

## Is Preserving Indigenous Languages and Cultures the Key to Avoiding the Impending Eco-Apocalypse? : An Ecolinguistic Reading of Le Clézio's *Le Rêve Mexicain*

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this essay is to explore Le Clézio's *Le Rêve Mexicain* from the lens of the growing field of ecolinguistics. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature speculates about the present and future ramifications of the destruction of divergent Amerindian civilizations. When a civilization or a language disappears, an entire worldview vanishes as well. In addition to wondering how Amerindian societies would have evolved if their trajectory would not have been 'interrupted' by the Conquest, Le Clézio hypothesizes that these indigenous voices could still help us to avoid the impending eco-apocalypse. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, the Franco-Mauritian author attempts to preserve the remaining vestiges of rich Amerindian cultures and to embed them into the existing environmental discourse of dominant world languages.*

### Introduction

In an aptly named text in which he expresses his future aspirations for the French language and what it could one day represent, the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature laments, "Chaque fois qu'une langue meurt, c'est une tragédie qui touche le monde entier" 'Every time that a language dies, it's a tragedy that affects the entire world' ("Eloge de la langue française," 1993, n.p.; my trans.). Although French is clearly not a threatened or endangered language, Le Clézio affirms that his worldview has been shaped by the first language that he acquired as a child. This conviction corresponds to the basic tenets of ecolinguistics, a branch of applied linguistics closely related to ecocriticism. As Bert Hodges explains, "Language ties us to a place, a history, and a way of life" (2014, 96). Given the universal nature of this sociolinguistic phenomenon, the Franco-Mauritian author decries the nefarious effects of linguistic imperialism. According to the writer, when a language vanishes, everything that is indicative of this culture disappears along with it. The hegemonic discourse of majority languages, and the values that it reflects, utterly effaces these essential voices.

In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio suggests that the painstaking process of preserving the remaining linguistic fragments of existing minority civilizations or societies that have already been eradicated could hold the key to avoiding the impending eco-apocalypse. The author wonders if the disappearance of indigenous languages and thought could prevent global society from embracing a more ecocentric *weltanschauung* which is paramount to saving the planet and every organism that calls it home. The purpose of this essay is to explore *Le Rêve Mexicain* from the lens of the relatively new field of ecolinguistics.

## Contextualization of *Le Rêve Mexicain*

Published in 1988 by Gallimard, Paul Archambault describes *Le Rêve Mexicain* as “perhaps the best and most controversial of Le Clézio’s ‘Mexican’ works” (2010, 290). Written in the same vein as *Hai*, *La fête chantée*, *Mydriase*, and “Le génie Datura,” *Le Rêve Mexicain* is an appreciation of everything that encompasses Amerindian erudition including art, philosophy, science, and autochthonous forms of spirituality. Jacques Lovichi notes that *Le Rêve Mexicain* is an attempt to reconstruct a “monde qui n’existe plus que dans ses traces” ‘world that only exists in its traces’ (1989, 119; my trans.). Le Clézio is astutely cognizant that a lost civilization can never be resuscitated by saving the few vestiges that remain.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the author underscores that preserving these scattered pieces before they dissipate entirely has become a dire necessity because of the gravity of the environmental crisis that threatens to destroy all abundant life including mankind.<sup>2</sup>

Highlighting the urgency of (re)-establishing a rudimentary form of dialogue with both decimated and extinct Amerindian cultures before it is too late, Jean-Xavier Ridon reveals, “Le Clézio nous dit qu’il faut pouvoir retrouver la forme d’un dialogue avec ce monde perdu” ‘Le Clézio tells us that we need to be able to find a way of dialoging with this lost world’ (1998, 39; my trans.). In an era that is increasingly defined by an ecological calamity of epic proportions, the author posits that saving non-anthropocentric thought systems from the brink of extinction might be the only way to create a more sustainable roadmap for the future that takes into account the fragility of the ecosphere. Given that the modern world is in desperate need of a radical paradigm shift to deviate us from our current ecocidal trajectory, Le Clézio adamantly maintains that ecocentric discourses of present and past indigenous communities must be valorized. Moreover, it should be noted that Le Clézio identifies three earlier works from which he derived inspiration in *Le Rêve Mexicain*. Similar to *le codex florentin* written by the Franciscan monk Bernardino de Sahagún, *La Relation de Michoacan*, and *Les Prophéties du Chilam Balam*, the importance of Le Clézio’s project is evident. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, the author endeavors to keep the faint Amerindian voice alive for future generations. Like his predecessors, Le Clézio illustrates “la nécessité de sauvegarder une parole autre qui témoignait d’une vision du monde différente de celles des Occidentaux” ‘the necessity of saving another voice that represented a different worldview than that of Westerners’ (Ridon, 1998, 42; my trans.).

