

Reflections on Teaching Indigenous Mesoamerican Thought

by Alejandro Santana

English Abstract

This paper attempts to take stock of some of the experiences and insights gleaned from teaching Indigenous Mesoamerican thought. Although some of what I have to say will be familiar to those who study other areas of Latin American philosophy, I submit that Indigenous Mesoamerican thought provides important access points to profound insights that are relatively unique to this area of study, especially for Mexican American and Central American students. More specifically, study in this area holds the potential to put these students in a place of profound cognitive dissonance – a place that not only threatens to undermine their current sense of self but also holds the promise of invigorating a new sense of self-exploration, imagination, and decolonization. Teaching Indigenous Mesoamerican thought is particularly important in breaking philosophical ground that helps these students deal with their own sense of self, place, and their relation to Western European intellectual traditions.

Resumen en español

Este documento intenta hacer un balance de algunas de las experiencias y percepciones recogidas de la enseñanza del pensamiento indígena Mesoamericano. Aunque algo de lo que tengo que decir será familiar para aquellos que estudian otras áreas de la filosofía latinoamericana, sostengo que el pensamiento indígena mesoamericano proporciona importantes puntos de acceso a profundos conocimientos que son relativamente exclusivos de esta área de estudio, especialmente para los estudiantes mexicano-americanos y centroamericanos. Más específicamente, el estudio en esta área tiene el potencial de poner a estos estudiantes en un lugar de disonancia cognitiva profunda, un lugar que no solo amenaza con socavar su sentido actual de sí mismo, sino que también tiene la promesa de vigorizar un nuevo sentido de auto-exploración, imaginación y descolonización. Enseñar el pensamiento indígena Mesoamericano es particularmente importante para romper el terreno filosófico que ayuda a estos estudiantes a lidiar con su propio sentido de si mismo, su lugar y su relación con las tradiciones intelectuales de Europa Occidental.

Resumo em português

Este artigo tenta fazer um balanço de algumas das experiências e insights colhidos do ensino do pensamento indígena mesoamericano. Embora algumas das coisas que tenho a dizer sejam familiares para aqueles que estudam outras áreas da filosofia latino-americana, proponho que o pensamento indígena mesoamericano fornece importantes pontos de acesso a insights profundos que são relativamente únicos a essa área de estudo, especialmente para americanos mexicanos e estudantes da América Central. Mais especificamente, o estudo nesta área tem o potencial de colocar

esses estudantes em um lugar de profunda dissonância cognitiva - um lugar que não apenas ameaça minar seu senso de self atual, mas também mantém a promessa de revigorar um novo senso de auto-exploração, imaginação e descolonização. Ensinar o pensamento indígena mesoamericano é particularmente importante para quebrar o terreno filosófico que ajuda esses estudantes a lidarem com seu próprio senso de identidade, lugar e sua relação com as tradições intelectuais da Europa Ocidental.

Introduction

In the fall of 2012, I began teaching a philosophy course on Indigenous Mesoamerican thought and have taught it five times since then. My hope for this paper is to share some of my experiences and to start a conversation about teaching Mesoamerican thought in philosophy classes, and more specifically, in Latin American Philosophy classes. This paper is inspired by my conversations with students, who have shared their thoughts about the course material, and by fellow SMAP colleagues, who have expressed interest in teaching in this area. Regarding my students, this paper is an attempt to give voice to some of the thoughts and insights that have emerged from class discussions and office hour visits. In this regard, this paper is as much theirs as it is mine. Conversations with SMAP colleagues have often led to a discussion about the pedagogical opportunities and challenges posed by this area. In light of this, I thought it would be a good idea to address them in order to help others who are new to teaching in this area or to help those who would like some fresh ideas if they already teach in it.

In doing this, I wish to express my deep sense of humility, and I would also like to honor those who have taught in this area for longer than I have, as well as those who have much more experience in teaching in Latin American philosophy than I have. The class I teach is not perfect, nor do I teach it perfectly, nor do I say any of what follows to boast or brag.[1] Instead, I share my experiences with humility, and offer them to open a conversation about how Mexican American philosophy can help transform lives and about how we can create the conditions for that transformation to take place.

