

## DIPHRASISM / DIALOGISM / DUALISM / DICHOTOMY

“A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*”  
Robin Wall Kimmerer

When the mythical twelve Franciscan priests arrived to Tenochtitlán—capital of the Mexica Empire and now Mexico City—in 1524, their mission was to convert indigenous peoples to Catholicism. The territorial conquest included ideological and cultural domination. Epistemic violence, the coloniality of knowledge exercised by the priests, is comparable to the physical violence of the conquistadores. Franciscan priests developed massive technologies of oppression that mimicked the performative/embodied/dynamic aspects of the rituals they observed in order to spread Christian doctrine more effectively. Some of these technologies of oppression for indoctrination included open-air masses and *autos sacramentales*, religious theatrical performances that resorted on aesthetic intimidation (gunpowder and fireworks, for example) and forced embodiment (written in Náhuatl and performed by the Mexicas themselves).

Ángel María Garibay was a Mexican Catholic priest and philologist who, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, profusely investigated the Náhuatl language and its literary heritage. He used the term diphrasism to describe a particular grammatical construction of Náhuatl

*On Ruins, Monuments,  
Art and Power*

*in xochitl in cuicatl*  
[the flower, the song]  
poem

*in atl in tepetl*  
[the water, the mountain]  
town/city

*in ahuehuetl in pochotl*  
[the ceiba/**ahuehuate**, the sabino tree]  
authority/protection

*in petlatl in icpalli*  
[the mat, the chair]  
command/authority

*in cuitlapilli in ahtlapalli*  
[the tail, the wing]  
the people/the common folk

*in cuauhtli, in ocelotl*  
[the eagle, the jaguar]  
the soldier/the warrior

*in ayahuitl in poctli*  
[the fog, the smoke]  
fame

in which two separate words are paired together to form a single metaphorical unit. Diphrasism shouldn't be understood as a mere stylistic or a formal characteristic of the Náhuatl language. According to scholar Alfredo López Austin, diphrasisms allude to complementary opposition, a fundamental idea in the cosmovision of many Mesoamerican cultures, that relates to cosmic dualism: everything, including the supreme god/godess Ometéotl/Omecíhuatl, was for the Mexicas composed by opposing and complementary substances.

This diphrasism is comparable to the dialogical form that Daniel Coleman identifies in the two-row trans-systemic thinking expressed by the Two Row Wampum and by Mohawk Poet Peter Blue Cold's poems.

[the Two Row tradition/treaty] was conceptualized from the beginning in a trans-systemic, cross-cultural context, and its **explicitly two-sided, dialogical form** was meant to help the treaty partners work out a balanced relationship throughout its ongoing life. The idea of making agreements to live in peace and friendship between two sides is not just an idea of how to relate to outsiders like Dutch or British people, for the teachings of the Great Law were derived from **dualist interactions** evident in nature and mirrored in daily Haudenosaunee life [...] Basic to this arrangement was the idea that good decisions, good thinking, was **dialogical**: one way of thinking was not enough. Ideas and proposals needed to be considered from at least one more point of view and then returned to the first before good decisions could be made. The Great Law of Peace is only made through thinking dialogically, thinking along more than one track.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Coleman, "The Good Mind and Trans-Systemic thinking in the Two-Row Poems of Mohawk Poet Peter Blue Cold," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 31, No 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2019): 66, Project MUSE.

After the conquest of Tenochtitlán, Huey Teocalli or Templo Mayor, was taken apart and the area redeveloped by new structures of the Spanish colonial city.



It wasn't until the late 70s and early 80s (20<sup>th</sup> century) that buildings in the downtown area were demolished and the **ruins** of the temple were unveiled next to the cathedral in Plaza de la Constitución or Zócalo

The dualism described by both Coleman and López Austin is radically different from the dualistic nature of Western thought which has led to canonical dichotomic contradictions such as good/evil, mind/body, nature/culture and human/non-human. Opposition for indigenous communities of the Americas/Abya Yala, isn't dichotomic (exclusive, discriminatory) but dialogic (inclusive, complementary, based on dialogue). Fundamentally distinct worldviews/cosmogonies/ideologies that are both expressed and rooted in language, as Robin Wall Kimmerer points out:

Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people [...] When we tell them that a tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make the maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation."<sup>ii</sup>

The 16<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of the invisibilization of circular time by linear time, of communality by exploitation, of metaphorical dialogism by encyclopedic taxonomization, in the Americas/Abya Yala. Although Spanish colonization has a distinct logic from settler colonialism, I argue that their epistemic violence is comparable in terms of the imposition of “unmarked structures of certainty that guide normative perception”<sup>iii</sup>, that is, of Western epistemology subtended by possession and extraction.

