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Sacred Vernacular, Nativizing Revelations

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Ko e koloa ‘a e Tongá, ko e fakamālō

(Tongan proverb: “multi-plying thanks, is the fortune of Tongans”)

Mālō faufaua (multi-plied appreciations and acknowledgments) to Jean-Pierre Ruiz for the gifts of, and in, Revelation in the Vernacular (Orbis, 2021). And special mālō (in the Tongan sense of gratitude, rather than the Spanish sense of bad) to Ruiz for not writing another book on the biblical book of Revelation, but on real revelations in caves on Mona Island, from the natives of Amazonia, and in debates and written texts under the shadows of western empires and their powerful tools—pens and keyboards. There are of course good and bad revelations (but who decides?), in scriptures as well as in papal bulls, in the enclaves of Rome, in the councils of churches worldwide, in the banks of rivers, and in homes and streets everywhere. Mālō, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, for gifting readers with examples of good and bad revelations, as well as some ugly and nasty ones.

Ruiz uses the term “retrieval” to describe his work, and in my head i hear many historians and postcolonial critics cheering—for he has “raided the archives” and brought some of the “hidden transcripts” to our attention. I too cheer for Jean-Pierre, and i invite and encourage Catholic and Latinx scholars, as well as scholars and students of colonization and coloniality, everywhere, to engage with this very engaging work.

I am a native pastor from Tonga (in Pasifika), and i will engage with Jean-Pierre’s work in our native ways. Informally. reStoryingly. Poetically. Inter- and trans-sectioning stuff
here and there. Ruiz and his colleagues do theology *latinamente*; i do my stuff in native- and island-styles.

On that note, i confess that this engagement testifies to my commitment to pick at some academic bones. I will pick on three particular bones in this native engagement: translation, vernacular, and native scriptures. And my picking at those bones is inspired by lines and thoughts that come through strongly in Ruiz’s text. In other words, this native engagement will make more sense for readers who have read Ruiz’s text. *Mālō* (in both Tongan and Spanish senses).

**Translation**

In the beginning was the word, asserts John 1:1

and that word gave birth to many more words

and as those words crossed borders and waters

  from cultures to cultures

  for every culture is already polycultural

  from cities to slums and ghettos

those words require translations

  from tongue to ear

  from ear to hands and feet

  to tongue again, and again

and translators require trust

  from readers

  who are stuck in the world of written words

Translation traps us in

in the world of written words

and translators give us the impression
that only written words matter

Those written words crossed into Mona Island and the Americas
they crossed upon the lips and faces of westerners
they entered caves and invaded Indigenous communities
they came in books and tongues that were nonsense to the locals
whose blood spilled because translators failed them

The intersection of translation, incarnation, and revelation in Ruiz’s book teaches me that the word at the beginning, the original text, is not as important as the words that come at the end, the revealed words, the revelation, the manifestation. *Translators* are obsessed with the word at the beginning, but *translations* unavoidably produce more words. Translations work because they produce more words, more words, excess of words.

The critics of Fray Luis and the supporters of those European idiots who threw the Amazonian carvings into the river, are examples of people who are stuck in the word at the beginning. They need to be taught, so that they may learn, that it is normal for translations to produce more words, and that excess of words is expected.

Words of revelation cross into villages, rivers, and forests across the seas
they come in books, and require that vernacular languages receive them

they require
vernacular languages
to give up their home and homing
for them
bibles consequently appeared in the vernacular languages
and the vernacular languages, which used to be oral
were formalized into scripts and grammars
books appeared and orality was wounded

those books and bibles were brought to convert our people

and they also converted our tongues

our minds

our hearts

put sharply, translations failed our vernacular tongues

but not all failed, and not all words were nonsense

some of those words made revelations possible

and so, the word that was at the beginning,

the word that was with God,

the word that was God, according to John 1:1

that word, is born again in translations

John’s word was at the beginning

but translation is at the end

translation is required by revelation

and revelation is impossible without the vernacular

**Vernacular**

In the beginning was the word, asserts John 1:1

In the beginning was the Sense, asserts Goethe

In the beginning was the Power, Goethe adds

In the beginning was the Deed, Goethe concludes

With due respect and apologies

i can’t say anything about “the beginning”

“the beginning” is not my obsession
but i can say something about “before” the word
before the Sense, before the Power, before the Deed

the vernacular was
before the author of John and Goethe with their assertions

the vernacular was
before incarnation, the vernacular was
before revelation, the vernacular was
before the seeds of the word, the vernacular was

“before” is such a confluencing word, for it functions in both time and space
before Mona Island, the Americas, Tiber, and the Amazon,
before Popes and Councils …
before all of them, in time and space

the vernacular was
before us, here and now, where you are

the vernacular was

our challenge therefore, is to embrace the vernacular in its own terms
to embrace the vernacular, for the sake of the vernacular
in other words, to put ourselves

before the vernacular

and to understand that the vernacular is more than a language system
for a language gives voice to (poly)cultures

to memories, to (be)longings, and to much more

I currently live with my family, and a few friends (yes, i have friends), in the cluster of islands now known as Australia, home to the world’s oldest civilizationS–i stress the plural, because there are many Indigenous Australian countries, nations, cultures, ways,
bodies, and languages. Indigenous Australians, as a people of diverse wisdoms and overlapping heritages, have been around for over 60,000 years. Some say that they have only been around for 40,000 years. And that too is a big number, in the context of human evolutions.