Even though Le Clézio “connaît de l’intérieur le monde amérindien, ses mythes, sa littérature [...]” ‘knows the Amerindian world, its myths and literature from the inside,’ numerous critics have oversimplified all of his Amerindian essays including *Le Rêve mexicain* (De Cortanze, 1998, 38; my trans.). Deconstructing unflattering assessments of this work that have caused researchers such as Paul Archambault to label this essay as “controversial,” Bruno Thibault

explains in the context of both *Désert* and *Le Rêve mexicain*, “Le Clézio enseigne-t-il la haine de l’Europe et de l’Occident? [...] L’intention de l’auteur nous paraît à la fois plus complexe et plus nuancée” ‘Is Le Clézio teaching us to hate Europe and the West? [...] The author’s intentions appear to be much more nuanced and complex’ (2000, 290;369; my trans.). Echoing similar sentiments as Thibault and defending the intellectual rigor of *Trois villes saintes*, *Le Rêve mexicain*, *La Fête chantée*, *Hai*, and all of the author’s so-called Amerindian texts, Raymond Cadorel affirms, “Aucune recherche de pittoresque ou d’exotisme ne vient distraire le lecteur” ‘no traces of the picturesque or the exotic are present to distract the reader’ (1985, 71; my trans.). As Cadorel notes, the stark, destabilizing realism of many passages of *Le Rêve mexicain* clearly negates unfounded criticisms of the author’s reflections related to the tragic disappearance of numerous Amerindian cultures.

In contrast to the overly simplistic interpretations of the writer’s Amerindian works decried by Thibault and Cadorel, Jean-Xavier Ridon and Sevet Kadioglu offer much more detailed and precise analyses of both *Le Rêve mexicain* and the writer’s *oeuvre* in general. Highlighting that a salient feature of Le Clézio’s fiction is to give a voice to disenfranchised and marginalized societies that are on the brink of vanishing or which have already been completely decimated, Ridon asserts, “la présence de ces êtres en bordure de notre visibilité correspond chez l’écrivain à la recherche d’une différence, à la nécessité d’une ouverture à l’autre. C’est sous le signe de la rencontre avec l’autre et sous celui de l’écoute des différentes formes d’échanges qui peuvent en découler qu’il faut analyser sa démarche” ‘The presence of these people on the periphery of our vision in Le Clézio’s writing is indicative of a valorization of difference and of the necessity of being open to the Other. It is in the context of the theme of encounters with the Other and listening to different types of exchanges that can stem from these encounters in which the author’s approach should be analyzed’ (1998, 39; my trans.). As Ridon underscores, the author insists that these silenced voices have much to offer the modern world in the current Anthropocene era.

## Brief Overview of Ecolinguistics and Environmental Discourse Analysis

The environmental anxiety expressed by the writer in *Le Rêve Mexicain* mirrors the concerns articulated by contemporary ecolinguists such as Sune Vork Steffensen, Alwin Fill, Arran Stibbe, Martin Döring, Francesca Zunino, Reinhard Heuberger, Richard Alexander, Peter Finke, and Hildo Honório do Couto. The budding and promising discipline of ecolinguistics is extremely diverse comprised of numerous subfields. Specifically, the area of ecolinguistics that investigates “environmental discourse analysis” is the most appropriate theoretical tool to enrich our understanding of *Le Rêve Mexicain* (Nash, 2011, 85). Environmental discourse analysis explores “how linguistic practices have contributed to the current ecological crisis” (Steffensen & Fill, 2014, 10). According to ecolinguists, the language that we speak influences how we view ourselves and the ‘world of things’ to which our species is inextricably linked. Thus, when a language dies, a different way of conceiving the appropriate relationship between humanity and the remainder of the universe is lost as well. In essence, a type of discourse, which reflects the values of dominant civilizations, substitutes itself for the former paradigm.

