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Revisioning the Colonial Record: *La relación de Michoacán* and Contemporary Mexican Indigenous Film

Charlotte Gleghorn

Biography

Charlotte Gleghorn joined Royal Holloway, University of London in July 2009, as a postdoctoral researcher for the 'Indigeneity in the Contemporary World' project. She is currently working on a book project on authorship in Latin American Indigenous filmmaking and is particularly interested in aesthetic strategies used to articulate collective concerns and shared memory. Previously, her research has principally focused on Latin American cinemas in comparative contexts, notably Colombian, Argentine and Brazilian. Her doctoral thesis studied the increased profile of women directors in New Argentine Cinema and the Brazilian retomada, exploring the themes of history and memory in light of the repressive effects of violent dictatorial rule and neoliberal reform.

Abstract:

This essay discusses two recent Mexican films that draw on the written and pictorial narratives represented in La relación de Michoacán, a sixteenth-century codex. This text is widely attributed to the Franciscan Friar Jerónimo de Alcalá but could more accurately be described as a composite account of multiple Indigenous and Spanish authors. Eréndira ikikunari (2006) explores the moment of Spanish invasion in the region of Michoacán, portraying the varied responses of the P'urhépecha people of the area through the heroic resistance of a young woman. Eréndira is compared with

a film directed by a P'urhépecha filmmaker, Auikanime: la que tiene hambre (Auikanime: The Hungry One) (2010), which, like many of Pavel Guillén Rodríguez's fiction shorts, also draws on the Relación for its inspiration. In analysing the discourses that frame and reflect the use of the codex and its aesthetic transposition to the screen, I demonstrate how the films dialogue with dominant constructions of Indigeneity as experienced in post-Revolutionary Mexican nationalism.

Keywords:

Mexico, Indigeneity, La relación de Michoacán, Erendira ikikunari, Auikanime

During the first Inter-American Indigenist Conference in 1940, the Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas pronounced that the nation-state's mission should not be to Indianize Mexico, but rather 'mexicanizar al índio' (cited in Dietz 1999: 178). This now famous refrain performatively enacts the assimilationist impulse of Mexico's post-Revolutionary ideology: *indigenismo*. In the decades following the Revolution of 1910–20, the state rearticulated its positioning towards its Indigenous population through a particularly virulent form of glorification, cooptation and negation of Indigenous difference. Institutions such as the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP, 1921) and later the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI, 1948) were employed to propagate the *indigenista* agenda through educational, cultural and developmentalist means. *Mestizaje* – ethno-cultural mixing – became the symbol of a unified Mexico, a marker of its distinctiveness and of its perceived future. The new 'raza cósmica' ('cosmic race') would combine the 'best' elements of Indigenous and Spanish cultures, creating a shared sense of identity through the erasure of difference (Vasconcelos 1992). With the support of sympathetic intellectuals and artists, the doctrine reified the country's pre-Hispanic past, leaving a pantheon of nationalist icons in its wake. Included in this visual syntax are the codices, murals and frescoes which bear witness to the cultural life of the territory prior to the invasion of the Spanish.

Film also participated in *indigenista* aesthetics, perhaps most famously in the Golden Age classic *María Candelaria* (1943), but also in state-sponsored documentaries, as illustrated by *Todos somos mexicanos* (1958). Like much early ethnographic visual culture, *indigenista* film was imbricated in (neo)colonial discourses of representation, asserting a presumed objectivity in its subject and taking up a scientific posture. The parallel trajectories of documentary filmmaking and

anthropological study developed around the desire to ‘symbolically control the world’ (Ruby 1980: 166), endorsing fantasies of superiority, and confining Indigenous peoples to a romanticized, pre-modern past. However, with the increasing momentum of the political struggles of peasant, Indigenous and student movements during the 1960s and 1970s, marked by the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968, anthropology – an ally of *indigenista* doctrine – suffered a crisis in legitimacy. These changes urged INI officials and anthropologists to reformulate *indigenista* policy, emphasizing the values of participation and consultation. As part of this repositioning, visual representation became a privileged mode to preserve the distinctive cultural practices of Indigenous groups, emphasizing the diversity of the country, while also documenting the problems that communities faced. The INI formalized the position of ethnographic cinema when in 1977 it created the Archivo Audiovisual Etnográfico (AAE), promoting film production in partnership with the Fondo Nacional para Actividades Sociales (Fonapas) through their Ollín Yoliztli Programme. Between 1978 and 1987, by which time the drive for Indigenous self-representation was gaining ground, the INI funded 37 completed films in the *indigenista* mode (Baltazar Caballero et al. 2009: 16).

