

## **Exploring Mexican National Identity in Salvador Carrasco's Film, *La otra conquista***

**Carrie C. Chorba**

**Claremont McKenna College**

*Carrie C. Chorba teaches Spanish and Latin American literature in the Department of Modern Languages at Claremont McKenna College. She received her Ph.D. from Brown University and was a Fulbright scholar in Bogotá, Colombia. Her article on La otra conquista is part of a book that will be called Mexico from Mestizo to Multicultural: National Identity and Recent Representations of the Conquest.*

*La otra conquista*, first publicly screened at the Guadalajara Muestra de Cine Mexicano in March 1999,<sup>1</sup> re-creates Mexico's trauma-fraught origins. It explores the spiritual consequences of the sixteenth-century conquest of Mexico by Spain, carefully examining the acceptance of Christianity by Mexico's indigenous populace, who embraced a syncretic version of the Virgin Mary. Screenwriter and director Salvador Carrasco focuses on the conversion to Christianity of an Aztec man, Topiltzin, ten years before the Virgin of Guadalupe's miraculous appearance at Tepeyac. Topiltzin's conversion constitutes a deconstruction of the syncretic nature of Mexican Catholicism.

The Spanish conquistadors destroy the images of Topiltzin's gods and proscribe their worship, but he continues to adore the mother goddess Tonantzin in secret. To do this, Topiltzin must fuse the goddess and the Virgin Mary. For him this is a matter of

<sup>1</sup> In April 1999 the film was distributed in Mexico by Twentieth Century Fox --the first time a U.S. company had done so with a Mexican film--and in April 2000, it was shown in Southern California. This was the highest grossing Mexican dramatic film released in that country and one of the costliest to make, at \$4 million. In February 2005, it will be distributed throughout the United States by Arenas Entertainment.

survival and salvation. Topiltzin's act reflects the attempts of late-twentieth-century Mexican artists to reshape Mexican identity. Carrasco sets out to disprove the belief that the fusion of indigenous peoples and Spaniards (*mestizaje*) as harmonious, but he ends his film on a surprisingly positive note, which, paradoxically, raises vexing questions about the situation of indigenous peoples in Mexico and their spiritual conquest. The questions that emerge from this film also speak to the 2002 canonization of Juan Diego, the indigenous peasant to whom the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared in 1531, a seminal event for both indigenous and national spirituality in Mexico.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when important Mexican novelists, playwrights, cinematographers and cartoonists took part in the collective commemoration of the Quincentennial, some grappled with the thorny issues presented by Mexico's *mestizophile* national identity discourse.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, a number of Mexican artists explored modern Mexican identity by reexamining the sixteenth-century conquest.<sup>3</sup> They returned to this traumatic era to explore the very origins of Mexico's *mestizaje*, the official cornerstone of twentieth-century Mexican national identity, and thereby reexamine the underpinnings of official claims of national unity. Using the conquest, these artists confronted the problematic, conceptual issues associated

<sup>2</sup> *Mestizophile* thought, defined by Agustín Basave Benítez in *México Mestizo*, is "la idea de que el fenómeno del mestizaje--es decir, la mezcla de razas y/o culturas--es un hecho deseable" (13). He also notes that in his *mestizophile* writings, Andrés Molina Enríquez--Mexico's greatest champion of *mestizaje*--says that Mexican *mestizos* "son los mexicanos por antonomasia, los auténticos depositarios de la mexicanidad" (13).

<sup>3</sup> Worth noting among numerous artistic works that rewrite the era of conquest, are the following: Eugenio Aguirre's *Gonzalo Guerrero: Novela histórica* (1980), Homero Aridjis's *Espectáculo del año dos mil* (1981), *1492: Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla* (1985), *Memorias del Nuevo Mundo* (1988), *Gran teatro del fin del mundo* (1989), Carmen Boullosa's *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* (1992), *Duerme* (1994), Carlos Fuentes's *El naranjo, o los círculos del tiempo* (1993), Vicente Leñero's *La noche de Hernán Cortés* (1994) and Victor Hugo Rascón Banda's *La Malinche* (2000).

with being *mestizo* and the process of *mestizaje*.<sup>4</sup> For, while it is said that *mestizos* constitute a ‘cosmic race’ or a ‘race of bronze’ which harmoniously fuses indigenous and Spanish roots, it is also the case that *mestizos* are children of tragedy in whom an unresolved battle continues to be waged.