Underscoring the ramifications of linguistic imperialism, Richard Alexander and Arran Stibbe assert, “When local languages are displaced by dominant world languages such as English what is lost are the discourses which encode everything people have learned about living sustainably

in the local environment. These are replaced by discourses such as those of economic growth, consumerism and neoliberalism that are at the core of an unsustainable society” (2014, 107). Offering a concrete example of how language impacts and informs our worldview, Alexander and Stibbe reiterate, “the term ‘growth’ is part of an economic discourse which models or shapes reality in a particular way” (2014, 108). In Western society, the words ‘growth’ and ‘progress’ have inherently positive connotations. Moreover, these terms reinforce the socioeconomic paradigm which is responsible for the depletion of the earth’s limited natural resources in addition to the destruction of the ozone layer. The pervasive notion that continual economic expansion is always advantageous permeates the linguistic codes that we symbolically exchange on a daily basis in dominant world languages. However, the stern warnings of modern science, which urge the modern subject to re-envision his or her place in the biotic community of life, have thoroughly debunked this simplistic ideology.

In a testament to the importance of saving and promoting more ecocentric environmental discourses from minority languages that have not been tainted by the aforementioned exploitative and idealistic ideologies, Arran Stibbe explains, “ecolinguistics consists of questioning the stories that underpin our current unsustainable civilization, exposing these stories that are clearly not working, that are leading to ecological destruction [...] and finding new stories that work better in the conditions of the world that we face” (2013, “An Ecolinguistic Approach,” 117). Stibbe and other researchers assert that many minority languages are spoken by traditional, autochthonous societies with profound ecological sensibilities. Consequently, in stark contrast to many dominant world languages that laud unbridled consumption, narcissism, and extreme opulence, the linguistic codes that are embedded in the environmental discourse of minority civilizations emphasize cosmic humility and the importance of stewardship. As Stibbe notes, environmental discourse analysis reveals that Native American societies clearly have a different conception of ‘progress’ (2013, 123). For Amerindian civilizations that venerate the cosmic forces which initially conceived all life, human and otherwise, wreaking havoc upon the planet that sustains us and slowly obliterating oneself in the process is a potentially lethal form of regression.

Contemporary scientific theories such as evolution, the laws of thermodynamics, the laws of ecology, quantum contextualism, and chaos theory highlight the interdependency and interconnectedness of all material beings. Nevertheless, the dominant environmental discourse of majority cultures still inexplicably frames the relationship between homo sapiens and other species from an anthropocentric perspective. Despite the undeniable fact that we are a part of nature, whether we like it or not, Western civilization still clings to obsolete dichotomies like *nature and culture* inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment (Döring & Zunino, 2014, 35). In other words, majority languages have yet to evolve in order to reflect what science has rather unequivocally proven. Misleading terms like “human” and “animal” still concretize the environmental discourse of majority languages. These lexical items which place homo sapiens and other organisms in sharply distinct ontological categories are merely the product of wishful thinking from a scientific point of view. Yet, these unfounded ideas are still promulgated by the ecological discourse which is emblematic of dominant world languages.

The ecolinguist Reinhard Heuberger recently examined manifestations of anthropocentrism in the English language. Heuberger discovered that the English language plays a major role in perpetuating appealing homocentric myths that run contrary to fundamental material realities from which there is no escape. For instance, many monolingual English dictionaries define other

organisms purely in terms of their “utility for humans” (Heuberger, 2003, 95). Although contemporary scientific knowledge reveals that all species were randomly tossed into the chaos of existence by indifferent cosmic forces approximately four and a half billion years ago by cycles that predate humankind, Heuberger notes that the environmental discourse of the English language has changed very little. Symbolic representations of nature in English draw their strength from chimerical ideology rather than rudimentary ecological realities. In order to foster healthier attitudes which lead to less destructive behavior, Heuberger proposes “the use of an ecologically more correct language” that mirrors the aforementioned scientific principles (2003, 103).