Framed by these debates, the rubric of *video índio*, or Indigenous video, emerged in Mexico in the 1980s, propelled by Indigenous activists, sympathetic anthropologists, filmmakers and state-led initiatives. Along with the foundation of the continental organization, the Coordinadora (then Consejo) Latinoamericana de Cine de Pueblos Indígenas (CLACPI), in Mexico City in 1985, the *Transferecia de Medios Audiovisuales a las Comunidades Indígenas* (Transference of Audiovisual Media to Indigenous Communities) programme was launched by the INI in 1989, organizing and facilitating workshops in Indigenous communities to empower them in

the creation of their own images. This programme enacted the category of *video indígena* from ‘above’, while the Indigenous autonomy movement provided a fertile platform on which to develop its praxis more organically (Cusi Wortham 2004: 365). Alongside the workshops that the INI conducted, the institution created four Indigenous video production centres in Oaxaca, Michoacán, Sonora, and the Yucatán, while independent Indigenous media organizations, such as the renowned Ojo de Agua in Oaxaca, developed to become powerful alternatives to state-led initiatives. A dynamic and evolving social practice, related to circuits of community, state and international NGO patronage, the category of Indigenous film now comprises diverse initiatives, genres and aesthetics, which often converge at international film festivals. At these events, filmmakers and community members exercise their right to self-representation, drawing a key distinction between productions made by Indigenous filmmakers and *indigenista* films made in a paternalist mode by non-Indigenous directors.

This distinction offers a springboard to discuss two recent Mexican films, *Eréndira ikikunari* (Juan Mora Catlett 2006) and *Auikanime: la que tiene hambre* (Auikanime: The Hungry One) (2010), by the P’urhépecha filmmaker Pavel Guillén Rodríguez, both of which draw inspiration from a sixteenth-century codex, *La relación de Michoacán*. Compiled circa 1538–41, the *Relación de Michoacán* is not a pre-Hispanic codex but a text produced from the very moment of contact, violence and cross-cultural communication that constituted the so-called *conquista* of Mexico. Many such texts were commissioned by the colonial authorities as a means of gathering information about Indigenous cultures. In so doing, they mapped Native cosmologies onto Christian dogma, thus establishing a policy of ‘translation for assimilation’ (Mignolo and Schiwy 2002: 255). The codex presents the oral narrative

of an anonymous *petámuti* (P'urhépecha high priest), combined with the perspective of the then P'urhépecha governor Cuinierángari (renamed Don Pedro Panza by the colonial authorities), translated into Castilian by a Franciscan Friar and layered with words in the P'urhé language. Divided into three parts – the first, which details the P'urhépechan gods and beliefs, was almost completely destroyed – the *Relación* gives an account of pre-hispanic P'urhépechan society up to and including the arrival of the Spanish.¹ The written narrative is accompanied by twenty-four illustrations crafted by *caracha*, or Indigenous scribes, who were probably familiar with aspects of a European pictorial tradition but who also drew on P'urhépecha epistemological and aesthetic modes (Stone 2004: 86).²

The authorship of the *Relación*, long contested, is now widely attributed to Friar Jerónimo de Alcalá (ca.1508–ca.1545), although for many, the true authors of the codex are indisputably the P'urhépecha themselves. In a preface written for Viceroy Don Antonio de Mendoza, who commissioned the text, the anonymous compiler carefully positions himself as a conduit for the oral narrative given by the Indigenous 'authors', thus promoting the 'chimera of the unmediated native voice' (Carey 2010: 454). The Friar's distancing from the text's content recognises the cultural origins of the *Relación* but effectively obscures the ideological work built into the transcription and translation task. As Alessandra Luiselli argues, the Friar's intervention in the *Relación* 'resultaba no en la recuperación sino en la fabricación de una identidad amerindia en perfecta sincronía con la utopía milenaria' (2000: 652; resulted not in the recovery but rather the fabrication of an Amerindian identity in perfect harmony with the millenarian utopia).³ The reinstatement of the voices of the *petámuti* and the other P'urhépecha contributors to the text is thus vital to

counterweigh the distortions brought about by its proselytising discourse. As Cynthia Stone observes,

it is only when we set aside the exclusive identification of the friar as author that we can begin to perceive the complex textual dynamics of the *Relación de Michoacán*: the layering of oral, pictorial, and alphabetic traditions; the traces of earlier manuscript drafts in the sole copy that has been found to date; the efforts to shape the final product in such a way as to edit out politically sensitive material; the struggle between competing viewpoints within the text, which have led, in turn, to contrary currents of interpretation. (2004: 13)