In terms of Mexico’s religious identity, however, the notion of a harmonious duality still exists because Mexican Catholicism is still hailed as a syncretic blend of beliefs where elements of one religious system are fused with those of another to create hybrid gods and modes of worship. Mother goddesses, like the Spanish Virgin Mary and the Aztec Tonantzin are similarly worshipped as in celebrations of fertility or harvests for example and survive because they encompass the belief systems of both cultures. In *El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude)* [1950], Octavio Paz defines Cortés and Malintzin as the Mexican Adam and Eve, thus making all Mexicans *hijos de la chingada*.<sup>5</sup> However, the opposite can be said about the origins of syncretic<sup>6</sup> religious beliefs in New Spain, or what is today Mexico. In fact, the first decade or so of Christian evangelization (1519-31) is largely downplayed if not overlooked in Mexican culture.

<sup>4</sup> I am mindful that the words *mestizo* and *mestizaje* carry with them burdensome sexual baggage. As Silvia Spitta writes, “for Latin America, *mestizaje*, or miscegenation, often used synonymously with transculturation and/or translation, carries precisely those sexual connotations absent in the latter terms and yet crucial to explain the dynamics of cultural and sexual ‘encounters’” (28). Guillermo Bonfil Batalla agrees, arguing that using the term *mestizaje*, “is an inappropriate way to understand non-biological processes, such as those that occur in the cultures of different groups in contact, within the context of cultural domination” (17). However, I continue to use them here to refer to cultural processes because the artist does so himself.

<sup>5</sup> In this seminal text on Mexican national identity, Paz draws parallels between Cortés and la Malinche and the concepts of the *chingón* and *chingada*. (An extremely strong term in Mexico, *chingar* is commonly used for “to fuck or screw” and *hijo de la chingada* for “son of a bitch” and “motherfucker”.) In *El laberinto*, Paz explains how the rapist, or *chingón*, leaves the victim wounded and used, literally *chingada*. Paz then contends that, beginning with the conquest and with Cortés’s taking his translator, Malintzin, as a lover, Mexicans are all *hijos de la chingada*.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that syncretism is commonly defined as a reconciliation or fusion of beliefs (*American* 1376), whereas *mestizaje* simply connotes the mixing of two races. Therefore, the very definition of syncretism carries with it a value judgement that excises conflict whereas *mestizaje* does not.

Instead, the Guadalupean events of 1531 take center stage in discussions of modern Mexican national identity. The Virgin of Guadalupe's appearance to Juan Diego is commonly believed to have been followed by large-scale, rapid conversions of indigenous peoples. In popular legend and Catholic teachings, the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe and her consequent, widespread acceptance among Creoles, *mestizos*, and indigenous alike is a given that raises none of the problematic issues associated with biological *mestizaje*. These two conquests—military and evangelical—are the beginnings of racial and spiritual mixing in Mexico and are of equal importance when studying modern Mexican national identity. As Roger Bartra says, “los sucesos de Tabasco de 1519 y de Tepeyac en 1531 se transformaron, con el correr de los siglos, en dos poderosos ejes simbólicos que. . .han acabado por ser vistos como las semillas fecundas de la nacionalidad mexicana, depositadas en el vientre fundacional de la patria” (174).

*La otra conquista* shows an idealized beginning to be a trauma and works against the untenable notions of *mestizaje* and syncretism as harmonious blends of races and belief systems. As the director himself says,

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” (Velazco 4).<sup>7</sup>

Carrasco has also stated that: “The truth is: The conquest is not over. And it’s not perfectly clear who is doing the conquering” (“Invisible” 167). The film then attacks the myths of harmonic hybridization surrounding Mexican cultural *mestizaje*, especially in terms of the origins of the syncretic cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Miraculous manifestations and spontaneous conversions are replaced by violent culture clashes, forced abjurations, and profound loss. Topiltzin’s spiritual journey speaks not only to the difficult reality of conversion, but also to the state of modern Mexican national identity at the end of the millennium, especially in terms of its indigenous population.