## The Role of Literature in the Promotion of Positive Environmental Discourse

Similar to how Heuberger underscores what is truly at stake in the context of the mission of ecolinguistics, Le Clézio’s *Le Rêve Mexicain* demonstrates that literature must urgently contribute to the environmental conversation as well. Like Stibbe, the Franco-Mauritian writer suggests that the ecocentric environmental discourse of Amerindian societies has much to offer the modern world. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio implies that the voices of these disenfranchised native peoples deconstruct “toute rhétorique reposant sur la notion du progrès des civilisations humaines” ‘all rhetoric founded upon the notion of progress in human civilizations’ which does not consider the larger web of life into which our saga is woven (Miller, 2005, 36; my trans.). Instead of encouraging the subject to transcend material realities that govern the existence of every life form on this planet, Amerindian philosophy and spirituality attempt to facilitate a type of cosmic awareness that allows one to “renoncer à l’anthropocentrisme occidental” ‘renounce western anthropocentrism’ (Cadorel, 1985, 88; my trans.).

In opposition to anthropocentric delusions of grandeur that are not supported by science, Amerindian environmental discourse stresses the importance of ecological humility in an interconnected and interdependent biosphere. As the author observes, “le monde indien est imprégné de l’idée du cycle [...] L’homme indien n’est pas le maître du monde” ‘the Indian world was impregnated with the idea of a cycle [...] The Indian was not the master of the world’ (*Le Rêve Mexicain*, 1988, 229; 174). In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio contends that these deep ecological sensibilities are indicative of a “système de pensée cohérent [...] une philosophie” ‘coherent system of thought [...] a true philosophy’ (1988, 257; 95). Although European invaders originally scoffed at the spiritual convictions of indigenous societies, the writer highlights that many of these concepts have now been confirmed by scientists.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to being coherent, Le Clézio posits that the ecocentric worldview of Amerindian civilizations is also cohesive. In traditional Native American communities, science informs religion and vice versa. For this reason, Amerindian environmental discourse is not predicated upon isolated thought systems that are incongruous with each other. Given their inherent cohesiveness, Amerindian worldviews could represent a viable alternative to Western conceptions which continue to exacerbate the ecological crisis with each passing day. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, the central focus of Le Clézio’s literary project is to ensure that this dim voice will continue to resonate despite centuries of persecution, genocide, and linguistic imperialism. For Le Clézio, literature is an invaluable tool for replacing scientifically erroneous discourses which

lie at the heart of the ecological crisis with more realistic and positive attitudes. By preserving important cultural artifacts of autochthonous civilizations which reflect a radically different *weltanschauung* and embedding these constructive discourses in a dominant world language, the author hopes that these traces could one day nuance Western ideas of progress and growth.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Deleterious Effects of Cultural and Linguistic Imperialism in *Le Rêve Mexicain***

In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio beckons the reader to imagine how the world might be different today if the voices of Amerindian societies would have been valorized centuries ago. Additionally, the author speculates about the present and future repercussions of cultural and linguistic imperialism that have reduced many Native American civilizations to mere rubble. First, Le Clézio ponders whether the environmental crisis could have been avoided entirely if a meaningful dialogue, grounded in mutual respect, would have taken place before the industrial revolution. As the author explains in an interview with Gérard de Cortanze, “Notre responsabilité, face aux générations futures, est entière. Si nous avions su vivre comme vivent les Amérindiens [...] nous n’aurions certainement pas eu à gérer autant de catastrophes. Certes, nous n’en serions pas au même degré de perfectionnement technique mais nous n’aurions pas non plus gaspillé, avec autant de facilité, nos chances de vie” ‘Our responsibility for future generations cannot be overstated. If we would have known how to live like the Amerindians live [...] we certainly would not have had to manage so many catastrophes. Of course, we would not have achieved the same level of technical perfection but we would not have so easily wasted our chances to survive either’ (24; my trans.). Further elucidating his motivations for writing *Le Rêve Mexicain* and the other so-called ‘Mexican’ texts, the author concludes, “J’ai simplement le sentiment de l’impérieuse nécessité d’entendre d’autres voix, d’écouter des voix, celles des gens qu’on n’entend pas parce qu’ils ont été dédaignés trop longtemps, ou parce que leur nombre est infime, mais qui ont tellement de choses à nous apporter” ‘I simply feel that it is urgently necessary to hear other voices, to listen to other voices, those of people that we don’t hear because they have been looked down upon for too long, or because their population is too small, but who have so many things to offer us’ (De Cortanze, 1988, 24; my trans.). Convinced of their intellectual and moral superiority, the European conquistadors attempted to eradicate every last remnant of Amerindian cultures. Blinded by extreme avarice and ethnocentrism, the conquerors failed to realize that these rich indigenous cultures had much to offer if they were willing to listen.

