, trapped in a state of cultural orphanage” (Carrasco 2002, 168). In light of the image we are left with, however—and if, indeed, the film represents and Carrasco believes that cultural

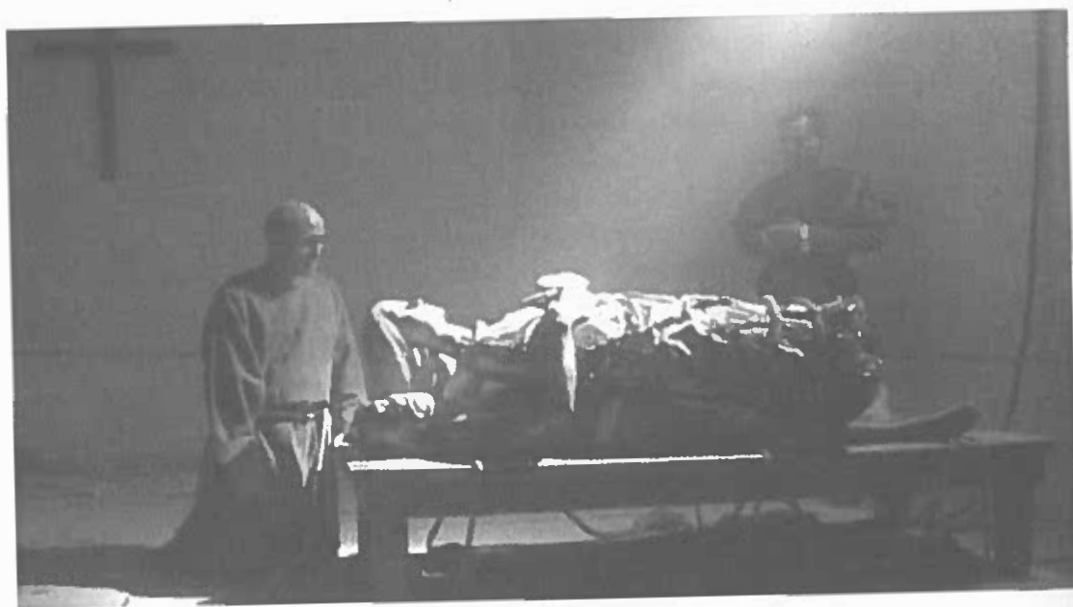


Figure 2.9. The film ends enigmatically with Fray Diego staring at Topiltzin, who lies dead under the Virgen de la Luz. The scene may be a metaphor for *mestizaje* or for the annihilation and silencing of the indigenous race. Courtesy of the director, Salvador Carrasco.

annihilation occurred, leaving the indigenous in a state of “cultural orphanage”—it is puzzling that Carrasco can speak in terms of real cultural mixing (whether it is syncretism or *mestizaje*).

Carrasco is well aware of the controversial nature of his film and the opposition it produces by taking on the most sacred and essential aspects of Mexican national identity. The conquest of Mexico has been mythified, as we have seen, to provide Mexicans with a well-crafted tale of good and bad. Carrasco himself contends that “the official history of the conquest was not meant to be questioned because of the embarrassing things that it might say about the situation of Mexican Indians today” (Carrasco 2002, 167). Embarrassing, indeed. Carrasco set out to explore the reasons for Mexico’s conflictive identity. His film reveals the profound loss experienced as the indigenous people were forced to adapt to the new invading culture and religion. Embarrassingly enough, the film also turns popular myths about unproblematic religious conversions on their ear. Even more embarrassing for Mexico in the 1990s was the question of what had become of the indigenous population as a result of the conquest. The 1994 Zapatista uprising was an answer that few Mexicans wanted to hear. The Zapatistas not only called on the nation to recognize centuries of exploitation and abuse of indigenous cultures, lands, and rights; they also demanded an increased role in national politics and more sovereignty in terms of their own local governance.

These same questions about the state of indigenous peoples in Mexico, how the Virgin of Guadalupe was accepted in the Americas, and the future role of indigenous groups in Mexican society were also being posed across the Atlantic. In the Vatican, Pope John Paul II decreed that Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, the Chichimeca man who first brought the news of the Virgin’s appearance to Zumárraga, would be canonized in Mexico City on July 31, 2002.

The elevation of Juan Diego to sainthood—making him the first indigenous American saint ever—was profoundly relevant for a number of reasons. First of all, “it put an end—at least for the Catholic church—to the polemic over the historicity of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s witness in 1531” [“puso fin—cuando menos para la Iglesia católica—a la polémica sobre la historicidad del vidente de la Virgen de Guadalupe, en 1531”] (Roman and Vargas 2002, 1). In addition, in his homily during the three-hour ceremony at the Basílica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, Pope John Paul II took the opportunity to send to Mexicans a strong message about the plight of the indigenous: Lending the church’s support to “the indigenous people in their legitimate aspirations” [“los indígenas en sus legítimas aspiraciones”] (quoted in Loaeza 2002, 3), he intoned, “Mexico needs its indigenous people, and the indigenous people need Mexico!” [“¡México necesita a sus indígenas y los indígenas necesitan de México!”] (quoted in Roman and Vargas 2002, 1). Juan Diego, he said, served as a model because

by embracing the Christian message, without renouncing his indigenous origins, Juan Diego became the protagonist of the "new Mexican identity," and . . . his life must continue to drive the construction of the nation, promote brotherhood among all his children and contribute more and more to the reconciliation of Mexico with its origins, its values, and its traditions.