We first see Topiltzin as a lone survivor, climbing out of the ruins of the *Templo Mayor* after the massacre of 1520. His world is shattered. He calls on his mother goddess, Tonantzin but gets no answer. From the outset, he is the orphaned embodiment of Octavio Paz’s thought, a point to which I will return below. 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, ironically enough, to depict the annihilation of a people.

<sup>7</sup> Here, Carrasco conflates the concepts of *mestizaje* and syncretism, leveling them in the field of cultural mixing. I have noted the downside of this terminological confusion, yet the two continue to be used interchangeably. This quote also demonstrates the pliant nature of Mexico’s *mestizo* identity. By stressing the violent conquest of native Mexicans by invading Spaniards, it can foment nationalistic sentiment and distrust of foreigners, as it did in the decades following the Revolution. Or, by depicting *mestizaje* and its spiritual component, syncretism, as harmonious and balanced processes, Mexico can claim to have integrated its indigenous population when it is evident it has not—a topic treated in greater detail ahead.

Topiltzin's initial reaction to the Spaniards' hostile presence and the incentives for collaboration is to resist with all his strength. He strenuously disagrees with his own brother, a collaborator, who says "We must adapt to survive." Topiltzin simply replies with the words, "I don't adapt. I know who I am!" Later, Topiltzin is captured, made to face a statue of the Virgin Mary, and forced to renounce his culture and his gods while his feet are being burned. Despite this cruelty, Topiltzin escapes death because his half-sister, Tecuichpo, is Hernán Cortés's favorite courtesan. She informs the *conquistador* that Topiltzin is an illegitimate son of Moctezuma, and therefore an heir to the empire. Topiltzin is thus spared but forced to convert to Christianity under the tutelage of the Spanish clergyman, Fray Diego de la Coruña in the monastery of Nuestra Señora de la Luz. Topiltzin continues to resist but is thwarted at every turn. At last, he makes love to Tecuichpo in a desperate attempt to ensure the survival of their lineage. But Cortés learns of the transgression and strangles her, killing both Tecuichpo and the child she was carrying.<sup>8</sup> Now Topiltzin's loss is total. He then begins the ambiguous and complex process of accepting and appropriating the Spanish Virgin Mary while suffering debilitating fevers and hallucinations. Throughout Topiltzin's travails, Fray Diego prods, encourages, and punishes 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 believes his work is done, declaring the scene, "a miracle of how two

<sup>8</sup> The act of strangling Tecuichpo in the film calls to mind the scandal involving Hernán Cortés when he allegedly strangled his first wife, Catalina Xuárez Marcaida, in 1522, soon after she arrived in Mexico and joined him in Coyoacán (Martínez 404-406). He was then able to marry Juana de Zuñiga, daughter of the Conde de Aguilar, thus inserting himself into Spanish nobility. As Hugh Thomas comments in the genealogy entitled "La entrada de Cortés en la nobleza": "Esta genealogía sugiere que, si bien Cortés era hijo de un hidalgo pobre, era rico en relaciones familiares" (686).

different races can be as one through tolerance and love”. The movie ends as the camera pans up and out the window of Topiltzin’s cell on the dawning of a new day.

Topiltzin, aside from embodying the origins of modern Mexican faith, also represents many traditional beliefs about the Mexican national character. His identity is painfully unfixed or unresolved, for he is conquered, victimized, westernized, baptized and re-named “Tomás.” As an illegitimate son of Moctezuma whose mother has been murdered by the Spaniards, he is a bastard and an orphan. He also encompasses many of the positive myths of *lo mexicano* as well: as an heir of Moctezuma, he is therefore a proud representative of the glorious Indian past. He is a stubborn rebel, punished in the same way as Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor who also had his feet burned by Cortés. But, because he is Indian, we realize he does not entirely encompass modern Mexico’s *mestizo* identity. He does, however, embody one aspect of that identity: the indigenous. Therefore, his actions and experiences ultimately will speak to the place of the indigenous in modern Mexican consciousness and how it came to be so.