The European settlers dismissed the spiritual and philosophical beliefs of indigenous peoples as a form of naïve mysticism because they refused to engage in dialogue with cultures that they considered to be inferior. Due to their myopia fueled by insatiable greed and a superiority complex, the European invaders were painfully unaware of their own ignorance. If a meaningful conversation would have taken place between the Europeans and these autochthonous societies, then the immigrants of the new world would have noticed that their base of scientific knowledge paled in comparison to that of the native peoples. Whereas the ancient Aztec civilization was extremely advanced for its time in various scientific fields including astronomy and astrology, researchers like Galileo would continue to be persecuted by the Catholic Church for even attempting to engage in scientific inquiry for several generations to come. As a result of this devalorization of scientific erudition in their own cultures, Le Clézio asserts that the

Europeans had much to learn from the original inhabitants. Unfortunately, the Europeans did not heed the ecological warnings issued by Amerindian political and spiritual leaders.

Furthermore, although human exceptionalism has been disproved since Darwin (1859), outdated ideas which reinforce anthropocentric thought paradigms have yet to be contested. Many people now consider science to be the ultimate arbiter of truth, but the general public often refuses to recognize that ecological principles apply to human beings as well. Hence, in spite of nearly irrefutable evidence from the international scientific community which affirms that human-induced climate change is indeed real, Western society still finds itself at a dangerous impasse. Our thought systems have yet to undergo the radical transformation that would bring them into line with what we have now known about the universe and our place in it for quite some time. In Western society, faulty anthropocentric logic still reigns supreme even when the effects of global warming are clearly visible all around us. In ecolinguistic terms, the dominant environmental discourse has barely changed at all to reflect the major scientific discoveries of the last couple of centuries.

In addition to offering a compelling argument in *Le Rêve Mexicain* which asserts that the ecological crisis could have been averted altogether if Amerindian voices would not have been so violently silenced, Le Clézio is cautiously optimistic that these autochthonous societies could still play a major role in reshaping a more sustainable future for all of humankind. By preserving and promoting<sup>5</sup> the scattered remnants of Amerindian cultures which have miraculously survived the conquest due to the efforts of individuals such as the aforementioned Bernardino de Sahagún, the author suggests that these native peoples might still save us all. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio aims to incorporate key elements of the ecocentric worldview of divergent Amerindian civilizations into the dominant environmental discourse of Western society. Now that the crisis is upon us, regardless of whether it could have been avoided or not, we must move forward in a more positive direction.

In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, after highlighting the systematic violence and exploitation that obliterated many Amerindian civilizations, the author describes these first nations as being “en plein essor” ‘in full bloom’ at the time of their destruction (1988, 60; 40). Le Clézio invites the reader to speculate concerning how these cultivated societies would have evolved over time if their trajectory would not have been ‘interrupted’ by the conquest. As the author muses,

La grande question que nous posent les cultures indigènes du Mexique [...] est bien celle-ci : comment auraient évolué ces civilisations [...] Quelle philosophie aurait pu grandir dans le Nouveau Monde, s’il n’y avait eu la destruction de la Conquête. En détruisant ces cultures, en abolissant aussi complètement l’identité de ces peuples, de quelle richesse les Conquistadors européens nous ont-ils privés ?

The great question we are asked by the indigenous cultures of Mexico [...] is indeed this: How might these civilizations have evolved [...] What philosophy might have developed in the New World if the destruction of the Conquest had not taken place? In destroying those cultures, by abolishing so completely the identity of those peoples, what richness did the European Conquerors deprive us of? (1988, 269; 204-205).

This poignant passage underscores the writer's convictions related to the importance of interculturality in the modern world. Given his sincere belief that every culture, large or small, has something valuable to contribute to the entire human family, it should be noted that the Nobel Laureate created the "fondation pour l'interculturel et la paix" with the renowned intercultural theorist Issa Asgarally in 2010 (Moser, 2011, 41). Throughout his entire career which spans approximately half a century, Le Clézio has been trying to expand the environmental conversation to include the perspectives of marginalized, minority civilizations through the medium of literature. With complex issues like climate change, the writer asserts that we need all hands on deck in order to create possible solutions. Additionally, since the ecological crisis affects every single person on this planet, the author affirms that everyone should have a voice. In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio questions the notion that an elite group of the world's richest and most powerful nations should have the right to make short-sighted decisions without consulting all of the stakeholders (i.e. the entire human race), whose continued existence has now been placed in jeopardy.