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<sup>ii</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed editions, 2013), 57.

<sup>iii</sup> Dylan Robinson. *Hungry Listening* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 10.

In 2021, the Mexican federal government declared August 13 as the commemoration day of 500 years of indigenous resistance, since that date marks the fall of México-Tenochtitlán under Hernán Cortés' army, the defeat of the Mexicas and the beginning of Spanish colonization.

““If we say *Noche triste* we think of Cortés and the Conquest. If we say *Noche victoriosa*, we honor those who died in the Templo Mayor massacre” Sheinbaum continued in a speech in which she recalled what happened a few days before Cortés was defeated and went to the place to vent next to the **ahuehuete**.”<sup>iv</sup>

<sup>iv</sup> Juan Pablo González. “¿Por qué cambiaron de nombre a la Plaza de la Noche Triste?”, *Televisa News*, July 27, 2021, <https://noticieros.televisa.com/ultimas-noticias/cambian-nombre-plaza-noche-triste-plaza-noche-victoriosa/>

Dylan Robison, building “upon Patrick Wolfe’s foundation principle of settler colonialism as a “structure” rather than an “event” of invasion” [...defines] settler colonialism as a state of perception and relocates those structures from an external point of origin in the outside world to an internal location constituted through subjectivity itself, [...and argues that this] perception is acquired over time through ideological state apparatuses at the heart of subjectivation”.<sup>v</sup> After centuries of deep and violent normalization/naturalization/neutralization/legitimation of such imposed structures, there is now a move towards their decolonization. But some decolonial gestures obscure the epistemic violence they inherited from same structures they try to breakdown.

Dylan describes representational politics (inclusion, cultural diversity, interculturalism, assimilation, etc.) as asymmetrical, non-reciprocal, extractivist and naturalizing gestures of epistemic violence. Pulling from Tuck and Yang’s prominent text *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*, we can think of these gestures as “settler moves to innocence”, or, using the trade blanket paradox from multidisciplinary artist and choreographer Lara Kramer’s artist statement for her project *In Blankets, Herds and Ghosts*, as disguised gestures for the strategic extermination of Indigenous populations:

The lighted Independence ornaments that hang from the colonial buildings in the Zócalo don’t depict the usual heroes, but Mexica gods and imagery—for example the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui—; and a monumental model of the Huey Teocalli has been built/layered on the plaza.



Templo Mayor model, Mexico City  
(REUTERS/Toya Sarno Jordan)

<sup>v</sup> Dylan Robison. *Hungry Listening* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 10.

Trade Blankets hold a multi-dimensional meaning, used in ceremony and trading of goods, and also used for warmth. And they were used in the spreading of smallpox for the purpose of eradicating Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.<sup>vi</sup>

To claim back the multi-dimensional ceremonial meaning, Lara Kramer designed and fabricated collaboratively with her mother and artist, Ida Baptiste, a trade blanket/jingle dress embodying a:

[...] practice of labour, of love, and mobility. A practice that works with our soft hands, hard hands, our ancestor hands. A practice for sharing, in the way that kinship positions us in relation to past, present and future voices, territories, one another and other, memories, traditions, stories, materials, sound and spirit. The practice is durational but offers an experience of non-time. It proposes a pacing and invitation for embodiment, a connection to prayer, healing, creation, memory and reflection on past, present and future. A practice of deepening the intergenerational knowledge that comes from my mother, my children, family and kin, all in dialogue with one another.<sup>vii</sup>

One of two public billboards featuring images of Kramer cloaked in this new trade blanket, is located at Café Cherrier in Plateau Mont-Royal, an area “known as a young, *student-friendly* neighborhood with streets full of *charming* townhouses [...] lined with *casual cafes, laid-back eateries, busy bars, and contemporary galleries and theatres*”<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> Lara Kramer. “In Blankets, Herds and Ghosts”, *Dazibao Art*, April 28, 2021, <https://en.dazibao.art/dazibao-satellite-lara-kramer>

<sup>vii</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>viii</sup> “Le Plateau-Mont-Royal”, Wikipedia, accessed Oct 1, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le\\_Plateau-Mont-Royal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Plateau-Mont-Royal)

The model raised controversy, especially amongst artists and critiques. Cuauhtémoc Medina, curator in chief of the renowned University Museum of Contemporary Art—and who (ironically?) is named after the last Mexica emperor executed by Cortés—considered it as demagogic and nationalistic.