Notwithstanding the networks of power and coercion in place at the time of its compilation, the codex is taken to be a prime example of overlapping modes of authorship and representation. Moreover, its regional specificity is particularly pertinent to this essay since Michoacán holds a significant position with regards to the post-Revolutionary ideologies of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje*. The home state of Lázaro Cárdenas, Governor of Michoacán (1928–32) and later President of the Republic (1934–40), the region may be seen as a testing ground for some of the most penetrating *indigenista* policies (Dietz 1999: 21). Considering the interlocking trajectories of codex aesthetics, *indigenismo* and Indigenous film, this essay analyses how Mora Catlett and Rodríguez harness the *Relación* to create representations which are both sympathetic to, and discordant with, the *mestizo* cultural ideal.

Challenging Mexican ‘mythohistory’

As representations that engage with and resuscitate accounts of a sixteenth-century colonial encounter, *Eréndira* and *Auikanime* both thematize what Ana María Alonso

has termed the ‘post-Revolutionary mythohistory’ of Mexico (2002: 462). This mythohistory, with its attendant discourses of hybridity and cultural cross-fertilization, privileges narratives of transculturation. Coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940, transculturation signifies the ways in which cultures negotiate the terms of their encounter with others, suppressing some aspects, accommodating others and resulting in a new system of representation (Ortiz 1995). The term describes the process of loss and gain which brings about cultural change in the context of uneven power relations, and may be seen to envelop a form of assimilation typical of nationalist projects (Mignolo and Schiwy 2002: 252). The 1990s in particular saw these foundational tropes of Mexicanness narrativized and revised on film. Nicolás Echevarría’s *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991), one of a cluster of works engaged with the historical moment of the 1992 quincentenary of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas, charts explorer Álvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca’s transculturation among Indigenous groups in the present-day US state of Florida and in northern Mexico, suggesting that the cultural traffic between Indigenous and colonial authorities was not unidirectional. In the same year Mora Catlett’s first feature, *Retorno a Aztlán* (Return to Aztlán) (1991), imagined pre-Hispanic Mexica civilization, bringing the sounds of classical Náhuatl to the silver screen.⁴ Set seventy years prior to the Conquest, the film narrates the journeys to the mythical city of Aztlán undertaken by the messengers of Moctezuma and the protagonist Ollín. At its core is an interrogation of the erasure of Indigenous historical memory and the widely disseminated prophecy which purportedly foretold the end of the Mexica civilization. The commercially successful *La otra conquista* (The Other Conquest) (1998), later in the decade, attempted to (re)inscribe Indigenous agency in the ‘spiritual conquest’ of Mexico through the symbolism of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a syncretic figure

comprising the Mexica Goddess Tonantzin and the Virgin Mary. In these examples, the colonial encounter dramatizes issues surrounding cultural intelligibility and translation, exposing the epistemic, and semantic, relationship between *conquista* (conquest), *conversión* (conversion) and *traducción* (translation) (Rafael 2001: xvii).

These three themes also intersect in the staging of colonial incursion in *Eréndira* and *Auikanime*, in some ways reversing the epistemic shift performed in the translation of the oral P'urhépecha history to Castilian in the *Relación*. *Eréndira ikikunari*, Mora Catlett's second feature film, interweaves the written and pictorial narrative contained in the *Relación* with the legend of Eréndira, a P'urhépechan princess who fought the Spanish invaders on horseback. The film portrays the dispute that purportedly developed between different factions of P'urhépecha leadership with the arrival of the Spanish. Lord Tangáxoan II, the last *cazonci* (hereditary ruler) of the P'urhépechan state, following a prophetic announcement about the arrival of the new (Spanish) gods, is urged by his brother, Lord Timas, to take his own life to avoid the shame of being captured. Moments before he submerges himself in Lake Pátzcuaro, he is persuaded by Lord Cuiníarangari, fresh from an exploratory trip to determine the nature of the Spanish negotiations, that the colonizers do not want war but rather gold to feed their gods. Reneging on his suicide, Tangáxoan resolves to await the Spanish and negotiate with them. This 'passive' approach to the colonizers, perceived as the surrender of the P'urhépecha, angers Timas, inciting him to mount an armed resistance against the Tangáxoan–colonial alliance. Eréndira (Xochiquetzal Rodríguez) is destined to marry Nanuma, a member of Tangáxoan's party, but joins Timas, her uncle and hero, in the struggle after stealing and learning to ride a horse. Fratricidal combat ensues and Timas is slain by Nanuma, who also kills Eréndira while she mourns her uncle's loss. The enduring presence of the sacred stone of