Moreover, Le Clézio maintains that our very future might depend on our willingness to embrace cultural and linguistic diversity. Even if it is tempting for the dominant world powers to exclude voices of dissent, which might momentarily derail economic 'progress' as it is narrowly defined in Western society by asking questions that urgently need to be posed, the author explains that sifting through the ashes of lost Amerindian civilizations could help us to rediscover a sense of ecological balance. As the author contends, "Les Mexicains étaient à la veille de développer un système philosophique qui aurait pu résoudre les contradictions de l'ancien monde [...] le respect des forces naturelles, la recherche de l'équilibre entre l'homme et le monde aurait pu être le frein nécessaire au progrès technique du monde occidental" 'The Mexicans were on the verge of developing a philosophical system which might have resolved the contradictions of the ancient world [...] the respect for natural forces, the search for an equilibrium between man and the world might have been the necessary braking of technological progress in the Western world' (1988, 273; 207-208). After directly addressing the environmental crisis, Le Clézio reaches the following conclusion: "l'homme d'Occident doit réinventer tout ce qui faisait la beauté et l'harmonie des civilisations qu'il a détruites" 'Western man must reinvent all that once made up the beauty and harmony of the civilizations he has destroyed' (1988, 274; 208). For the Franco-Mauritian writer, preserving what is left of these autochthonous societies could literally be a matter of life and death. A vital aspect of this reinvention or radical paradigm shift suggested by Le Clézio is to replace outdated environmental discourse which frames nature from a homocentric, instrumental lens with a type of 'ecologically more correct language' outlined by Heuberger. According to Le Clézio, picking up the fragments of Amerindian culture that remain could function as a catalyst that allows Western society to conceive and actualize a new way of being in the world.

## The Limitations of Le Clézio's Artistic Project

Nonetheless, despite his assertion that "Faire jaillir une unité nouvelle de cette poussière de cultures est devenu une nécessité" 'To make a new unity rise up from that dusting (of cultures)<sup>6</sup> has become a necessity' in order to confront the daunting nature of the environmental catastrophe that our species has created, or at least hastened, Le Clézio readily admits the limitations of his artistic project (1988, 219; 165). Similar to *La fête chantée*, the conclusion of *Le Rêve Mexicain* is quite nuanced. John Brown's interpretation of the *dénouement* of *La fête*



*chantée* could also be applied to *Le Rêve Mexicain*. Underscoring that the Franco-Mauritian author is not naïve enough to think that a writer can breathe life back into civilizations that have been forever lost, Brown explains, “But in ‘La danse contre le déluge,’ the somber conclusion of this brilliant and challenging work, he does not permit himself any facile optimism” (1998, 583). Numerous passages in *Le Rêve Mexicain* are reminiscent of the realistic conclusion of *La fête chantée*.

After acknowledging the determined efforts of his predecessors to keep Amerindian voices alive, Le Clézio declares, “Mais l’équilibre d’une civilisation est précaire, et peu de chose la ruine à jamais. Le monde indien est fragile comme un rêve, auquel le rêve des oracles annonçait la fin” ‘But the balance of a civilization is precarious, and it takes very little to ruin it forever. The Indian world was as fragile as a dream, to which the dream of the oracles announced the end’ (*Le Rêve Mexicain*, 1988, 122; 91). Echoing similar sentiments in a later section of the work, the author delves into “le sentiment troublant d’une civilisation perdue à tout jamais” ‘the disturbing feeling of knowing a civilization has been lost forever’ (1988, 212; 160). Le Clézio is aware that most of what has disappeared can never be recovered. This realization explains the profound sense of loss that deeply resonates throughout this complex text.