*La otra conquista*’s tale of culture shock and religious conversion is organized around the idea of the Indians’ total loss. Topiltzin’s physical and spiritual worlds are obliterated in a matter of years. His ultimate appropriation and difficult acceptance of the Virgin Mary can only be understood within the context of these losses. Significantly, Carrasco points to the source of this concept when he says, “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.” (Velazco 4)<sup>9</sup> Paz’s depiction of

<sup>9</sup> Carrasco refers to a quote by Octavio Paz which appears in the introduction to Jacques Lafaye’s groundbreaking work, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness 1531-1815* where he writes, “Tonantzin/Guadalupe fue la respuesta de la imaginación a la situación de orfandad en que dejó a los indios la conquista.” (22). Carrasco’s omission of the word imagination could be attributed to a lapse in memory during an

orphanhood as the emblem of loss appears in the film in the textual prologue, which reads in part: “After two years [of the Spanish penetration into Tenochtitlan] 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.” Of note is the use of the word orphanhood (*orfandad*) where one would expect to read ruin (*ruina*). Here we notice the continuous resurgence and the pervasiveness of Paz’s thought when it comes to interpreting Mexican history and national identity.

Topiltzin’s losses instantly characterize him as an orphan, but a resistant orphan. After the *Templo Mayor* massacre, Topiltzin recovers consciousness, finds he is surrounded by murdered compatriots--among them, his mother--and screams out, “Tonantzin!,” to his mother goddess. The English subtitle translates the name as “Mother!”. The depiction of the Aztecs as orphans supports both Paz’s and Carrasco’s contentions that syncretism and *mestizaje* followed profound loss and victimization, but it also infantilizes them. To define the Indians as orphans is to mark them with the rubric of childhood. To a certain degree, this infantilization undermines the Indians’ capacity for cultural and military resistance, and this contradicts Carrasco’s intention to show that the evangelization of the New World was a difficult, ultimately unfulfilled project.

The film’s early images prepare the audience for the tragic events to follow, but they also demand that we read it from a variety of perspectives. So, Carrasco’s intention is not merely to produce a sad tale about the Mexican past, though he does so artfully and accurately. Carrasco wants to explain the cultural process of syncretism in real, human

interview, but it also serves to underline the blurring of lines between cultural constructions and the reality they constitute for believers. Although Paz posits the Virgin of Guadalupe as a savior, first and foremost, to the indigenous, many foreign scholars’ work demonstrates that the Virgin of Guadalupe and her apparition legends were primarily Creole constructions in the early days of evangelization (late 1500’s and early 1600’s).



terms, and envisions the process of loss and resistance as the cornerstone of indigenous willingness to accept and adore a Spanish Virgin, which in turn becomes the basis of Mexican national identity. Topiltzin represents a lost Mexico and, by cinematically witnessing what Topiltzin experiences, we see the spiritual conquest in real, human terms. Through him, we experience the process that engendered today's Mexico.

For example, we see that, near the end of the film, Topiltzin appears to be resolutely and successfully resisting conversion—until a statue of the Virgin de la Luz arrives at the convent. Soon after, in a metaphoric dramatization of the syncretic process, he experiences strange hallucinatory dreams that presage his spiritual capitulation. In one vision, in which a conquistador threatens to brand him with the sign of the cross, Topiltzin sees the statue of the Virgin and Child being lowered into the chapel by a rope. Suddenly, the Christ Child is jarred from her grasp and falls into Topiltzin's arms, magically metamorphosing into a flesh-and-blood infant. Topiltzin appears to receive Christ from the Virgin and with Him the need to nurture this gift child by becoming Christian. In yet another dream, Topiltzin then sees an Aztec priest about to sacrifice the Virgin as his grandmother whispers to her, "You are the chosen one." The Virgin's face magically becomes that of Tonantzin, and Topiltzin awakes.

