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Christopher B. Swift

CUNY New York City College of Technology

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The Sacred Performative: *Holy Wednesday* and Colonial Ritual/Theatre

by
Christopher Swift

Holy Wednesday is a late sixteenth century adaptation of a Spanish *auto sacramental* written in alphabetized Nahuatl, the predominant pre-Columbian language spoken on the High Central Plateau of Mexico. The author remains unknown, however he was likely a Nahua amanuensis educated by Franciscans at *Colegio de Santa Cruz* in Tlatelolco. Religious drama was one of the important evangelizing tools of the Catholic brotherhoods in colonial Mexico and although a record of performance of *Holy Wednesday* does not exist, this dramatic depiction of the final meeting of Christ and Mary prior to the crucifixion was almost certainly performed as part of Holy Week celebrations.¹ This paper builds on the scholarship of Louise Burkhart by placing the play-text more specifically in performance and performative contexts.

In addition to theatrical contexts and material performance conditions, this paper reads *Holy Wednesday* as it performs in wider social and linguistic frames and as a subject of two critical modes: transculturation and performativity. From Fernando Ortiz, transculturation is the complex process of change that occurs when two or more cultures come into contact. The first stage of transculturation is the loss or uprooting of one culture through conquest and oppression (deculturation) and the second is the creation of an entirely new culture (neoculturation) as a result of adjustment, self-assertion, and integration.² Likely staged on a church patio by the Franciscans with Nahua boy actors, *Holy Wednesday* intermingles European and Nahua collaborators, audiences, languages, and religious tropes while documenting the uprooting of pre-Columbian culture and development of an entirely new ritual performance form differing from both parent cultures in fundamental ways. I favor a transculturative reading of the play operating within the manifold setting of colonial theatre and ritual rather than a reading that interprets cultural differences or hidden transcripts. Certainly oppositional

¹ Louise M. Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahua Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 6.

² Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995)

alignments of loss, resistance, and subversion are part of the colonial past; however, adhering strictly to a historical narrative that claims a segmentation of the colonized culture only serves to reaffirm metropolitan hegemony. As Pratt points out, "the relations of conquered / conqueror, invader / invadee, past hegemony / present hegemony become the medium in which and out of which culture, language, society and consciousness get constructed."³ A more complex historical view might be accomplished by scrutinizing fields of discursive relations of power where heterogeneous, transculturated forms are constructed in the colonial arena.

In order to arrive at such a reading I apply toolkits from speech act theory, mapping a theoretical genealogy from J.L. Austin to Jacques Derrida and from Pierre Bourdieu to Judith Butler, in order to interrogate ways in which *Holy Wednesday* behaves performatively among religious, theatrical, and colonial fields and matrices. Again, a definition is in order since the word performativity is now so widely (mis)used its descriptive value is imperiled. Austin defines performative enunciations as expressions whose function is not to inform or describe but to accomplish an *act*, to produce the very event that the words designate (the "I do" in a marriage ceremony has become the prototypical example). Performative utterances cannot be logically true or false, but only successful or unsuccessful – and in the first moments of *Holy Wednesday*, Christ speaks performatively about his imminent crucifixion:

But the sacred words that lie written in the sacred book, which is quite strong with sacred words, they are really the truth. And this: oh my precious mother, I will cause them to come true.⁴

In other words, Christ's death on the cross is the sacramental fulfillment of prophetic speech acts, and if there were any doubt about the veracity of Catholic discourse (as there likely was among the indigenous population in Mexico at the time), Christ establishes an agentive, performative function for sacred words with the realization of a promise. With his crucifixion, words and the action enter into a self-confirming circle of social magic. In the sense that ritual performs the discursive truths and teleologies of religion, sacred drama is a good examples of –

³ Mary Louise Pratt, "Transculturation and Autoethnography: Peru, 1615/1980," in *Colonial Discourse, Postcolonial Theory*, Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) 26.