Although some of what I have to say will be familiar to those who study other areas of Latin American philosophy, I submit that Indigenous Mesoamerican thought provides important access points to profound insights that are relatively unique to this area of study, especially for Mexican American and Central American students. More specifically, study in this area holds the potential to put these students in a place of profound cognitive dissonance – a place that not only threatens to undermine their current sense of self but also holds the promise of invigorating a new sense of self-exploration, imagination, and decolonization. In this sense, this paper attempts to provide an answer to one of the main questions of this conference, “Can Mexican-American Philosophy help solve the problems that confront Mexican-Americans?” My

answer is absolutely and that teaching Indigenous Mesoamerican thought is particularly important in breaking philosophical ground that helps these students deal with their own sense of self, place, and their relation to Western European intellectual traditions. Before I outline how, let me begin with a little background on the course I teach.

The Course

Let me begin with a few general remarks about my university and the course. I teach at a private liberal arts institution, with a predominantly white, upper-middle class to wealthy student body. However, there is a sizable Latinx minority, consisting largely of Mexican and Central Americans. For the sake of brevity, when I mention Latinx students, I refer primarily to students who either come from Mexico or countries in Central America or have a heritage from these parts of Latin America. This is also a junior-level metaphysics course, which is one of a distribution of courses that every student with a major in the humanities (including the sciences) is required to take. The course therefore is pitched to a general audience, usually non-majors, who have little to no background in metaphysics and even less in Indigenous Mesoamerican thought.

The course itself attempts to survey Nahua and Maya metaphysics through an historical and cultural approach. The course begins with an overview of Mesoamerican history and culture, starting with the early settlement of Mexico, through the Olmec, Teotihuacano, and Toltec civilizations, and ending with the Mexica and Maya, including the Spanish conquest of both. Regarding the Mexica we trace their early settlement of Lake Texcoco through the conquest, and then move to features of their social organization, including their social hierarchy, education, farming techniques, food, family, and daily life. I also follow the same basic structure with the Maya.

Philosophical readings include León-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Maffie's IEP article "Aztec Philosophy," Santana's "Did the Aztecs Do Philosophy?," and Gingerich's "Heidegger and the Aztecs." In early versions of the course, I have had students read León-Portilla's *Time and Reality in the Thought of the Maya*; in later versions, I have swapped out this text and had students read excerpts from the *Collected Works of Charles Eastman* (AKA Ohiyesa), Deloria's *God is Red*, Waters' *American Indian Thought*, Cordova's *How It Is*, Cajete's *Native Science*, and Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*. I was allowed to teach this course so long as I also did some comparison to Western philosophical ideas and traditions, so I also cover texts that fit nicely with the overall tenor of the course. We cover the Pre-Socratics, Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, process philosophy, survey several views on the philosophy of time, as well as cover selections from *Rationality* edited by Bryan Wilson. [2]

I also wanted this course to be highly visual, so I made Power Point presentations using photos and videos I took while touring multiple museums and indigenous archeological sites in Mexico and Guatemala, as well as photos gleaned

from reliable online sources. I also require the students to watch four documentaries including *When Worlds Collide*, which discusses the Spanish conquest and *Guatemala – An American Genocide*, which tells the story of an American forensic anthropologist who excavates mass execution burial pits in Guatemala – pits that were filled with indigenous Maya people during the US-supported repression carried out by Guatemalan General Efraim Rios Montt.

Lastly, this class includes several alternative modes of experiential learning. To this end, I offer multiple other documentaries about Indigenous Mesoamerican history and culture for which students can earn extra credit.[3] Every time I teach this course, my wife and I prepare a meal consisting of sweetened, popped amaranth, guacamole, salsa de nopales y camarones, pico de gallo, and chía fresca, which the class enjoys while watching the *Nova* documentary, “Cracking the Maya Code.” As faculty advisor for the MEChA club, I also have the club offer an invitation to a Danza Azteca troupe with which I have had a relationship for several years, and we schedule them to offer a Danza Azteca workshop to the MEChistas, which I then offer as extra credit to my class. On one occasion, I taught this course as an independent study to a MEChista, who could not take it when it was scheduled. And during this time, my family attended a weekend-long Danza Azteca ceremony, which my student attended with her boyfriend, and I taught some of our classes there.