This second dream depicts Topiltzin's transition into the realm of syncretism. One goddess's image blends with the other's as their respective differences blur. The image of the Aztec sacrifice of the Virgin implies the cult of the Virgin will, in fact, feed and sustain Tonantzin's faith. The Virgin has, in a way, saved Tonantzin, and Topiltzin awakens Christianity among his people by embracing the Christ Child. The emperor Moctezuma's bloodline ends with Tecuichpo's death, but the Virgin offers 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 the fusion that syncretism connotes, however, *La otra conquista* shows Topiltzin’s conversion to be based on the total obliteration of his past cultural identity. His own culture has been sacrificed just as Christ (and he) will be crucified in the end.<sup>10</sup> **[CC: You said in your e-mail that you’d added a sentence citing Carrasco’s approval to cite script, but that’s not stated in footnote.]**

This pessimistic view of the place of the indigenous in modern Mexican identity and consciousness, embodied in Topiltzin’s problematic conversion and the extinction of his lineage, extends into the religious and spiritual realms, as the film’s ending shows. In the last scene, Topiltzin pulls the statue of the Virgin Mary to him, embracing her and simultaneously impaling on her likeness. This last gesture and Fray Diego’s commentary on it are vexing because they seem to contradict everything said about the film.

Because Carrasco’s intention is to address the issue of modern Mexican national identity, the film’s ending is of paramount importance. The final scene, I believe, refocuses and explains the unresolved nature of Mexican national identity. The sense Mexicans have of their religious beginnings can encompass the violent, the syncretic, and the resistant. Topiltzin brings that all to life. However, the one aspect of Mexican spirituality that Carrasco does not capture in the ending scene is precisely the sense that the conquest is incomplete. This shortcoming is essential because it drastically compromises the film’s ability to communicate Carrasco’s message.

<sup>10</sup> Carrasco has written that Topiltzin’s death at the end of the film is a “Christlike self-sacrifice, which makes him transcend his enemies and become a symbolic figure” (“Invisible” 176). However, as I show ahead, these nuances of Christian redemption are ultimately lost on the audience.

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.” (“Invisible” 167-68). But we are never made aware of Topiltzin’s intentions, just as we cannot verify the redemption the director tries to demonstrate.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the audience is faced with a pessimistic ending which signals—perhaps unintentionally—the absence of the Indigenous in modern Mexican spirituality and identity. If individual Aztecs appropriated the Virgin into their lives in order to regain a lost Tonantzin, they did so to continue worshipping. Topiltzin, on the other hand, *dies* in the process. If he is, then, redeemed in the act of regaining his Mother goddess, then the visual representation of this process makes no sense. His death merely signals his individual annihilation, the disappearance of Aztec culture, and the absence of the indigenous in Mexican spirituality today.

When he finds the two motionless figures, Fray Diego sends for Cortés so that he, too, may witness “a miracle of how two different races can be as one through tolerance and love.” These poetic words inexplicably echo the *mestizophile* ideal of harmonic fusion. To Fray Diego’s western eyes Topiltzin’s death embodies love, tolerance, and fusion, but the visual reality before our eyes reinforces a message of death, cultural loss, and the silencing of the Indigenous. About this ending, Carrasco has also written,

<sup>11</sup> Carrasco’s interpretation of Topiltzin’s actions, however, *is* reflected in a June 14, 1995 version of the script. Topiltzin delivers such lines as, “. . . todo el mal del mundo está contenido dentro del icono de la Gran Señora de piel blanca. Es necesario apoderarse de ella. . . ¿Por qué he de ser yo—quién lo decidió—el que la oculte en mi pecho para absorber su penosa alma y que pierda sus poderes?” (109) and “Venceré o seré derrotado para siempre. . . Moriré con ella y por ella. Nadie antes de mí se había atrevido a arrancar el mal de un solo impulso, desde la raíz. ¿Pero, hay lugar para ambos? No, sólo la muerte” (110). Carrasco says that, as a director, he realized he could express this message cinematographically through Topiltzin’s actions in twenty minutes of dialogue-free scenes. Cinematographically, I

“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 orphanhood” (“Invisible” 268). We wonder how Carrasco can continue to speak about cultural mixing (be it syncretism or *mestizaje*) when the film represents—and he seems to believe it—a cultural annihilation that left the indigenous in a state of “cultural orphanhood.”