Curicaueri in the final scene nevertheless gestures towards the survival of the P'urhépecha people.

Mora Catlett first came across the figure of Eréndira while researching a documentary on the Mexican artist and architect, Juan O'Gorman (1905–82). His fascination with the image of an Indigenous female warrior riding a white horse in resistance to the Spanish invaders, portrayed in O'Gorman's mural *La historia de Michoacán* (1941–2) on the walls of the Gertrudis Bocanegra Public Library in Pátzcuaro, prompted him to investigate her story further (Mora Catlett 2009–10: 12). The first printed reference to Eréndira in Mexico was in the late nineteenth century, when the historian and writer Eduardo Ruíz (1839–1902), drawing on the information contained in the *Relación*, published his two-volume history of the region, *Michoacán. Paisajes, tradiciones y leyendas (Michoacán: Landscapes, Traditions and Legends)* (1891–1900). This popular study of the cultural practices and history of the area, along with her various reincarnations in paintings and oral history, might account for Eréndira's mythic status in Michoacán (Ramírez Barreto 2007: 114–15). Her name was also given to the home of Lázaro Cárdenas who often resided on the banks of Lake Pátzcuaro (Ramírez Barreto 2007: 122). After further research, Mora Catlett decided to merge the colonial text with the oral legend in the film, offering opposing views of the Conquest (2009–10: 12). The avowed aim of the director is to write this chapter of history from an Indigenous perspective, with the participation of members from the local P'urhépecha community, carving a space from which to look back at the colonial version of events. In Mora Catlett's words, the film is 'more than mere entertainment, it's a Statement of the Original Peoples regarding their own History' (2009–10: 14).

The use of the P'urhé language in the film is fundamental to the director's mediation of a Native perspective. A number of linguists collaborated in the making of *Eréndira* to devise a form of P'urhé 'with an ancient flavour' that remained decipherable to the modern-day P'urhépecha (2009–10: 14). By placing P'urhé dialogue alongside the pictorial narratives contained within the codex, *Eréndira* foregrounds the historical memory contained within the language, underscoring that translation corresponds to a transcultural shift (Mignolo and Schiwy 2002: 252). In light of language revival programmes in Mexico, native-language content is an area of great social significance. The director's own account of screening *Eréndira* in a community setting in Pátzcuaro – the same town where Cárdenas declared the necessity to Mexicanize the Indian – suggests that the embodied performance of P'urhé in the film is one of its principal successes. Mora Catlett reports that following the screening an old woman said that it was the first time she had understood a Mexican film, and another member of the audience commented that the film restored his pride in the language (2009–10: 15). Notably, *Eréndira* received recognition for its employment of P'urhé from the SEP on the occasion of UNESCO's International Mother Language Day, Mexico, 21 February 2007.

The distinction drawn between oral and written literature, expressed in terms of a presumed (il)literacy, often frames the transposition of one (Indigenous) language to another (European). In relation to the *Relación*, Stone notes that 'the way in which the friar cedes authorship to the indigenous informants does not undermine his sense of cultural superiority, for they are identified exclusively with the "lesser" authority of oral as opposed to literary tradition' (2004: 46). Significantly, Mora Catlett also seems to elide the porousness between oral and written cultures in promotional material for *Eréndira*, although the film itself blurs these boundaries. He positions the film as a

composite of accounts, distinguishing between writing as ‘the official history’ – the prerogative of the colonizers – and orality ‘being the only history book of vanquished peoples’ (Mora Catlett 2009–10: 12). Further, in the ‘making-of’ documentary accompanying the DVD release of *Eréndira*, there appears to be a mismatch between the director’s assertion that the P’urhépecha are the true ‘dueños’ (‘owners’) of the cultural material depicted in the codex, and the way in which he frames the Indigenous component of the film as the oral legend.