In sum, this course is intended as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and multi-modal learning experience. It is set up to be an elaborate, sprawling intellectual play structure, where students are given many diverse opportunities to wander, explore, and engage in deep intellectual examination.[4] Let me now turn to three examples of how this course evokes the profound cognitive dissonance mentioned above. I will do so starting with different types of Latinx students that I have encountered.

Reflections

From what I have seen, most Latinx students know very little about the indigenous dimension of their cultural heritage. Most have only vague ideas that the Mexica, for example, practiced human sacrifice, were conquered by the Spanish, that many were decimated by small pox, and that they built large pyramids. Most are simply unaware of the extraordinary complexity and sophistication of Mesoamerican civilization. They are simply blown away that, for example, Tenochtitlan was built on man-made islands in Lake Texcoco; that it had clean streets, while European cities were often littered with garbage and feces; that its marketplace was bigger than any the Spaniards had seen in Europe;[5] that the chinampa system was capable of keeping a large population of hundreds of thousands generally well-fed with an extraordinary variety of foods,[6] while their European counterparts generally struggled with food insecurity; and that it may have been the only place in the world at the time of the conquest to offer universal schooling for both males and females.[7]

All of these facts, and many more, lead many Latinx students to express to me that they never knew how amazing Mesoamerican civilization was. Indeed, one student told me that she went to school in Mexico up to seventh grade, and this was the first time she had ever heard such things about her indigenous past. And they begin to more fully appreciate the impact of something that they have known all along: that the Spanish language is the language of the conqueror; that Christianity is the religion of the conqueror; and that there is, as Bonfil-Batalla put it, a “México Profundo” underneath it all, which they have not been taught (1996, xv). Although this isn’t news to us, it’s a sad fact that this is the state of affairs for many Latinx students: most know more about European history and culture than their own.

As a result, a substantial portion of my course, some 12 hours of class time, is devoted to bootstrapping, that is, giving students the requisite historical and cultural context to help make more intelligible the later philosophy that we cover.[8] It also helps prevent the temptation among Latinx students to either barbarize, primitivize, infantilize, romanticize, hastily generalize, or inappropriately anachronize the indigenous people they’re studying.

This bootstrapping often has residual effects that begin the process of critical exploration and revelation in the mind the Latinx student. Having come face to face with a much more accurate, detailed, and nuanced picture of Indigenous Mesoamerican civilization, students begin to take seriously the indigenous dimension of self-identity and they become more curious about their own indigenous heritage. They then begin to ask questions – not just from me – but from their own relatives. Some come to discover for the first time that their grandmother or uncle speaks Nahuatl, or that they now live in the US because their family fled from US-supported violence in El Salvador, or that their uncle had written a history of the Guatemalan civil war.

However, some also discover ruptures in their own family dynamics. One student discovered that her dad wished not to talk about his indigeneity or about that of his relatives, while her mother did; or that parents thought it was important *not* to tell their children that their relative spoke a native language. In other words, some students start to see, in their family members, a kind of shame about their indigenous past, and they see a side of their relatives that they never saw or fully appreciated. Students therefore begin to get a sense that they are in many ways the inheritors of an indigenous past or a past linked to trauma that has been inflicted on indigenous peoples. That is, they come to realize that they are inheritors of kind of inter-generational trauma.

This, however, creates the space for inter-generational healing, which leads me to a story that I have been permitted to tell. As mentioned above, I taught this course last year as an independent study. When my student and I were discussing the segment on Maya mathematics, astronomy, and their conception of time, my student mentioned that her father never went to college but often expressed how he would have liked to have studied mathematics. The following year, my student finished her Physics final – the last final of her undergraduate career – and she needed speak with me.

