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***Encuentros in the Cave: Aprovechar(se) Vernacular Revelations***

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While in the midst of reading Jean-Pierre Ruiz's *Revelation in the Vernacular*, I found myself struggling to frame what this book was about. Reading it was a struggle for all of the right reasons and in the best way possible! *Revelation in the Vernacular* is a historical study that takes seriously the coordinates of "then" and "now." It is a systematic liberation theology that finds freedom in what could have all too easily been a stifling form. And, at least for me, it manages to dizzy its reader with provocative questions, dazzle with thick description, and orient with grounded theory. It is the kind of map that gives glimpses into a diverse set of *vistas y momentos* while also inviting readers to consider the profundity of the phrase, "*Estás aquí*," especially in the midst of *encuentro*. *Revelation in the Vernacular* embodies everything I expected from a book in a series called "Disruptive Cartographers" and so much more, as it reminded me of the analytical dynamism of "doing theology *latinamente*."

I say "reminding" because it helped me recall that the first academic journal that gave me a chance to pursue my biblical studies interests was *Apuntes: Reflexiones Teológicas Desde el Contexto Hispano-Latino*, founded by Justo Gonzalez and housed at one of my alma maters, the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. My project was to present an interpretation of the Markan parable of the sower as informed by the history and archaeology of Early Roman Galilee and insights from my ethnographic work in a Yucatec Maya agricultural community. The piece eventually was called "*Con los Ojos de los Maya: Toward an Anthropological Hermeneutic*." While I trust that everyone has better things to do than to go

search for the rough and wanting work of a master's student, I mention it because "doing theology *latinamente*" allowed me to see a refraction of myself and the work I might be able to produce around the Bible. Specifically, I am thinking of its "call[ing of] others," as Michelle Gonzales puts it, to be accountable for the manner in which one's socio-political, cultural, and economic background shapes and limits one's theology.<sup>1</sup>

I was fortunate to have allies who helped me acquire grant funding to carry out research in Israel-Palestine and Yucatán. There were a few faculty—tenured as well as adjunct instructors—who helped me work around the colonial canon with off-the-books classes or copies of Ernesto Cardenal's *El Evangelio en Solentiname*.<sup>2</sup> And when, at my first annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, the very social-scientific biblical scholars who I had assumed would find my work interesting said that the Maya *milperos* had nothing to do with the farmers of Early Roman Galilee, *Apuntes* said that my thesis was well worth further reflection.

Because I identify and am identified with other communities, I would not count my work a reflection of "doing theology *latinamente*." But *Apuntes* offered me a refraction through which I would find my own path, whether through my online scholarly platform, *Sowing the Seed: Fruitful Conversations on Religion, Culture, and Teaching*,<sup>3</sup> or my first book, *Identifying Roots: Alex Haley and the Anthropology of Scriptures*.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Ruiz did not have to prove to me the potential of seeds, words, and encounters, nor did he need to convince me that doing

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Gonzales, "Latino/a Theology: Doing Theology *Latinamente*," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41:1 (2002), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://sowingtheseed.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Richard W. Newton, Jr. *Identifying Roots: Alex Haley and the Anthropology of Scriptures* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2020).

theology *latinamente* was something worthy of the widest scholarly attention. Thus I say that this volume has me “refracting” once again on some prior queries pertaining to the anthropology of scriptures and the social-politics of revelation.

When speaking of refraction, I am recalling a critical agenda laid out by Vincent L. Wimbush regarding the study of the peoples, places, psychologies, politics, and phenomena we associate with scriptures. It is the critical study of scriptures as reflection and extension of the painful efforts to become a people, to realize ultimate goals that are sighed for, and to gain power. It would be about how people manipulate their own and others’ imaginations and are manipulated by the same, about why and how they project beyond themselves “realities” that they make up, and about how they make ongoing creative attempts to “live subjunctively” in relation to that which is made up.<sup>5</sup>

In my own work, I have come to think of scriptures in terms of “the cultural texts that people read but that also seem to read them back.”<sup>6</sup> And thus were we to think about scriptures as roots, we would be talking not only talking about the vocabulary for cultural-orienting power of texts, but about the grammar of meaning-making. Here I am most recently informed by the work of the Institute for Signifying Scriptures, the Society for Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts, and the international social theory collective known as Culture on the Edge.

What I hope my work has offered is a framework for parsing the social work people engage in regarding cultural texts—the “uprooting,” liminal “routing,” and “taking root” with which we use to locate ourselves and others.<sup>7</sup> Having read Ruiz’s work, I now better realize that

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<sup>5</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, preface, in Vincent L. Wimbush, ed. *Refractions of the Scriptural: Critical Orientation as Transgression* (New York: Routledge, 2016), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Newton, *Identifying Roots*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Newton, *Identifying Roots*, 12-15.

what I wanted to redescribe are the facets of *encuentro* and the terms and conditions by which we might refract on the *vistas*, *momentos*, and maps by which we come to understand that statement, “*Estás aquí*,” with all of its socio-political declensions.