⁴ *Holy Wednesday*, stanza 15, lines 8-13 (stanza and line numbers of *Beacon of our Salvation* are indicated here according to the corresponding translated/extrapolated sections of *Holy Wednesday*). Translation by Burkhart.

to quote Butler – "a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."⁵ It is in the liminal space of sacred theatre where customary and theatrical practices overlap, *performance* and *performativity* co-exist, albeit ambivalently, and speech acts have the capacity for potentially unlimited citationality.

Precolonial Nahua ceremonial tradition was infused with metaphorical allusions and objects of the natural world, and although flowers, quetzal feathers, and human hearts all stood for something other than themselves in ritual enactments, they also existed as perpetually transformational selves, vacillating between the sacred and mundane. Nahua ritual celebration is uncomfortable with European performance concepts like catharsis, mimesis, and representation – to say the least. Rather, Nahua rituals, sacrifices, and performances of the *xochi-cuicatl* (flower-song) enacted a present-ness that exceeded the merely symbolic and the human body was provided direct access to the transcendent.⁶ When Christianity was imposed on the Nahua, Christian metaphors for holiness involving light, gardens, flowers, and jewels, provided a doorway through which the diphastic, flowery complex of Nahua belief became invested in colonial Christianity. It is through this particular frame of surviving Nahua sacred allusions in the late sixteenth century that we can locate what Derrida called parasitic citationality.

In his deconstruction of Austin, Derrida argued that all utterances are susceptible to parasitic contexts and it is *because of* – rather than *despite* – corrosive contexts and miscarried communication that language itself is possible.⁷ A Derridian reading of *Holy Wednesday* reveals sustaining Nahua belief systems on the colonial stage enacting parasitic structures among Christian exemplum, enabling cross-cultural citationality despite the semiotic force of European biblical doctrine. Two citations of Nahua cosmology burst at the seams of the text.

...as it was with a tree that Adam and Eve erred, likewise it must be with a tree that I die.⁸

⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits Of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

⁶ Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 220-221.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 9-17.

⁸ *Holy Wednesday* 29, 23-24.

Christian theology in the medieval period commonly prefigured the cross on Golgotha with the Tree of Life in Genesis. However, this passage calls forth the tree of *knowledge*, the site of Adam and Eve's fall from grace. The specific Nahuatl word used here, curiously, means a *tree of life* despite the reference to a tree where "Adam and Eve erred" and overtly allocates to the tree image a pre-Columbian understanding of sacred materiality and natural significance at the center of the cosmos. The Nahua amanuensis appears to have amalgamated antithetical Christian originary concepts – knowledge and life – into the single image of a Nahua tree able to contain both doctrinal representations. Original sin, a distinctly European metaphysical concept, is reconceptualized to mirror the sacrificial act of Christ: both acts offer life through the regenerative process of death. Like medieval prefiguration, the Nahuatl text links the Old and New Testaments by refashioning the transgressive act in the garden to include mortal and life-affirming meanings, enacting on the Nahua spectator a frame of reference with the capacity for alternative readings. Whether accidental or purposeful on the part of the Nahua adapter of the Spanish *auto*, this could well have resonated with Nahua audiences.⁹

Likewise, later in the play when Mary addresses her son as "my life, my existence, my jewel, my quetzal plume,"¹⁰ an entire network of Nahua spiritual citations unfolds within the Christian narrative, creating new meaningful entryways. The turquoise-colored feather of the quetzal was highly prized by the Mexica and strongly suggested the seen and unseen world of the Nahua gods. Mary's endearment to her son – coming at the last moments of the play in a section not found in *Beacon of our Salvation* (the Spanish *auto* on which *Holy Wednesday* was based) – may have instigated powerful religious memories. Or, alternatively, memory may have enjoined with signification on the Christian stage, transfiguring Christ as the new quetzal. Burkhart has argued for a strong correspondence between the Nahua god Quetzalcoatl and Christ, supported by thematic similarities of embodiments and ascension.¹¹ If this was indeed the case, the Nahua playwright saw an opportunity in introducing quetzal into *Holy Wednesday* in order to offer a spiritual bridge between Nahua belief and Christianity. But, for a number of

⁹ Burkhart 192.

