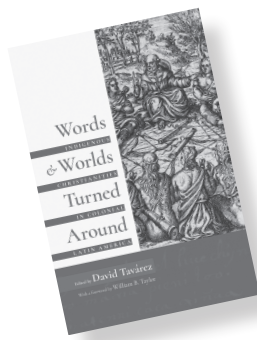


Book Review



*Words and Worlds Turned
Around: Indigenous Christianities
in Colonial Latin America.*
David Eduardo Tavárez, ed.
(Boulder, CO: University Press
of Colorado, 2017), 329 pages,
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The study of the colonial encounter between indigenous populations and European missionaries in the Americas—between native religions and Judeo-Christianity—is fertile ground for innovative scholarly contributions. In *Words and Worlds Turned Around*, David Tavárez presents a carefully edited collection of colonial linguistic and native evangelization studies by leading scholars to examine the role of native and alphabetical languages in

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generating “indigenous Christianities.” It exposes the agendas, methods, and strategies guiding the creation of lexicographic and ecclesiastic conversion material and how natives transformed imposed doctrines to meet their purposes. William Taylor’s foreword problematizes language translation as a less than perfect communication process, while Louise Burkhart’s introduction offers a comprehensive historiography of colonial Nahuatl research, illustrating its evolution from a one-way “spiritual conquest” to approaches where indigenous people were active agents. She delineates the legacy of research on colonial Nahuatl texts.

Part one opens with Tavárez’s overview of the corpus of catechetical documents in the Zapotec language, demonstrating how Dominican missionaries invented a Christian lexicon by appropriating native referents that appealed to their collective memory. This hybridity provided a conceptual bridge between Christian and ancestral devotional practices. In chapter 2, Julia Madajczak challenges the existence of a precolonial Nahua confession practice. Her deconstructive analysis of Nahua terms deployed by missionaries for this Catholic sacrament shows that they were appropriated and assimilated within the Christian discourse given their shared semantic fields. She highlights the difficulties of interpreting precontact, ethnographic information as it was collected and reinterpreted within a preconceived Christian ideological framework. Similarly, in chapter 3 Gregory Haimovich focuses on the Christian lexicon

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deployed by missionary friars during the early evangelization period in the Andean region. He traces the semantic properties and shifts of the Quechua terms used to render essential Christian doctrinal concepts in order to approximate their preconquest meanings, cultural connections, and usage in modern Quechua vocabulary. In chapter 4, Garry Sparks and Frauke Sachse analyze “Kislak 1015,” a Dominican missionary field notebook from Highland Guatemala. This text offers a rare glimpse into the dynamics of creating a contextualized theology, and its intertextual connections with other Dominican evangelization materials serve to more accurately date the implementation of a “K’iche’anized” Christianity.

Chapter 5 in part two begins with M. Kittiya Lee’s study on sixteenth-century encounters between Protestant and Catholic missionaries and the Tupi-Guarani peoples of the Brazilian coastal and Amazonian regions. Here, a merging of “two worlds and words” resulted in a militant Christianity with a victorious God as the Tupinambá exercised agency, demanding a Christianity relevant to their cosmological beliefs. Similarly, Justyna Olko in chapter 6 analyzes the cross-cultural translation process of the medieval folktale Judas into Nahuatl, demonstrating how an indigenous scribe-author innovatively engaged with other European sources of knowledge to create a culturally relevant text for his audience. In chapter 7, Ben Leeming borrows the concept of autoethnography to show how Fabián de Aquino, a Nahua-Christian “convert,” appropriated the

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colonizers' interpretation of natives-as-evil to create a counternarrative. Aquino's theatrical representations defiantly incorporated characters whose roles highlight culturally significant Nahua referents.

Chapter 8 by John Chuchiak begins part three and focuses on the Maya-Spanish dictionary *Calepino de Motul* by Franciscan friar Antonio de Ciudad Real. He argues that the excessive number of Spanish words for sexual perversion in this and other Yucatec Maya Christian doctrinal texts evidenced the friars' preoccupation with sexual morality and deviance. Native informants strategically resisted this colonization of their bodies by satirizing the Franciscans' obsession and fear of sexual perversion through playful speech and innuendos. In chapter 9, Claudia Brosseder focuses on a 1661 baptism and Eucharist impersonation enacted during a Corpus Christi celebration by "Indio Ladino" Francisco Martín from the rural Andes. She concludes that Martín acquired the dual identity of a Catholic priest and a local huaca to introduce a preexisting native huaca into Christianity. She shows how native communities strategically engaged in a complex process to steer Christianity to fit their own cultural-religious ends. In chapter 10, Mark Christensen examines the medieval text "The Fifteen Signs" and its influence on documents written by ecclesiastic and native authors in Nahuatl and Yucatec Maya languages. Here, predictions and portents of doomsday were appropriated into native-authored sources as they fit within a Mesoamerican cosmology. These authors creatively

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employed multiple European sources of apocalyptic thought to create nuances of this text for their own purposes.

Part four offers case studies of religious coexistence in contemporary Mexico with Nahua scholar Abelardo de la Cruz introducing “El costumbre,” or the practice of ancestral beliefs, in chapter 11. Using three case studies of catechist-*rezanderos*, he shows how the inclusion of Christian and “El costumbre” elements gives greater cohesion to current Nahua ceremonial practices in the Huasteca region. He concludes that indigenous Christianity is a process by which Christian elements are negotiated, resignified, and assimilated to ensure religious continuity. Finally, the concluding chapter by David Tavárez highlights the two intertwined objectives of the book: to inquire into various methods and policies in the production of colonial religious conversion material and lexicographic projects, and to explore the ways that indigenous communities engaged in and responded to the advent of Christianity. He invites readers to view this collection as a step forward in understanding the bonds between global Renaissance, Counter Reformation, and indigenous Christianities in the Americas.

This volume is a significant contribution to colonial scholarship. Despite an emphasis on Mexican case studies, it includes other geographical regions and native languages, illustrating the multiple scenarios that originated from the colonial encounter between European-indigenous worlds, actors, and

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processes. Using the corpus of ecclesiastic and linguistic documentary sources written in indigenous languages, each chapter illustrates innovative approaches that challenge the narrow perception of a one-way “spiritual conquest,” engaging the reader with the complexities of translating (converting) Christianity into a new (geographical) context with a multiplicity of native cultures and languages. Playing with the Mesoamerican lexical semantics of “translation,” or “the turning of words,” as a process of shifting positions without total conversion, the book reminds us that indigenous peoples ultimately held an upper hand in adopting, recasting, accommodating, and manipulating missionary teachings to fit their worldviews and cultural practices.

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