Wikipedia’s description of Mont-Royale reminds me of colonia Roma in Mexico City, where many 1940’s houses have turned into *casual* cafes and bars that cater for upper-middle-class incomers, tourists, and expats, that have been raising rents with their dollars and displacing working-class neighbors, for the last two decades or so. Maybe it’s not the same case with Mont-Royale... but adjectives *as the ones I italicized above* are always suspicious to me. These words describe many gentrified neighborhoods I’ve experienced and lived in (I take the blame too) both in Mexico City/Tenochtitlán and elsewhere; the gentrification of unceded territories that keep changing hands for the sake of profit.

Kramer’s billboard is layered on the façade of a “timeless Montreal classic, since 1983”, five-star-reviewed Cafe Cherrier on Plateau-Mont-Royale. But this isn’t Montreal but Tiohtià:ke, French cuisine only exists because of colonization, imperialism and the exploitation of resources and labor, and it is only *timeless* because of its legitimization and praise by Western dominant ideology and its apparatuses (in this case, food critiques, gastronomic magazines, schools, etc.). The billboard gets its content



In October 2020, authorities in Mexico City set up metal fences (pictured here) to protect a statue of Christopher Columbus from protesters. Officials later removed the sculpture, ostensibly for restoration. Photo by Guillermo Gutiérrez / NurPhoto via Getty Images<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>ix</sup> Nora McGreevy, “Monument to Indigenous Women Will Replace Columbus Statue in Mexico City,” *Daily Correspondent*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/monument-indigenous-women-will-replace-columbus-statue-mexico-city-180978609/>

across, but the structure remains in place.

Tuck and Yang’s radical approach emphasizes that “decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land.”<sup>x</sup> On the other hand, Robinson Dylan proposes that the resurgence of epistemic plurality can only be achieved by structural refusal and not only by content refusal:

Actions of structural refusal are formal and aesthetic strategies that impede Indigenous knowledge extraction and instrumentalization. Forms of structural refusal counteract the epistemic violence of normative writing by exercising a range of interventions including forms of Indigenous resurgence (oratory, language, syncretical rhythm) and non-Indigenous aesthetic strategies (Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, the *détournements* of the Situationist International).<sup>xi</sup>

Just as blockages impede the flow of resources through direct action, for Dylan, structural/aesthetic refusal can take the shape of written, aural and visual obstructions that affirm Indigenous sovereignty, temporality and cosmivision with the ultimate goal of generating an epistemic shift that makes colonial structures collapse. Mohawk Poet Peter Blue Cold’s writings can be seen as blockages in Dylan’s terms: the structural shift to dialogism obscures (Western/colonial) linear understanding and reveals the complexities

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<sup>x</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor”, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, No.1 (2012); 1

<sup>xi</sup> Dylan Robinson. *Hungry Listening* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 23.

Recently, Mexico City’s government commissioned sculptor Pedro Reyes, famous for disarming populations to create musical instruments with guns, to create a monument to replace Colon’s.

*Tlalli*—the **Náhuatl** word for water. It depicts a woman from the Olmec civilization, known for their massive sculptures of human heads.





of an entangled and embodied perception/philosophy behind two-row thinking and its potential for epistemic liberation, as Daniel Coleman suggests:

I understand Blue Cloud's two-column poems to be quiet efforts to help readers experience two-row thinking, then, as a practice for clarifying and ordering the morass that results from traumatic, multilayered, unjust history. This means that while these poems look like meditations on living quietly in Creation, they have important implications for law, politics, and epistemology.<sup>xii</sup>

Blockages and obstructions are violent in nature, but when dialogic resolution has proven useless, violence might be necessary in order to collapse structures of power that have purposely obscured their epistemic violence for over five centuries in order to preserve the status-quo. Layering content over these structures won't tilt them over, but structural refusal might crack their foundations.

“[...] it is very important to first recognize the type of privileges from which Mexican-male-white artists have historically benefited, and above all the systemic racism and sexism that has prevented many artists of indigenous origin, as well as the artists identified as women, receive the same opportunities as Mexican white male artists. [...] That is why it seems urgent to me that you reject this commission.”<sup>xiii</sup> Letter to Pedro Reyes from Pablo Helguera, Mexican artist, author and educator living in NYC

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<sup>xii</sup> Daniel Coleman, “The Good Mind and Trans-Systemic thinking in the Two-Row Poems of Mohawk Poet Peter Blue Cold,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 31, No 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2019): 67, Project MUSE.

<sup>xiii</sup> Pablo Helguera, “Querido Pedro, Nadie nunca quiere escribir esta clase de cartas, pero este tipo de situaciones lo vuelve inevitable,” Facebook, September 12, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/pablo.helguera/posts/10158595989452066>



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