For so long, Western intellectual tradition has signified Plato’s allegory of the cave as a way to work out its epistemology. Its central thesis was a coming-to-terms with the difference between shadow forms and illumined ideals, notions picked up by Aristotle, Ignatian spirituality, and, as Ruiz points out, the Jesuit polymath José de Acosta. How intriguing it is to consider what might happen were our epistemology informed by the hermeneutical circle kindled in Cave 18 on Mona Island, *un encuentro* of Taíno vernacular revelation and Spanish Catholic missions so powerful that even someone like Fray Luis de León, as far away as the hallowed halls of Salamanca, might rethink where he is. Just the idea of *encuentro* positioned Fray Luis to analogize the Christianization of Rome to Spain’s exploits in the New World—and Fray Luis had only visited this New World through de Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*. But were Fray Luis to somehow stand in the material form on Mona Island, would he realize that he is only here because he descends from people like the Taíno? Would he know that he was part of a people who learned what it meant to be uprooted? Would he gain the psycho-social capacity to be privy to such a revelation? I don’t know...

Ruiz’s *Revelation in Vernacular* also has me thinking anew about revelation—not so much as a textual genre (*à la* apocalypse) but as a political strategy or social gambit. Wilfred Cantwell Smith gestures at this with his discussion of “scripture” as both a “human propensity” and a “potentiality.”<sup>8</sup> But Ruiz’s fourth chapter retrospectively choreo-graphs the myriad dances that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and *Latinidad* have made around the Word. Ruiz

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<sup>8</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 237.

takes the reports of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) as archive. He sketches the moves made by the Catholic Church to rationalize how “seeds of [God’s] word” have increasingly been revealed to have been planted in the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean prior to evangelization. In this we see scripturalizing as being the purview not only of the colonizer but also of subaltern agents.

Yes, the letter and spirit of the law have killed in the Americas, and they have also given life in *Latinidad*. I read Ruiz as challenging us to uncover how the mystery of the sacrament is that the Word made flesh follows the word accented, not the other way around. His reading of the colonial and Indigenous exegetes at the Mona Island cave reveal the shortcomings of originist discourses that would have us forget that the social and theological history of the gospel has never been separable from the domestic encounter of foreign kingdoms. We cannot overcome “the stench of manipulation and power, as well as social asymmetries” that are part and parcel of *la realidad de lo cotidiano*, and thus, we should join Orlando O. Espín in thinking about how to live amidst this reality.<sup>9</sup> To me, Ruiz suggests revelation as a way forward and very much the purview of the vernacular, the Indigenous, the enslaved, the colonized, and others on the far side of histories and maps. For we are all today products of such political encounters.

A bourgeois approach to decolonization might have us declare, “We cannot forget this.” And yet we know some forget this all too easily, and others could not even if they tried. This is what I find so powerful about the interventions of Lynn R. Huber’s *Thinking and Seeing Women in Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Shannell T. Smith’s *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Suspicion*

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<sup>9</sup> Orlando O. Espín, “Theologizing *Latinamente: Had Anselm Known Us!*” *Anglican Theological Review* 101:4 (2019), 590. For foundational discussion of *lo cotidiano*, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Journal of the Hispanic Theological Institute* 10:1 (2002), 5-17.

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), the late Lynn St. Claire Darden's *Scripturalizing Revelation* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), Jacqueline Hidalgo's *Revelation in Aztlán* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Lloyd Barba's *Sowing the Sacred: Mexican Pentecostal Farmworkers in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), and Ekaputra Tupamahu's *Contesting Languages: Heteroglossia and the Politics of Language in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). I think that this diverse set of works shares with Ruiz a common thread about the germination of vernaculars and the cultural politics of revelation.

There are many lessons one can draw from Ruiz's study. I cannot recommend more highly that this book be taken up across subfields on account of the prismatic refractions that extend from its thesis. Our roundtable is but a glimpse of the possibilities. For instance, as I was reading, I became aware of how often I at least imagine revelation in terms of a *telos* rather than a liminal striving, a projected root rather than an in-process routing. I suspect that the medium and the message make this especially easy. But Ruiz's nuanced readings of Pope Francis and the Pachamama controversy bring due attention to the push and pull of revelation.

My final thought is a question about revelation in the spirit of the shadow play in Cave 18 on Mona Island. To what extent might revelation be thought of as an example of *aprovechar/aprovecharse*? Having lived in Texas and California, I have had a number of *encuentros* with forms of this term. As I understand it, *aprovechar* means something like "to take advantage of," as in "make the most of." *Aprovecharse*, on the other hand refers to being taken advantage of, with a semantic range that extends as far as abuse. (By all means, correct me if I am wrong.)

I raise this because it seems to me that the very idea of revelation in the vernacular underscores that revelation takes place on the fine line between making the most of an *encuentro*

and taking advantage of *los encontrados*. And the nature, history, and morality of drawing that line are far more complicated than José de Acosta knew in his time—though as students of Ruiz, I think we may better learn how to trace them.