In *Le Rêve Mexicain*, silence is a haunting leitmotif that pervades the entire work. For Le Clézio, the silence that enshrouds Amerindian civilizations and their grim fate allows us to catch a small glimpse of the cultural and intellectual richness that the conquest has forever deprived us of experiencing. As the author explains, “Ce silence, qui se referme sur l’une des plus grandes civilisations du monde, emportant sa parole, sa vérité, ses dieux et ses légendes, c’est aussi un peu le commencement de l’histoire moderne” ‘That silence, which closed in on one of the greatest civilizations in the world, carrying off its words, its truth, its gods, and its legends, was also in a certain way the beginning of modern history’ (1988, 59; 40). Further developing the theme of silence, the author reiterates, “Le silence est immense, terrifiant. Il engloutit le monde indien [...] il le réduit au néant. Ces cultures indigènes, vivantes, diversifiées, héritières de savoirs et de mythes aussi anciens que l’histoire de l’homme, en l’espace d’une génération sont condamnées et réduites à une poussière, à une cendre” ‘The silence was immense, terrifying. It engulfed the Indian world [...] and reduced it to a void. Those indigenous cultures, living, diverse, heirs to knowledge and myths as ancient as the history of man, in the span of one generation were sentenced and reduced to dust, to ashes’ (1988, 231; 176). As Brown notes in *La fête chantée*, it is evident that Le Clézio does not minimize or trivialize the Amerindian cultural treasures that have been effaced for good. The author is steadfast in his affirmation that engaging in dialogue with Native American societies is no longer an option if we wish to save the planet and ourselves in the process. Yet, Le Clézio is troubled because he is unsure if there are enough visible traces of the traditional Amerindian way of life “au milieu des ruines” ‘in the midst of the ruins’ to help us deviate from our current unsustainable path (1988, 59; 40). Although the question of how many fragments still exist to be exhumed and integrated into a new form of environmental discourse remains unresolved at the end of *Le Rêve Mexicain*, Le Clézio insists that this long overdue conversation is our best bet for survival.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Le Rêve Mexicain* provides a concrete example which illustrates why cultural and linguistic imperialism truly matter. When a language or a culture dies, an important voice that

represents another point of view perishes as well. Given the dire realities of living in a biosphere that is degrading at an alarming rate, global society has arrived at a crucial tipping point. As contemporary ecolinguists assert, it is time to reconstruct the anthropocentric environmental discourse of dominant world languages by uncovering examples of other worldviews that are more scientifically accurate. These healthier approaches to sharing our interconnected and interdependent planet with other human beings and organisms could finally allow us to solve the contradictions of Western society highlighted by Le Clézio in *Le Rêve Mexicain*. As the author affirms in *Le Rêve Mexicain*, the importance of preserving minority languages and cultures has nothing to do with nostalgia. Facing an uphill battle to reconfigure a cultural and socio-economic model that relies on excess consumption to sustain itself, breaking the silence and fostering a meaningful exchange with past and present civilizations could very well determine our future or lack thereof.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>This point will be further examined in a later section of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>In Haï, the author articulates similar fears. As the narrator declares, “La rencontre avec le monde indien n’est plus un luxe aujourd’hui. C’est devenu une nécessité pour qui veut comprendre ce qui se passe dans le monde moderne. Comprendre n’est rien, mais tenter d’aller au bout de tous les corridors obscurs, essayer d’ouvrir quelques portes : c’est-à-dire, au fond, tenter de survivre” ‘This encounter with the Indian world is no longer a luxury today. It has become a necessity for those that want to understand what is happening in the modern world. Understanding itself is not enough, but attempting to follow all of these obscure corridors, trying to open some doors: In other words, attempting to survive’ (1971, 13; my trans.).

<sup>3</sup>For instance, in *La fête chantée*, Le Clézio highlights that Chief Seattle’s famous speech in which he indicated that “toutes choses sont liées” is a cogent explanation of the first law of ecology. See pages 229-236.

<sup>4</sup>However, it should be noted that the author is astutely cognizant of his limitations as a writer, as evidenced by his Nobel acceptance speech “Dans la forêt des paradoxes.” Furthermore, a later section of this essay will underscore that neither an extinct language nor a lost civilization can be fully resuscitated after its demise.

<sup>5</sup>In reference to Chief Seattle’s legendary speech, the author asserts in *La fête chantée*, “Chef Seattle prononça l’un des plus beaux messages laissés à l’humanité qu’il serait bon d’enseigner dans toutes les écoles du monde” ‘Chief Seattle delivered one of the most beautiful messages ever left to humanity that it would be good to teach in every school in the world’ (1997, 233; my trans.).

<sup>6</sup>My insertion.

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