[al acoger el mensaje cristiano, sin renunciar a su origen indígena, Juan Diego fue protagonista de la "nueva identidad mexicana" y . . . su vida debe seguir impulsando la construcción de la nación, promover la fraternidad entre todos sus hijos y favorecer cada vez más la reconciliación de México con sus orígenes, sus valores y sus tradiciones.] (quoted in Roman and Vargas 2002, 1)

One reporter wrote that John Paul II "wanted, before he died, to canonize Juan Diego. Making the indigenous man a saint, was, perhaps, a way of 'sanctifying' all indigenous Mexicans in the eyes of the government" ["quiso, antes de morir, canonizar a Juan Diego. Hacer santo al indígena, era, tal vez, una forma de 'santificar' ante los ojos del gobierno a todos los indígenas de México"] (Loeza 2002, 3). Another reporter believed that "the canonization of Juan Diego has the character, one could say, of a technological revindication and relevant pastoral letter, although late, for all indigenous Latin Americans on Rome's behalf" ["la canonización de Juan Diego tiene el carácter, cabría suponer, de una reivindicación teológica y pastoral pertinente, aunque tardía, de los indígenas latinoamericanos por parte de Roma"] ("Quinto viaje" 2002, 1). The *New York Times* reported that the canonization "stirred considerable debate in Mexico: about whether Juan Diego was a real man or a convenient marketing tool for the Catholic faith, and about whether the church, in trying to court indigenous people, was actually offending them" (Bruni and Thompson 2002, A6).

The same issues and debates are echoed in *La otra conquista*. In its depiction of the trials and tribulations of Topiltzin, the film also seeks to valorize the historical indigenous role in and contribution to Mexico's unique form of Catholicism. Although Carrasco demonstrates the real costs, in both human and spiritual terms, that a conversion such as Juan Diego's entails (as we have seen) in the end, the film's visuals appear so disconnected from the message that they leave the audience hopelessly befuddled as to the final value of such a radical process.

The same can be said for Juan Diego's canonization ceremony. Despite the Pope's poetic and symbolic words, the powerful visuals presented to the public betrayed what some saw as institutional racism and governmental erasure of the indigenous. Criticisms about the small number of indigenous people at the ceremony poured in, as evidenced by the headline, "The Canonization of the Indian Juan Diego without the Indigenous" ["La canonización del indio Juan Diego, sin indígenas"] (Mejía 2002b). In a separate article, the same commentator drew still more profound conclusions about Mexico's relationship with its indigenous people:

"This is a country that makes use of its indigenous past only to put its historical discourse in order but in fact does not participate with them in ecclesiastical communion" ["Este es un país que se sirve de su pasado indio únicamente para formalizar su discurso histórico pero de facto no participa con ellos en la comunión eclesiástica"] (Mejía 2002a, 1).

The most troubling observation, however, concerned the painting of Juan Diego that was presented to the Pope for canonization. One outraged reporter wrote, "It must be said before the elevation of the Tepeyac Indian to the altars that the Vatican has altered the image of the soon-to-be saint, who is now presented as an individual with Caucasian features and white complexion. The europeanization and whitening of the figure of Juan Diego cannot be understood as anything but a gross expression of racism, which taints basic Christian values and distorts the indigenist tone of the canonization process" ["No puede omitirse que antes de la elevación del indio del Tepeyac a los altares la oficialidad vaticana ha realizado una alteración de la imagen del iminente santo, el cual es presentado ahora como un individuo de rasgos caucásicos y piel blanca. La europeización y el blanqueo de la figura de Juan Diego no pueden entenderse sino como expresiones de grosero racismo que desvirtúan los valores cristianos básicos y distorcionan el sentido indigenista del proceso de canonización"] ("Quinto viaje" 2002, 1). Indeed, the *New York Times* reported that "straight hair, a full beard and an angular face . . . did not seem to reflect an Indian ancestry" (Bruni and Thompson 2002, A6). Once again, powerful attempts to return to the origins of Mexico's national identity and romanticize or revalue them can easily be undone by a few words (as in the case of *Nen, la inútil*), editorial cuts (as in *La otra conquista*), or an inaccurate artist's rendition (as in Juan Diego's likeness).

The works examined in this chapter demonstrate two of the core flaws of mestizophile ideology as a basis for modern Mexican national identity. First, despite efforts to construct mestizo identity and culture (especially syncretism) around positive, even romantic, origins, forging harmony from the violence of the conquest of Mexico is virtually impossible. Second, the silencing of the indigenous—no matter how romantic or heroic their last actions—bespeaks the reality of *mestizaje* as assimilation. As a result, it is understandable that the mestizo as the emblematic Mexican and a modern Mexican national unity based on mestizophile ideology might be fair targets for attack among writers of this era.

How books, films, and cartoons have rewritten popular notions of the Spanish Conquest

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