She told me she aced the exam, but more importantly, the exam was something of a revelation to her. As she was taking the final, she was for the first time able to understand the math, its relation to physics, and the relation of both to her own worldview. In words she couldn't put precisely, she said she caught a glimpse of what the Maya might have thought regarding the sacred power of mathematics in their worldview. Understanding math and physics in this way, she felt as though she was getting closer to her indigenous heritage. The Maya, math, and physics – somehow, it all made sense, and it all seemed perfectly natural. She then brought up intergenerational trauma: Finishing her degree and her revelation during her physics final was a profound experience; she felt she had accomplished for her father what he couldn't accomplish himself; she felt his pain and somehow helped to heal it. And then she began to cry, shedding tears of healing, redemption, and renewal. Lastly, she told me that she called her father, and tried to explain her thoughts – the degree, the math, the physics, the Maya. He was happy to hear them, and of her accomplishment, but she could tell that he didn't quite understand its significance.

But for her, that was okay: being a first-gen college student, she understood that she is now charting a new path in her family's historical trajectory. She somehow knew her experience had a positive impact on the way she would support her younger nieces and nephews in school. Knowing that the Maya were amazing mathematicians and astronomers, she now knew she had a strong cultural and historical basis from which to encourage her relatives to pursue math and science – the Maya did it, so they could too. Lastly, she knew she could, in a small way, help heal and indeed reverse this bit of inter-generational trauma. To her, math and science were no longer disciplines reserved for others; they are as much a part of her own cultural heritage as anyone else's; and she would confidently pass that on to her younger relatives. As she put it, "At least I know I won't pass on *that* trauma. It stops with me."

Undoubtedly, there are many people here who can share similar experiences of students who have been moved by the course material to which they have been exposed; and it is likely that similar opportunities lie in wait in virtually any Latin American philosophy class; this is how it has come up in mine. But they come up in other ways as well, as I will explain next.

It goes without saying that many Latinx students are deeply religious and are most often Catholic or some other denomination of Christianity. Such students often enter the class aware of Mexica human sacrifice, generally find this practice to be abhorrent, and radically at odds with their own religious world-view. However, things get a bit too close for comfort when we discuss the metaphysical rationale behind Mexica sacrificial practices. If we look closely at some of these practices, and focus on their metaphysical and religious dimensions, then we find they seem to share interesting similarities to Christianity.

To begin with, the Mexica thought that life and death were two sides of the same coin; there had to be death so that there would be life. The Mexica also thought that the entire cosmos was a living organism made of a single sacred power, force, or energy – *teotl*.^[9] Lastly, they thought that humans were among the most – if not *the* most – precious and potent vessels of this vital energy. So when humans were sacrificed, this vital energy was recycled into the cosmic atmosphere to keep the entire cosmos alive and balanced. In other words, for the Mexica, human sacrifice was done for the sake of the greater good of the cosmos; humans were giving back to the cosmos – understood here as *teotl* – precisely what the cosmos gave to them; it was an attempt to engage in one-to-one reciprocity.

But if we focus on the idea that Jesus Christ was a human being, then his crucifixion was a human sacrifice as well. Jesus sacrificed himself for the greater good; he died so that we may live; and his death brought life. Now here the word “life” is understood in a different way than that of the Mexica, but the important point here is that human sacrifice in both cases has extraordinary cosmological significance and consequences that in some way brings life to the world.

And if we focus on the idea that Jesus was somehow God incarnate, the Mexica had a similar intuition as well, with what they called *ixiptla* or *teixiptla*. According to Maffie, *ixiptla* or *teixiptla* refer to “physical manifestations of deities ranging from humans dressed in special ritual attire, ritually dressed, painted wood or stone figures, and effigies made of amaranth dough to any arrangement of ritual attire mounted in a wooden frame and provided with a mask” (Maffie 2014, 113). For Maffie, the various *ixiptla* and *teotl* are “strictly identical,” insofar as they are properly arranged to disclose the nature of *teotl*, and they provide a physical medium with which to engage in various aspects of this one sacred energy (Maffie 2014, 114). Thus, *ixiptla* that are human embodiments of Mexica deities – *Tetzcatlipoca*, for example – are metaphysically identical with *teotl*, that is, the single power that constitutes the entire universe. Thus, it would also follow that such *ixiptla*, when ritually sacrificed, are also sacrificed deities, or at least physical manifestations of deities, similar to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Things get even *more* complicated when we discuss the ritual cannibalization of these *ixiptla*, which is ultimately ingesting the flesh and blood of an embodied deity. Catholic Latinx students often become puzzled as to how to reconcile this with the doctrine of transubstantiation, which in the Catholic Catechism states that “Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity (cf. Council of Trent: DS 1640; 1651)” (1995, 395).

