

Mictlantlatolli (Hell Words): The Language of Loss and the Trauma of Colonialism



Out from the pages of a sixteenth-century Nahuatl-Christian manuscript emerges a rarity in the written sources from early colonial Mexico: an intimate portrait of Indigenous Christianity told largely in the first person. The speaker addresses his audience from hell, lamenting his current state of suffering and urging them to avoid a similar fate. The author, Nahua Fabián de Aquino, casts a terrifying picture of hell and the punishments that are experienced there. The text concludes with a remarkable collection of *mictlan tlahtolli*, “hell words,” which purport to be translations of the doleful expressions uttered by damned souls. I read Aquino’s text as a Nahuatl-Christian *icnocuicatl*, a song of lamentation that offers a deeply personal portrait of Nahua Christianity, told from the perspective of an early colonial “cultural broker.” This presentation will argue that in the rawness of the emotions it conveys we witness the effects of the wide spread cultural trauma inflicted on native people in post-Contact Mexico. By applying trauma theory to texts such as these, I hope to shed new light on the complex and contradictory circumstances under which indigenous people like Aquino came to affiliate themselves with Christianity in the colonial context.



The Department of Anthropology presents:

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Friday, March 23, 2018 at 3pm Fine Arts (FA) 114