Carrasco is aware of the controversial nature of his film and the immense opposition it aroused by assailing the most sacred and essential aspects of Mexican national identity. The conquest of Mexico has been mythicized to provide Mexicans with a tale of good and bad. Carrasco himself contends, “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” (“Invisible” 167). Embarrassing indeed. Carrasco set out to explore the reasons for Mexico’s conflictive identity, and his film reveals the profound loss experienced by the Indians when they were forced to adapt to the new, invading culture and religion. Embarrassingly enough, the film also turns popular myths about unproblematic religious conversions upside down. Even more embarrassing for Mexico in the 1990’s was the question of what had become of the Indians as a result of the conquest. The January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994 revolt in Chiapas was an answer few in Mexico wanted to hear. The Zapatistas not only called on the nation to recognize centuries of exploitation and abuse of indigenous cultures, lands, and rights,

agree that he chose the most effective device. Unfortunately for the film’s message, I believe, these monologues were not part of the final product. Script cited with verbal permission from the director.

but they also demanded an increased role in national politics and more sovereignty in terms of their own local governance.

The same questions about the state of indigenous peoples in Mexico, the ways in which the Virgin of Guadalupe had been accepted in the Americas, and the future role of indigenous groups in Mexican society were also being posed across the Atlantic at the turn of the millenium. Pope John Paul II decreed that Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, the Chichmeca Indian to whom the Virgin first appeared, would be canonized in Mexico City on July 31, 2002.

The elevation of Juan Diego to sainthood—the first indigenous American saint ever—was extremely important. First, it “puso fin—cuando menos para la Iglesia católica—a la polémica sobre la historicidad del vidente de la Virgen de Guadalupe, en 1531” (Roman 1). In addition, in his homily during the three-hour ceremony in the Basílica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, Pope John Paul II took the opportunity to send a strong message to Mexicans about the plight of the indigenous. “¡México necesita a sus indígenas y los indígenas necesitan de México!” (Roman 1) he intoned while also lending the Church’s support to “los indígenas en sus legítimas aspiraciones” (Loaeza 3). Juan Diego, he said, served as a model because,

al acoger el mensaje cristiano, sin renunciar a su origen indígena, Juan Diego fue protagonista de la ‘nueva identidad mexicana’ y que 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 (Roman 1).

One reporter wrote that John Paul II “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 lo indígenas de México” (Loaeza 3) while another believed that “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” (“El Quinto” 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 A6).

The same issues and debates reappear in *La otra conquista*. In its depiction of the trials and tribulations of Topiltzin, *La otra conquista* also seeks to show the historical significance of the indigenous and their contribution to Mexico’s unique form of Catholicism. Carrasco does demonstrate the real costs, in both human and spiritual terms, that a conversion like Juan Diego’s entails. However, in the end, the film’s visual message appears so disconnected from Carrasco’s spoken message that they leave the audience hopelessly befuddled.

The same can be said for Juan Diego’s canonization ceremony. Despite the Pope’s poetic and symbolic words, the visual images presented to the public betrayed what some saw as institutional racism and governmental erasure of the indigenous. Criticism about the paltry number of indigenous people at the ceremony poured in, as evidenced in the headline, “La canonización del indio Juan Diego, sin indígenas” (Mejía). In another article, the same commentator expanded on the headline: “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 eclesíastica” (“Barroquismo” 1). But the most troubling observation concerned the painting of Juan Diego that was presented to the Pope for canonization. One outraged reporter wrote:

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” (El Quinto” 1).

Indeed, the *New York Times* reported that the “straight hair, a full beard and an angular face . . . did not seem to reflect an Indian ancestry” (Bruni A6). Once again, powerful attempts to return to the origins of Mexico’s national identity and revise or reconsider them can easily be undone by a few words, a few editorial cuts (as in the case of *La otra conquista*), or an inaccurate artist’s rendition (as in the case of Juan Diego’s likeness).

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