Here, I should emphasize that do not intend to draw false equivalences, nor do I intend to raise tired accusations that were used to stigmatize and discriminate against Catholics. I also do not intend to endorse Mexica sacrificial practices, nor do I intend to lead students to a relativistic philosophical or religious stance. Instead, I intend to get the Latinx student to do a philosophical double-take – one that compels the student to

look beyond superficial interpretations of their most deeply-held beliefs and to look more deeply into both the Mexica and their own view of Christianity. That is, I intend to get the student to look more deeply into the religious and metaphysical significance of these practices in search of a more fundamental and profound meaning.

This approach opens philosophical space to explore archetypal ways of thinking that circumscribe common ground that both the Latinx student and the Mexica occupy. How are their religious intuitions similar to the Mexica? How are they different? What is it about sacrifice for the greater good that we find so ennobling, so deserving of reverence and respect, and so redemptive? That is, why does a Maya lintel from Yaxchilan depict a ritual practice where a woman pulls a rope of thorns through her tongue? Or why does a San Bartolo mural depict a Maya man ritually piercing his penis with a stingray spine? Perhaps it is for a similar reason that every classroom at my university has a depiction of a tortured man, suffering and bleeding to death on a cross. And what is it about the human need to commune with some kind of sacred power such that we would conceive of ritual practices where we ingest the supposed sacred power into our bodies? What does all of this say about ourselves as religious, philosophical, and spiritual human beings? All of these questions, and many more, are raised when Latinx students look closely at Mesoamerican religious perspectives and compare them with their own. I will close with one final example that relates to the socio-political perspective of some Latinx students.

Some of my Latinx students deeply identify as MEChistas and have a strong, socio-political consciousness that colors their identity. Such students are often willing allies of indigenous culture and life ways, especially those of the Mexica, whose lifeways MEChistas are most eager to recover, remember, and identify with. This willingness is often shaken when these students are exposed to diverse ways in which the Mexica practiced human sacrifice and the many functions this practice served, some of which were mentioned above. MEChista willingness is also shaken by the fact that the Mexica were an imperial people, who often oppressed their neighbors such that their behavior led to widespread disaffection which helped the Spanish overthrow them.

One function of human sacrifice not mentioned above is that it also served as a form of political intimidation, as well as a means of desensitizing the Mexica population to extreme levels of violence.[10] In one graphic example, we are told that the Mexica sacrificed thousands of captives over the course of four straight days for the rededication of *Coatepetl*, the Great Pyramid in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan.[11] We are also told that provincial tribal ambassadors were brought in and forced to watch this grisly ceremony. The purpose, it seems, was to intimidate these ambassadors and reassert Mexica dominance after a period of provincial insurrection.

In light of this, some MEChistas have expressed confusion regarding the role the Mexica play in the MEChista sense of self. That is, some wonder why the Mexica, an imperial and often oppressive people, would be viewed as a source of strength and pride for an organization that seeks to work against injustice and oppressive institutions.

How is a MEChista supposed to take pride in the Mexica when they were oppressive in ways to which the MEChista stands opposed?