Eréndira begins with the eponymous legend told by an off-screen voice in P’urhé, marking the protagonist as an exceptional being:

Hucha mítetixapquia escacsi hupiringa, máteru cuiripuecha. Atahpiticha encacsi tyámu xucuparhapca ca engacsi cacapequa úquaaca imaechani engacsi cuahpequarhenga. Ma cuiripuhcu no cherheaspti. Yurhistsquiri ma enga naneni, hamemquia Eréndira arhicurhispti. (We had heard about the intruders who descended from heaven and killed all who dared oppose them. The only one person that didn’t fear them was a girl, barely a woman: her name was Eréndira.)⁵

A graphic credit sequence accompanies these words, depicting animated arches based on the convent of Archangel San Miguel in Ixmiquilpan in Hidalgo state, before honing in on one of the sixteenth-century murals featured in the building (Richards 2011: 211). The film focuses on the figure of a warrior in the fresco, as the narrator recounts the heroism of Eréndira. The juxtaposition of the oral legend of Eréndira, creating an epic structure to the narrative, and Indigenous aesthetics in the church murals, evinces the film’s predilection for iconic referents of pre-Hispanic Mexico. Here the exploitation of different representational forms discloses the film’s status as a fiction of the past, calling attention to the potential pitfalls of a realist mode that

may appeal to notions of historical truth. Cut outs from the *Relación* illustrations are also inserted throughout the film, creating a distinctive and multimodal aesthetic akin to that of a collage. Plates from the Escorial manuscript, such as Plate 24, depicting the *petámuti*'s oral address to the Friar-compiler, or Plate 44, illustrating the arrival of the Spanish in the area, are featured at key moments in the narrative as signposts, or metaphors, of what we see in the main body of the film. The resulting film presents a highly plastic and richly textured *mise-en-scène* that imaginatively evokes a moment impossible to recreate.

However, it is noteworthy that the director should call upon representations that pertain to another Indigenous culture, the Hñähñu (or Otomí), in the credit sequence. The thematic overlap between the Ixmiquilpan frescoes and *Eréndira*'s narrative drive may explain their inclusion, with the battle scenes in the paintings foreshadowing the role that violent conflict will have in the film, reiterated as the credits come to a close and the screen is washed in blood red. Yet in his description of the film's making, the director highlights the attention to P'urhépecha specificities in *Eréndira*, underlining how his team utilized the costume and body markings contained in the *Relación*, and devised a colour palette consonant with the original manuscript (Mora Catlett 2009–10: 12–13). The attention to colours is particularly significant, since they were central in transmitting and determining meaning in pictographic form throughout Mesoamerica (Stone 2004: vii). P'urhépecha material culture is also rendered on screen with details such as *bezotes* (lip plugs), ear guards, pottery, textiles and other crafts drawn from Native artisans in the area (Mora Catlett 2009–10: 12). A number of the scenes were filmed in archaeo-historical zones, lending 'a kind of magical aura and communion with living nature and the ancient gods' (2009–10: 15). While *Eréndira* transposes the *caracha* illustrations, asserting the P'urhépecha presence in

the codex, the inclusion of the Ixmiquilpan murals in the credits both undermines any spurious claims to authenticity, recognising the impossibility of faithfully reconstructing this shared historical moment, and exemplifies dominant representations of Indigeneity as enacted in post-Revolutionary *mestizo* nationalism.

This layering of aesthetic forms reflects the cross-cultural negotiations that occurred with colonization in the sixteenth century and which sustain the making of the film. The simultaneous conjuring of diverse modes and bodies of knowledge fosters a ‘creative tension between the meanings engendered by these texts [the *Relación*, the P’urhé language] in the traditional performative context and the new function within a Western dramaturgical framework’ (Balme 1999: 5). The film’s borrowing of masks used in the ‘Danza de los Kúrpitis’ symbolizes both the alien nature of the colonizers to the P’urhépecha and the syncretic cultural forms borne of the combination/fusion of pre-Hispanic performance modes with colonial religious festivals. Made of wood and painted with European facial features, these masks are used in the dance celebrated in the municipality of San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro and performed every January, coinciding with Epiphany (Bishop 2009: 391). In *Eréndira*, the contrast between the mobile armoured body and the static faces of the masks grotesquely parodies the colonial forces. The masks symbolize the immortal status of the ‘new Gods’ and their alien beast, the horse, until Eréndira witnesses their bloodshed in a battle scene and realizes that the Spanish are not invincible. This rendition of a P’urhépecha point of view on the intruders draws on a post-contact aesthetic form, acknowledging the powerful strategy of appropriation and reinvention. Simultaneously, the colonial gaze is contested since the eyes in the colonizers’ masks are fixed, and point of view shots dominate from the P’urhépecha perspective.

