

“Let it be written in different languages”¹: La Virgen and Problems in (Re)Writing the Early American Literary Canon

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Since its first edition, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Paul Lauter, has set out to reconstitute the American literary canon through its inclusion of otherwise overlooked texts, and its treatment of texts and writers usually already included in the canon. In the preface to the anthology, Lauter writes that the first edition of *The Heath*, “while providing very rich selections of traditionally canonical authors, also contained the widest selection of writing by women and authors of diverse racial, ethnic, and regional origins ever assembled in an academic textbook” (xxvii). *The Heath* is engaged in a project which addresses the problems of the unchallenged literary canon, represented in academic anthologies taught in university, which fails to sufficiently represent women, people of color and politically radical writers. Lauter continues that a goal of the anthology “has been to broaden our understanding of what constitutes ‘literary’” (xxvii). This broadening is evident in the inclusion of the seventeenth-century “History of the Miraculous Apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 1531.” This broadening, as an attempt to rewrite or reconstitute the literary canon, does not come without complication. While it seems that an inclusive canon is a step in the right direction for hearing previously unheard voices, it may be the case that broadening the canon does not address the problematic process of assigning worth, through anthologized publication, to certain cultural texts. This process entails choosing both which texts and which versions of those texts to include. In the case of the La Virgen narrative, not only the text’s inclusion, but also the decision to include one particular version over another has implications which call into question how the literary canon is reconstructed. These implications raise questions about publication history and translation, both of which shape the frame of reference for the anthology’s reader before he or she has engaged with the text.

I argue that, although *The Heath* aims to reconstruct the American literary canon, its efforts are complicated by the versions of texts it chooses to represent between its covers, specifically, in the version of the La Virgen narrative included in the sixth edition. The anthology treats the text and the image of La Virgen as one, and although they are indeed connected, the anthology does not fully unpack the historical complication surrounding the text itself. While the image of La Virgen is culturally important, the focus of my research is on the written texts surrounding La Virgen. *The Heath*’s reconstruction, in its decision to frame La Virgen as a “syncretic figure, bridging the gap between the colonizers and the colonized in Mexico,” has chosen a particular text which better suits this treatment (134). I will provide a theoretical framework which positions the function of literature on the level of ideology. In order to understand the ideological function the La Virgen narrative, I will then examine the historical context of the sixteenth century in New Spain, picking up directly following Hernando Cortés’ sacking of the Aztec Empire. From there, I will unpack the process of publication, and offer a close reading which complicates the version of the narrative in *The Heath*.

Questions surrounding publication and dissemination of a given

text are important to consider because the motives behind such endeavors undoubtedly impact the ideological function of the text itself. By ideology, I am referring to a definition which “suggests a certain masking, distortion, or concealment” of reality which works “in the interest of the powerful against the interests of the powerless” (Storey 2). In this sense, we can consider how the ideology framing certain versions of the La Virgen narrative functions as a tool of religious conversion for the Spanish colonial project. The element of distortion refers to the cultural co-optation of indigenous tradition in order to create the appearance of cultural hybridity, or even progress, in the text. The process of mediation in the various levels of translation and publication is also ideological. The two versions of the La Virgen narrative under consideration represent this complicated process.

My assertion, that *The Heath*’s version of the La Virgen narrative functions to further the project of Spanish colonization of indigenous people through conversion to the Catholic faith, is engaging with Raymond Williams’ understanding of hegemony as “the ‘whole social process’ to specific distributions of power and influence” (108). This understanding includes the acknowledgement that the hegemonic process includes counter-hegemony, or resistance, and that the hegemonic process is never “static,” “total,” or “exclusive” (113). It is in this space of resistance to the hegemonic process that La Virgen is most often represented. In *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, editor Ana Castillo compiles many narratives engaging with the image/figure of La Virgen, and all of them focus on La Virgen as a site of reclamation and resistance. My assertion, however, foregrounds the hegemonic process in which “subordinate groups and classes appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, cultural and political meanings, which bind them to, and ‘incorporate’ them into, the prevailing structures of power” (Storey 63-64). This hegemonic discourse should not be viewed as an “either/or” binary between domination and agency, but rather, a “both/and” process in which it is vital to neither ignore nor dismiss all aspects of the “lived experience” that is hegemony.

While the Spanish colonial project, as one site of the hegemonic experience, was conquest-focused through the violence of Cortés, this attempt of solidifying rule was unsustainable. By 1529, Spanish officials were reporting growing unrest in the indigenous population (Demarest 5). In addition to conquest, the colonial project included converting the polytheistic indigenous people into Catholics. But this aim was also failing by 1529 (5). Then, two years later, the apparition of La Virgen in Tepeyacac, outside Mexico City, was reported to have occurred. The Aztec picture-chronicles circulated during the 1530s have been taken to be the earliest representations of La Virgen (Demarest 9). Demarest writes that “mass baptisms took place on a scale such as the world has scarcely seen” simultaneously to the circulation of these images (9). What is generally considered the first textual representation of the apparition was published in Spanish in 1648 by Miguel Sanchez, and followed the next year by Luis Laso de la Vega’s “Huei tlamahuiçoltica,” published in Nahuatl.