¹⁰ *Holy Wednesday* 100, 21-22.

¹¹ Burkhart 95.

reasons, Aztec/Christian hybridization may not have been so effortless. The mention of the quetzal plume also serves to remind the audience of their own historical situation as colonial subjects. In this perceptual context, the citation becomes an autoethnographic expression, a device of counter-eradication and counter-objectification.¹² Offering the quetzal plume back to colonial power as a self-identifying principal destabilizes European Christian dogma, and refocuses preconquest Nahua belief through a lens of nostalgia. As an embodied, collective act witnessed in public, ritual may have been the ideal vehicle for indigenous, ethnic self-realization that coalesced around a non-Hispanic identity.

Ceremonial elements of song, dance, and pre-Colombian religiosity entered into performances of the Christian sacraments by various means: colonial evangelizers marketed Christianity to the Nahua in the guise of old traditions, Nahua celebrants conducted autoethnographic expressions, and the Nahua faithful reveled in holy observance through a window from the past. All of these groups read performance through Derridian parasitic frames. In order to remain meaningful across the diverse cultural systems operating in New Spain, colonial Christianity *depended* on failures of language and speech acts for its very survival.

I now turn to Bourdieu, social magic, and the authorization of performative utterances. In his contribution to speech act criticism, Bourdieu uses religious terminology to imbue non-ecclesiastic social processes with a feel for the sacred. Ritual conditions within a field are a combination of a systematic set of interdependent conditions, sacraments that undergird the success of a performative act. Social, performative magic is dependent on the validation of these systems and is only fully realized when a religious official acts as a kind of authorized medium between the group and performative speech act.¹³ In late sixteenth-century Tlatelolco, these authorities proliferated. Beyond the most apparent powers of the Spanish viceroyalty, in the early colonial period the Nahua hereditary nobility were given exclusive privileges by the

¹² "...autoethnographic expression suggests a particular kind of cultural self-consciousness, an awareness of one's life-ways or customs as *they have been singled out by the metropolis*, be it for objectification in knowledge, for suppression or for extermination. Autoethnography selectively appropriates some tools of objectification both to counter eradication ('we are still here despite your / their efforts') and to counter objectification ('we are not as you / they see us')." Pratt 44. Emphasis Pratt's.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, trans. John B. Thompson, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991) 111-116.

Spanish to participate as "principal actors" in Christian rites, processions, and religious plays. Thus, intersecting grids of religious and political jurisdictional powers were conferred along hierarchized lines among the Mexica during public ceremonies. On another level, the bodies and voices of the Nahuatl boy actors dictated their own reign of interpretive power over the text through performance choices and inclusion of elaborately coded Nahuatl somatic and aural signifiers that may have remained unrecognizable to Spanish authorities.

Authorization of speech acts in *Holy Wednesday* was also negotiated in fields of linguistic play. *Holy Wednesday* was written in the colonial government-sanctioned dialect of *pillahtolli*, the classical speech of Aztec royalty. The Nahuatl "common people," who spoke a vernacular form of Nahuatl, were restricted from access to colonial administrative and ecclesiastic institutions as precolonial social structures based on linguistic, ethnic, and hereditary differences persisted in the sixteenth century.¹⁴ Therefore, the use of *pillahtolli* in *Holy Wednesday* would have implicated performance of the play in pre-Columbian fields of power that carried across the conquest divide – from one administrative power to another. A layer of authorization can also be located textually: the co-authors of *Holy Wednesday* (the unknown Nahuatl playwright-adaptor and the Franciscan who presumably oversaw the translation project) both act as authorized mediums between the performative text and reader-audience. Even the characters *within* the dramatic narrative take positions: Mary is frequently addressed with the indigenous title of nobility – *cihuapilli* – connoting a complex set of authoritative intersections of Nahuatl class with Christian theological categories.