These strategies evoke historical agency, rebuking *indigenista* claims to integrate Native practices into the *mestizo* nation. However, the closing scenes in *Eréndira* seem to point in the opposite direction, signalling the inevitable integration of P'urhépecha beliefs into the dominant register of Christianity. Following Eréndira's death, the spectator is presented with a perfectly centred shot of Lord Tangáxoan, seated in a doorframe flanked by P'urhépecha devil masks on both sides, as he instructs his people in P'urhé:

Since the strangers wish to be our lords, since they yearn for gold and women and land and lakes and all of its richness, we better get baptized so that they won't kill us, and thus we and our children and grandchildren can die of old age upon our land. Thus, it's my will that we all worship the god of the strangers, *since it's the same one that we already worship*. (emphasis added)

Approximately half way through this speech, as Tangáxoan commands conversion, he retreats through the doorframe to reemerge in colonial dress. His capitulation, rendered visually and aurally as church music begins to sound, has a rather fatalistic tone, negating the tactics which were integral to a mediated conversion. This contrasts with the following scene when Eréndira reappears in an idyllic lakeside setting. She is dressed and decorated in white and bathed in sunlight as it streams through the trees. The oneiric light references versions of the legend which suggest that Eréndira was captured by a colonial soldier, and cried inconsolably to the gods for her release. This was granted in the form of a lake, Lake Zirahuén, formed from her tears, where she is thought to live on as a mermaid. In *Eréndira*, we witness her mount her white steed and move away before the camera rests on a shrine with the stone representing the fire and sun God, Curicaueri. The stone's survival of the devastation of colonial encounter

acts as a symbol of Indigenous resistance and resilience. Yet Eréndira's sad and resigned face as she leaves the lake, coupled with the fatalistic undertones to Tangáxoan's speech in the previous scene, intimates the integration of P'urhépechan beliefs within the framework of the dominant (Christian, later *mestizo*) culture, and not vice versa. Spiritual conversion thus provides the narrative arc to *Eréndira*. The same theme is also central to *Auikanime*, but in representational terms Rodríguez's film portrays this act through a different lens.

Contesting pastness

A historian, Rodríguez first came to filmmaking through his degree course at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo in 1996, and later developed his interest through a series of workshops run by the Centro de Vídeo Indígena Valente Soto-Bravo (CVI-Mich). Before releasing *Auikanime* in 2010, Rodríguez directed a number of short films drawing on the *Relación*, including *Kurita kaheri* (Messenger of the Gods) (2006) and *Xankuchka ia* (That Was All) (2008). *Auikanime* dispenses with trademark sequences, established in his earlier films, that depicted the Friar transcribing the oral narrative. This strategy somewhat delinks the work from the colonial intervention, moving it more assertively into the realm of P'urhépecha historical memory. This approach also differs radically from Mora Catlett's centring of the pictorial aspects of the codex as a way of engaging with its dual cultural frameworks. When Rodríguez was asked about the possible comparisons to be made between his own *oeuvre* and *Eréndira ikikunari*, he candidly responded:

En la película de *Eréndira* se cuenta la historia de los p'urhépechas de una forma, la cual es válida, es una visión ... Yo la cuento de otra ... No estoy diciendo cuál de las dos sea mejor, no me interesa ponerme a pensar en eso,

sino que más bien creo que son dos formas diferentes de contar algo. (cited in Sámano n.d.; in *Eréndira* the history of the P'urhépecha people is told in a certain way, which is valid, it's a point of view ... I tell it in another ... I'm not saying which of the two perspectives is better, that doesn't interest me, but I think we do have two different ways of recounting something.)