Recently, we church and academic folk have come to accept that divine energies—or ‘elohim, in biblical terms—were in the land of the Indigenous Australians before the Christian invasions. In fact, divine energies were present in the land of the Indigenous Australians before Christianity was conceived.

Before the Christian God was revealed in Jesus Christ,

divine Indigenous energies were present among Indigenous Australians

in the vernacular

Before the Christian God was revealed in John’s logos,

divine Indigenous energies were present in the vernacular

and in the imaginations and wisdoms of Indigenous Australians

The problem, however, is that we church and academic folk in the cluster of islands now known as Australia think of the divine Indigenous energies with our Christian God lenses. Our Christian senses (à la Goethe) of God personalize and individualize the divine Indigenous energies of Indigenous Australians. We do the same with the divine Indigenous energies of other native peoples. I saw this also in the three graffiti left in Cave 18, discussed by Ruiz, and in the council documents in which the sons of Christian soldiers responded to Indigenous wisdom—through their Christian God values. They did not pay proper respect to the Indigenous divine energies in the Amazon and the Americas, prior to when the Christian soldiers came barging in.
Spivak once asked if the subaltern can speak. The answer is simple: YES, they can speak. The problem is that we want them to speak in our language, instead of us learning their language. In other words, we need to put ourselves before their vernacular.

In this line of thinking, the vernacular is not the seed of the word rather, the word is the seed of the vernacular if we have the humility to embrace the vernacular, for its own sake we will realize that even the word that was at the beginning according to John 1:1

is a seed of the vernacular

**Native Scriptures**

I would have loved to see some pictures in *Revelation in the Vernacular* this is not only because visual images are spokes in the wheels of orality but because Ruiz was putting words to what i call native scriptures and in the process he draws readers to the traps of the world of written words

Thanks to the google gods,
i found images that i want to share with readers

in this modern cave (qua an article for a journal)
i invite engagement around two images from Mona Island¹

and one from the Amazon

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This is a sacred text, a native scripture, a sacred text
in this sacred text, in my native Pasifika eyes, we have a woman
who stands to tell something (stories, instructions) to an audience
who could be children … tomorrow people … on her right
to her left side, is maybe an animal
or a male elder, who sits to give her company
or maybe that figure represents the ancestors

before whom she stands

in our side of the big sea, no one stands alone
one stands in the company of whanau (pronounced “fānau”), relations

before whom she stands
this woman stands, before others
as well as before the sun,
which peeks out behind her
as in the image on the cover of Ruiz’s book
—an original painting by Darién Farel Irizarry titled “Sol Revelado”—
in which the sun figures prominently
this cave art is a native scripture
that invites me to raid the archive in the cave
to get a sense of what stories she gifted her audience
more work is needed on this native scripture
Ruiz credits Irizarry’s “Sol Revelado” for
“so magnificently express[ing] what the words of this book struggle mightily to communicate” (p. xiv)
Sol translates as sun, a star, and divine energy
and Revelado is the gist of Ruiz’s book—revelation
and so, in my native mind
before the word reached the beginning
it needed Sol to enable its revealing
This second sacred text makes me think of rituals

what Indigenous Australians call ceremonies

and i wonder, were they dancing in celebration of success?

dancing in preparation for tasks at hand?

dancing as they engaged in the tasks at hand?

dancing in the day or in the night?

dancing in shared grief and trauma?

dancing to remember and to anticipate?

natives dance for many reasons

and the reason behind this sacred text

is most likely unveiled in the images around it
or were they playing a game
or working in the field, or in the river
options are many, which is a characteristic of native scriptures

one word births many words,

one text births many senses,

one artwork has many potentials for Revelado

*Mother with child*

Image credit: *Catholic News Agency*

This third sacred text is of one of the carvings from the Amazon
which were taken from the Church at Transpontina
that Pope Francis mistook as the pachamama statues
as Ruiz explained in the book\(^2\)

When i found this image on the internet, i immediately saw

that this is not just a statue

but a statue of a woman

an Indigenous woman

a native woman

a pregnant woman

a woman in whose womb is

a logos waiting

to be birthed, into many words

a logos waiting

to come into the world of revelation

a logos looking

for the rays of Revelado

\textbf{Mālo}

From the reStorying woman to the dancing natives to the pregnant woman

i drew attention to sacred texts

but texts are imposed upon surfaces, upon contexts

and cave arts are drawn upon rocks that curve and crack

and that the landscape is also a text

a womb that awaits birthing

a story that awaits telling

I offer this excess of words with much appreciation
for native scriptures can make our imprisonment in the world of written words
more bearable with Senses, Powers, and Deeds

thank you, Jean-Pierre

for the revelations that you have sparked in my native mind

May your readers give space for revelations
to access their lips and hearts
as well

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