Competing beacons of power sought dispensation of singular meanings and acts in *Holy Wednesday* and through these contestations the singularity of authorization miscarried or, more accurately, *successfully* misrepresented. In other words, performative, ideological effectuation of religious and official narratives in the performance of *Holy Wednesday* were legitimized by the polysemy of language, and these multiplicities of meanings opened the door for social complicity.

¹⁴ James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992) 115-116.

[T]he language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs, without the help of the social mechanisms capable of producing this complicity, based on misrecognition, which is the basis of all authority.¹⁵

Considering complicity and misrecognition from the point of view of the spectator of a performance allows us to look at the speech act from an entirely new point of view, especially relevant for ritual performance where the spectator assumes a creative and constative role in the enactment. As we have seen in the complex of competing authorities surrounding the text of *Holy Wednesday*, the potential for misrecognition abounds when the social positions of the players in the field of religious performance are continually renegotiated and realigned. As Butler suggests, the success of performative speech acts is "always and only provisional" since agency is derived only if the "act is itself a ritualized practice," and "to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized."¹⁶ In performing a heterogeneity of accumulating and dissimulating citations, *Holy Wednesday* represents, ritualizes, and theatricalizes its own effectiveness under the disguise of multiple, misrecognizable signs.

These ambivalences re-authorized, I would argue, the Nahua religious celebrants themselves in their fundamental, participatory role in the sacralization of Holy Week festivities. As much as *Holy Wednesday* was embedded in a week-long, efficacious ritual celebration, all participants – indigenous and criollo celebrants, Franciscans, and Nahua performers – can be said to be involved in performative acts of empowerment and transformation through the misrecognizing of images and linguistic signs. The transformational agency conferred on the multitude of participants, seen as a whole, was located in the effective, transculturative Nahuazation of Christianity (or Christianization of Nahua practice).

A principle construct of religious embodiment in precolonial Mexico was the Nahua concept of *ixiplatl*, a flexible spiritual category that allowed for, among other things, manifestations of gods, god impersonators, sacrificial victims dressed as gods, beggars wearing the flayed skins of captives, wooden figures, and priests. One requirement of the *ixiplatl* was

¹⁵ Bourdieu 113.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, "Burning Acts: Injurious Speech," in *Performance and Performativity*, Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995) 205.

that it be temporary and constructed for the occasion, made and unmade during the course of the action. *Ixiplatl* is the space where spiritual being and physical being are fully integrated, much like the Catholic idea of Eucharistic transubstantiation where the man-made wafer becomes the body of Christ itself through ceremonial consecration – no longer behaving representationally or metaphorically. In this sense, Mary's appeal to her son in the passage below speaks as much to her unbearable emotional suffering as to a precolonial godly manifestation demanding maternal fealty by way of *ixiplatl*.

Oh, how my heart is torn open to its very bottom!
It as if you plunged a knife into it
by answering me in this way,
you who are truly God and sovereign...
Do tell me.
Why do you afflict my spirit, my soul,
I who am your mother in the fleshy sense?¹⁷

The passage clearly links the physical ("my heart is torn open...as if you plunged a knife into it") with the spiritual ("why do you afflict my spirit, my soul") and Mary in her "fleshy sense" calls for her son to regard her precolonial embodiment where spirit and flesh are one. If we extend this reading, Christ's eventual denial of Mary in her pre-Christian embodiment energizes the Christian narrative of *Holy Wednesday* with contemporaneous meanings of memory, loss, and transformation for the Nahua celebrants as the old faith is symbolically eradicated and the new faith realized in the moment of Christ's sacrifice, in spite of his mother's pleas. In the production of speech acts, the bodies of performers and spectators created a scene where "the body is the blindspot of speech...which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said."¹⁸

Butler argues that success in performative acts depends on the accumulating "force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practice."¹⁹ This force of authority in the speech act is always extenuated, or problematized, by the excesses of somatic, erotic, multiply-gendered, and potentially chaotic signification. This is especially true

¹⁷ *Holy Wednesday* 16, 1-9.