Whereas *Eréndira*'s structure replicates the multiple layers of the *Relación*, *Auikanime* forgoes material references to the codex but gives a clear historical referent when the titles inform the spectator that the action is located in 1530, in Michoacán. According to the codex, this is when Tangáxoan II was killed by the notoriously blood-thirsty and avaricious colonial administrator, Nuño de Guzmán (Stone 2004: 82). Framed by the evangelizing mission of the Franciscans, the film focuses on a young couple, Tsipa (Blanca Santos) and Hopótaku (Amaruc Lucas Hernández), who must protect their baby son from a malevolent being, the *auikanime*, who seeks a child for sacrifice. These two dangers frame the film: the first and most explicit in the form of the violent colonizers, the second, as the *auikanime* herself. Their menacing presences converge in the story's *dénouement* when the *auikanime* visits the family to claim the baby but is startled by the appearance of colonial forces, which threaten to kill them all.

According to the *petámuti* depicted in the film, the *auikanime*, who is described in Chapter 28 of the *Relación*, announces drastic change.⁶ The opening sequence depicts a woman struggling in labour, who dies during childbirth, as conveyed by the blood on the midwife's hands. Her death is made explicit a little later when Hopótaku tells the *petámuti* of the old lady who came begging for food. The *petámuti* explains that the lady, the *auikanime*, is the earthly-representative of the deceased mother. Returning to the land, she seeks a baby of her own to assuage her

grief. Here the appearance of the *auikanime* resonates with the syncretic myth of La Llorona, the weeping woman charged with infanticide. While the myth of La Llorona varies and has disputed cultural origins, the eternal search in an afterlife to recover the children she has lost is common to most versions. The Llorona myth first irrupts into the narrative as Tsipa hears a woman sobbing at night. It is later specified, however, that the crying mourns the loss of the baby in labour, rooting the episode firmly in a P'urhépecha framework and within the context of the film.

As well as being the explicit theme of the film, the iteration of the codex in *Auikanime* is rendered through symbols that suggest a visual translation of details disclosed in the colonial text. The film has an episodic structure marked by shots of a night-sky with a full moon, landscape panoramas and images of fire. These structuring motifs could be interpreted as a cinematic rendering of the P'urhépecha cosmology depicted in the *Relación*, since Xarátanga, Goddess of moon and water, is meant to dwell up in the sky, Curicaueri is God of sun and fire, and smoke presents 'one of the primary means of maintaining a link between the heavens and Earth, gods and mortals' (Stone 2004: 85). The repetition of these images lends the film a rhythmic quality, consolidated by the enigmatic soundtrack composed by Rodríguez himself. Sound appears before the image at the beginning of the film, compelling the spectator to listen to, and not just observe, this world and underlining the central role the aural occupies in Rodríguez's work.

In contrast to *Eréndira*, which focuses predominantly on battle scenes and the public spaces of P'urhépecha society, *Auikanime* has an intimate style which foregrounds the quotidian lives of the protagonist couple. As we learn early on, Hopótaku is suffering a crisis of faith in his leader, provoked by Tangáxoan's tacit acceptance of the Spanish presence. The spectator glimpses these doubts in a

domestic setting as Hopótaku voices his anxieties about the future of the kingdom to his wife at home. The portrayal of this predicament in an intimate milieu emphasizes the daily experience of the people depicted in the *Relación*, and how they witnessed the impact of the conquistadors' arrival. This strategy dramatizes the continuity between the past and the present, creating a bridge between the ancestors and the contemporary P'urhépecha people. For Rodríguez, such continuities are intimately related to the *rescate*, the recuperation, of historical memory, through texts 'where mythology and history go hand in hand' (Rodríguez 2006). The dramatization of ancestral stories and practices thus becomes a political act, linked to the restitution of historical agency for the P'urhépecha people.

Tsipa's decision to approach the Franciscans to save her baby situates the conversion to Christianity in concrete circumstances. When Tsipa learns of the significance of the *auikanime*'s visitation, she comments to Hopótaku that the old woman vanished when the friars appeared, a first indication that she believes that conversion may bring greater protection for her son from the lady who is pursuing her child. When Tsipa approaches the priests she asks: 'si mi hijo es purificado por la intervención de Santa María, ¿la Auikanime se olvidará de él?' (If my son is cleansed by the intervention of the Virgin Mary, will the *auikanime* forget about him?). The friar's explanation that the Virgin is not God but rather his mother, strikes a chord with Tsipa as she immediately finds a parallel with the Goddess Cueraváperi, the mother of all gods in P'urhépechan cosmology. These overlaps, like Tangáxoan's command to convert at the end of *Eréndira*, emphasize how it was possible, if complicated, to conjure two different belief systems in parallel. As Rodríguez's film goes on to show, Tsipa's contact with the friars saved her and her son from both the *auikanime*'s clutch and death at the hands of the conquistadors, although Hopótaku