Again, this realization poses a serious problem for the MEChista, but it also opens a path for reinterpretation, transformation, and renewal. Although this might not be new to us, Latinx students come to realize that learning more about their cultural heritage involves learning many things of which they are proud, but also learning things of which they are not. These reflections bring students to realize that this is true about virtually every culture, ethnicity, or nationality. But then they realize that they are part of the ongoing process of creating and re-creating their culture. To best participate in this creative process, however, one has to confront one's culture as a whole, including its dark, harmful, or shameful elements. It is only then that students can fully embrace their culture and at the same time determine where they identify with it and where they do not. In doing so, Latinx students can better determine precisely how they can see themselves as descendants of Indigenous Mesoamerican peoples.

Speaking in regards to the descendants of the Aztecs/Mexica, Sandstrom puts it well:

Who are the contemporary descendants of the Aztec Empire? Just as the historical Aztecs have receded into the mists of time, their authentic descendants are the people who invoke them in the creation of their own identity. They are to be found in Native American villages throughout Mexico, where people may or may not call themselves *Mexica* but have used their historical legacy to forge identities in opposition to the dominant Hispanic culture. They can be found among the Mexican citizens migrating to the United States and other countries in search of work, in the Chicano populations in the new Aztlan of the American West whose art celebrates their links to prehispanic civilizations, and anywhere people locate their identity in the historical legacy of ancient Highland Mesoamerica. The Aztecs and their descendants are very much a part of the contemporary world (Sandstrom 2017, 716-17).

Conclusion

As mentioned above, I offer these experiences and insights humbly, to help those who might be interested in teaching in this area or to offer fresh ideas to those who already teach in it. And again, I'm sure that many similar stories could be shared by those who have taught in other areas of Latin American philosophy. In any case, I hope this occasions a fruitful discussion on the transformative potential of Mexican-American philosophy.

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Notes

[1] There are two specific challenges to teaching this course, challenges that I have met with varying degrees of success. To begin with, the course, as I have constructed it, requires a tremendous amount of bootstrapping as most students know next to nothing about Indigenous Mesoamerican history, culture, and thought. As a result, a significant amount of time is devoted to bootstrapping students in this important way, which then takes time away from covering important philosophical texts. There is also a shameful dearth of both primary indigenous texts and Latin American philosophers covered in this course. This is largely a casualty of the requisite bootstrapping mentioned above as well as the requirement that comparisons be made to the Western philosophical tradition. Since there simply isn't time to engage in the kind of textual analysis that would be required to adequately cover primary indigenous texts, I opt for solid secondary sources. Western philosophical texts ultimately took whatever space remained. For a complete syllabus and more detailed explanation about the course structure, content, and other challenges involved in its construction, please see my "Syllabus for Philosophy 336 Metaphysics: Native American Philosophy," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Indigenous Philosophy*, Vol. 17 No. 1, Fall 2017.

[2] Please see Bibliography for a full list of course readings as well as other texts I use in the course.

[3] Please see List of Documentaries for a full list of assigned and extra-credit documentaries.

[4] In this regard, my course structure is inspired by the work of María Lugones, more specifically, her ideas expressed in "Playfulness, "World"-Traveling, and Loving Perception" (2003, 77 – 100) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000).

[5] Michael Coe, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, 4th ed., (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 166.

[6] Coe, *Mexico*, 164 and 174. And I should add that this estimate refers only to the population of Tenochtitlan; it doesn't include the many other polities surrounding Lake Texcoco that the chinampa system also helped sustain.

[7] Coe, *Mexico*, 170. Also see Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, (New York: Oxford, 2006), 358.

[8] The amount of time I devote to historical and cultural bootstrapping should not be seen as required to teach in this area; however, I do think that some amount of bootstrapping is required but could be done in a way that does not require such a long time commitment. It is possible to devote as much class time as is necessary to give students the requisite historical and cultural background for the topic one wishes to cover. For example, if one wished to cover Mexica sacrificial practices, then one might briefly introduce the cultural and historical context only on that particular topic, say, its history, methods, and functions.

[9] For the most in-depth and authoritative exposition of this monistic claim to date, see James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 21 – 62.

[10] Townsend, *The Aztecs*, Revised Ed., (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 105 and 218. For *Coatepetl* as the name of the Great Pyramid, see Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 159.

[11] Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 105. See also Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook*, 44.

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