¹⁸ Butler, "Burning Acts: Injurious Speech" 11.

¹⁹ Butler, "Burning Acts: Injurious Speech," 205.

of the ritual Aztec performances of the temporary, unstable *ixiplatl*, although in this case, it can be said that the problematization is purposeful; the breach of social norms is what enables transformative experience. Of course, Butler would argue that *all* physical texts destabilize linguistic ones, and in the transculturated and ultimately political scene of colonial theatre, the stakes are heightened by *Holy Wednesday's* own theatrical attempts at self-authorization.

It is within the excesses of the performing body that we can locate experimental signs (Mary's precolonial body, Christ's colonial-Christian body) that exceed the narrative of a text that means to rhetorically control the discourse. But the body not only speaks in excess of language, it is also the medium through which speech acts are performed, and in this sense it is impossible to distinguish, or rend apart, precolonial Nahua discourse and Spanish Christianization in performance. I disagree with scholars who interpret Nahua Christianity as a layered entity where subaltern practice is disguised beneath European Christianity. As Pratt argues, "[s]uch an argument would be trapped in an ideology of authenticity." Although the Spanish missionaries tried to identify hidden transcripts (in their terms, pagan practices), this does not mean we need to reinscribe this colonial fantasy of Christian incorruptibility on the past. Instead, by looking at religious performances in their transculturated wholeness we permit the possibility for indigenous self-empowerment and self-realization in colonial culture. *Ixiplatl* resonates in the Mary / Christ relationship and through the abnegation and torment of Mary in particular, Nahua celebrants recognized their own historical predicament. Colonial Christian and Nahua religiosity is integrated and transformed, truly *authorizing* the religious practices of a subjugated people.

Religious theatre in the early colonial period was subject to parasitic epistemological frames and this caused a situation where those who perceived, or wished to perceive, heretical Nahua witchcraft (as seen from above) or hidden Nahua cosmological transcripts (as seen from below), participated in consensual misrecognition. Certainly, as Bourdieu has shown, complicity and misrecognition are the necessary bases of authority that sanction performativity. But in the colonial setting misrecognition of authority is multiplied; each mistaken entity reads the performance of *Holy Wednesday* in a dissected form, clinging to precolonial meanings, as the transculturated *whole* escapes recognition. Contradictions are absorbed into the performance of a new cultural product, never frozen in binary dialogue, resisting temporal and spatial predetermination. *Holy Wednesday* ultimately evades singularity: it is neither wholly ritual nor

theatre, European or Mexican praxis, Nahuatl or Spanish language. The event of its performance was made performative by the fact of an overdetermined forestalling, or *différance*.

Claims in the text of the unmitigated transmission of truth via Christ's "total power" and the vanquishing of the "fleshy" mother by the spiritual mother are subject to the contextualizing force of *différance*. It is in this Derridean concept that the postcolonial and poststructural meet: *Holy Wednesday* was and is always ambiguously heterogeneous, for as soon as the presence of the text is felt, *différance* – that which is not apparent – haunts the "true meaning" of the speech act. Linguistic signs vacillate in ambivalent suspension as citations recall precolonial Nahua and European cultures and conquest narratives. *Holy Wednesday* in performance was a compelling, efficacious ritual enactment made meaningful through negotiations of sacred narratives between cultures by the Nahua faithful. In fact, successful speech acts were only possible through a conversation of heterogeneous, competing New and Old World topoi, despite the threat from sacrosanct authorities that would lay claim to the power of the speech.