was not so fortunate, slain moments before the friars intervene. In place of a directive from above, as in the case of Tangáxoan's speech at the close of *Eréndira*, the decision to convert is made by ordinary people, demonstrating an active engagement with the consequences. In *Auikanime*, Rodríguez reminds us that the thorny terrain of the colonial encounter was always embedded in lived daily experiences, which resonate poetically throughout his film. Here the process of Christian conversion integral to the colonial project is enacted on P'urhépecha terms, affording agency in a limited space. The evocative closing shot of Tsipa and her son with their backs to the camera at the side of a lake has a much more defiant tone than that of *Eréndira*, as Tsipa announces to her son in P'urhé, 'don't be afraid, you will live on to become a great Lord'. This finale, emphasizing the child's future prospects, completes a cycle of regeneration since the film opened with the death of a baby and the danger of the *auikanime*.

Conclusion

Both *Eréndira* and *Auikanime* turn to the colonial record as a source of information for the representation of P'urhépecha culture, discerning the Indigenous voices veiled in colonial intervention. In the case of *Eréndira*, Mora Catlett's interpretation of the codex both contains elements of a post-Revolutionary discourse on nation-building and *mestizaje*, and attempts to generate a space for Indigenous representation in a state which remains beleaguered by inadequate discourses of human rights. As Gordon Brotherstone indicates, 'it is possible to map a cluster of post-Revolutionary responses to the codices in Mexico, which cross-reference and foreground the whole question of iconography and nation-building, in both an affirmative and a critical spirit' (2005: 40). One could argue that *Eréndira* is at once affirmative and critical in

its use of the *Relación*. The splicing of different cultural systems in the film – the P’urhépecha horse-rider, the Ixmiquilpan church murals, the Kúrpitis masks – invites spectators to immerse themselves in the entanglements that characterized colonization, only to confront an ending which in some ways corresponds to the statist discourse of *mestizaje* through assimilation. In addition, the contradictions which emerge from Mora Catlett’s discursive framing of *Eréndira* dilute the powerful interweaving of colonial and Indigenous aesthetics in the film, establishing a binary opposition between the orality of the legend and the written word of the conquerors which in the narrative itself is not present.

Rodríguez, on the other hand, assertively claims the *Relación* as a P’urhépechan cultural history. In refusing to depict the readily recognizable illustrations of the codex, or the transcription process, he avoids the hegemonic recruitment of codex aesthetics in nation-building discourse. Instead, *Auikanime* underlines the coevalness of P’urhépecha society, not its pastness or antiquity, demonstrating the affective relationship that exists between the codex and some members of the contemporary P’urhépecha community. Both films effectively challenge a version of historical time that begins with the arrival of the Spanish, acknowledging the long history which pre-dated the conquest and which continues into the future. Yet it is *Auikanime* which seems more invested in retrieving the P’urhépecha agency embedded in the codex as a form of resistance to the ongoing homogenizing ideal enacted in statist policies and discourses in Mexico. Rodríguez’s use of the codex makes possible a reassertion of difference that is not dissolved by nationalist tropes of *mestizaje* or neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism. In this respect, it stands as a challenge to the ‘ideological framework in which translation was conceived, practiced, and theorized in the modern/colonial world’ (Mignolo and

Schiwy 2002: 279), not only reversing the linguistic transposition of P'urhépecha cosmology and history, but also reimagining the position of the colonial archive in the appreciation of P'urhépecha memory and culture.

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¹ This destruction probably occurred in a 1557 campaign when the study of pre-Hispanic beliefs was outlawed by the colonial Spanish authorities (Luiselli 2000: 640).

² The P'urhépecha people were called *Tarasca*s by the Spanish, and many sources continue to use this term today. The Indigenous group in question prefer P'urhépecha, which has been the dominant term since the 1990s. The Indigenous constitution of Michoacán is very diverse, with the most populous groups being the P'urhépecha, Nahuatl, Mazahua and Otomí peoples.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁴ In fact, Rodríguez has cited *Retorno* as an influence that made him reflect on the possibilities of the historical film (see Sámano n.d.).

⁵ All translations from *Eréndira* are taken directly from the film's English subtitles.

⁶ The *petámuti* is played by fellow filmmaker, Raúl Máximo Cortés, who was also responsible for translating the screenplay into P'urhé.