From the time of publication forward, “Huei tlamahuiçoltica,” has been the basis of dissemination for many versions of the La Virgen narrative. For the purpose of clarity I will divide these different versions into two groups, for each of which I will examine the publication context and level of mediation. The first, hereon denoted as the 1998 version, edited by James Lockhart et al, has been translated by philologists from the Latin American Studies program of Stanford

¹“Huei tlamahuiçoltica: Author’s Preface” (Lockhart et al., 57).

University. This text includes little mediation, and the linguistic basis is the Luis Laso de la Vega version, “Huei tlamahuiçoltica.” The second, hereon denoted as the 1956/2009 version, is a much more complicated group. The term “group” is necessary based on the mediation surrounding the history of translation and publication. The 2009 Heath’s version of the narrative has been directly taken from *The Dark Virgin: The Book of Our Lady of Guadalupe*, published in 1956, and edited by Donald Demarest. The 1956 version comes from a Spanish text by an Italian scholar, Lorenzo Boturini, published in 1895 by the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City. The 1895 Boturini version was reportedly translated from Laso de la Vega’s 1649 version. In summation, the 1998 version has undergone one level of mediation, while the 1956/2009 version has undergone three (including the 1956 to 2009 mediation). Further, for the Laso de la Vega text, which both groups have in common, the opinion on authorship varies greatly. The 1956/2009 version attributes authorship to Antonio Valeriano, claiming that Laso de la Vega is only responsible for publication (Demarest 53, Lauter 197). This assertion of Valeriano’s authorship is complicated by the 1998 version, which remains silent on the role of Valeriano, simply stating that, “by all indications Laso de la Vega took a large part in the composition of the Nahuátl texts in all sections of the work, but we cannot say with certainty whether he had collaborators or not” (Lockhart 47). Thus, as we can see, even the authorship of the narrative before translation is contested.

Turning to the texts, a close reading comparison of the two versions will demonstrate that the choice of translation impacts the meaning of the narrative. While there are several discrepancies between the two version groups, I focus my comparison on the first few lines of the narratives. The first discrepancy between the two texts occurs when La Virgen first appears to Juan Diego. In the 1998 version, the text states, “First she revealed herself to a humble commoner named Juan Diego,” while the 1956/2009 version states, “She appeared first to an Indian named Juan Diego” (41, 197). This textual difference is important. The line, in Nahuátl, boils down to the word “maçehualtzintli” (Lockhart 40). The 1956/2009 translation implies either a racial or cultural distinction for Juan Diego, identifying him as “an Indian.” In the logic of the text, which aims at conversion, this distinction both acknowledges the target population this narrative is supposed to reach and functions to either create or reproduce structures which recognize difference in the Spanish colonies. The function of identifying Juan Diego by this distinction, whether racial or cultural, may work to suggest that it is this aspect of this identity above others, say his religiosity that takes more precedence. The word “Indian” here may not specifically imply a racial distinction, but it does point to a differentiation that is not present in the 1998 version. It may not be useful to view this distinction as a racial project at the time of its publication, but it does seem to point to a differentiation of “Indians” as the specific audience for La Virgen.

A site of interest later in the narrative occurs when La Virgen addresses Juan Diego. In the 1998 version she says, “Do listen, my youngest child, dear Juan,” while in the 1956/2009 version she says, “Listen, xocoyote mio, Juan” (65, 198). This is perhaps the most problematic of the close readings I offer due to the complex choice of translation in this line. The 1956/2009 version uses three languages in quick succession, in literally the span of three words. “Listen, xocoyote mio,” is part English, part Nahuátl, and part Spanish. The footnote offered translates it, but without any context. Confusingly, upon con-

sulting the Nahuátl manuscript which accompanies the 1998 version, the word “xocoyote” does not appear at all, but because the 1956/2009 version does include it, I thought it necessary to unpack the function of this passage. The mediation in the text, from Nahuátl to Spanish to English, creates a tension at this place in the text, and it is significant that the translator chose to leave “xocoyote” in Nahuátl and “mio” is Spanish. Represented through language, this partial translation functions to create the appearance of hybridity applauded in the introductions of both pieces. Further, this text as translated may have different meanings depending on the context in which it is being consumed. In contemporary terms, this translation challenges assumptions of the subversive nature of cultural hybridity. Entire close readings and whole papers could be written around the assumption that, because this text condones a linguistic melding, the culture it represents could as well.

In conclusion, once a given text is returned to the cultural and historical context of its time, the understandings of that text are more complicated than if it is consumed without such considerations. This complication has important ramifications for the ways in which meaning is assigned or created by texts. While it may seem that “History of the Miraculous Apparition” could be read as the textual sanctioning of notions of hybridity, once contextualized, the ideology surrounding the text is more complicated, and, further, that same reading of hybridity actually functions to serve the interests of colonizers looking for unchallenged access to power. The implications specific to “History of the Miraculous Apparition,” also determine what is at stake for projects such as *The Heath*, which, in addressing the problematic American literary canon, should be cognizant of the ideological implications of choosing what to include in the canon.

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