THE COLONY AS THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

Theopolitical Embodiment in Mexico

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Abstract: In New Spain in the sixteenth century, the colony was imagined as a sacred body, as the mystical body of Christ (*corpus mysticum*), in which millions of presumed Catholic Indigenous subjects figured as the body's wounded feet. Beyond the simple secularization of a theological concept and its appropriation toward political ends, the colonial *corpus mysticum* became living, enfleshed, and incarnate, both sustaining the colonial project and rebelling against it. The Mexican *corpus mysticum* was grounded in the vernacular theologies and affects of the *mortandad*, the violent death world of the colonial cataclysm. The 'mysterious materiality' of the New World *corpus mysticum* points to signs of Mexican Indigenous communities' theopolitical refusal to be subsumed into the Spanish colonial flesh-body.

Keywords: body of Christ, Catholicism, church, colonial violence, *corpus mysticum*, Mexico, sixteenth century, Spanish missionaries

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

— 1 Corinthians 12:12

Lying beneath the terror of the sacred is the constant excavation of missing bones; the permanent remembrance of a torn body hewn in a thousand pieces and never self-same ...

— Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics"

The four-hundredth anniversary celebration of the Spanish invasion of New Mexico surfaced old wounds. As the twentieth century drew to a close, a group of activists calling themselves the Friends of the Acoma launched a covert

action against a monument commemorating the conquistador Don Juan de Oñate (1550–1626) in Española, New Mexico. Oñate was New Mexico’s first Spanish governor and the perpetrator of catastrophic violence against the Pueblo peoples. When Spanish invaders attempted to loot the food stores of the village, the Acoma attacked the marauding band, leaving 13 colonists dead, Oñate’s nephew among them. In retaliation and in a show of military force, Oñate called for a “war of blood and fire” against the Acoma pueblo. In 1599, the conquistador’s troops massacred almost a thousand people and left the pueblo destroyed. Those who survived were imprisoned. Upon them Oñate commanded a cruel sentence: all men aged 25 years and older would have a foot cut off (Trujillo 2009).

The Acoma survived this trauma and reclaimed and rebuilt their pueblo. Still, the memory of the atrocity haunted New Mexicans for centuries, including through this twentieth-century monument. For almost three decades Oñate sat proudly astride his steed at the Española visitor center. Dominating the highway, the monument ensured that the conqueror’s violent deeds remained an open wound. In the first weeks of 1998, in the cover of night, the activists amputated the foot of the statue in symbolic retribution for Oñate’s crimes against humanity. Almost 20 years later, during the 2017 protests against Confederate War monuments, a man came forward wielding the bronze foot and

FIGURE 1: Acoma activist wields a foot he severed from the monument celebrating the violent conquistador, Juan de Oñate. Oñate Visitor Center in Española, New Mexico. Photograph © Adria Malcolm, *New York Times*/Redux.

claiming responsibility for the symbolic amputation. Surrounded by New Mexican sagebrush and with sunlight illuminating his silhouetted form, the anonymous figure, the mysterious thief, brandished his trophy on the pages of the *New York Times*. The statue was finally removed in its entirety on 15 June 2020, inspired by Black Lives Matter protests. Today an empty plinth memorializes this history.

Oñate's violence against Indigenous lives and contemporary resistance to that legacy of violence set the context for a reconsideration of the theologies that governed and legislated the relationship between European and Indigenous people in the first century of Spanish American imperialism. Here, I confront a colonial paradox. In the Spanish American theological imaginary, the colony was understood as a shared, mystical body that incorporated and absorbed Indigenous Catholics into its expansive form. The "theological hinge" of Roman Catholic conversion "was ultimately to transform Otherness into Sameness" (Napolitano 2016: 5). At the same time, colonial violence—military, structural, economic, and epidemiological—devastated the very Indigenous communities that were meant to animate the Spanish Empire as a holy body. The phantom of the disembodied foot haunts this history. Spanish missionaries regarded the *Indios* as the feet of the mystical body of Christ: part of the body commons and dissociated from it—at once precious and severable, shared and alien.¹ As I will show, this paradox endowed the colonial *corpus mysticum* with theopolitical power.

The New World *Corpus Mysticum*

For the Spanish, the military subjugation of America's people signaled their collective conversion to the Catholic faith. The *corpus mysticum*, or *cuero místico* in Spanish, provided a potent ordering narrative that was adapted to explain and interpret the place of millions of presumed Christian Indigenous subjects and their occupied territories within the expanding body of the church universal and within the structures of colonial society. The theology of *corpus mysticum Christi* traditionally imagined the church as a body made of diverse Christian persons participating together in the shared sacrament of the Eucharist. Variations on this corporeal theology have anchored Christian belief and practice since the origins of the church. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Catholic evangelization of New Spain necessitated the incorporation of new persons into the body of the church: even as they became subjects to the crown, Indigenous Catholics also needed to be integrated as part of the mystical body of Christ. In this process, a new theopolitical regime emerged, one in which the body of the church and the body of the colony (i.e., the Viceroyalty of New Spain) were to become overlapping entities, co-identified as both territorial and theological

jurisdictions: the *corpus coloniae mysticum*.² Spain and its far-flung colonies were geographically discontinuous, an almost insurmountable challenge for efficient and effective colonial rule. The extension of the royal realm to include territories at great distance from the metropole created the pressing need for a binding ideology. The *corpus mysticum* had the potency to create an imagined spatial continuity between the metropole and colony, even if what resulted was a sort of fictive (or theological) ‘territoriality’ (Muro Romero 1982). Thus, the *corpus mysticum* lent itself readily to the European colonial project; Christ’s own body was given to its service.³ In the colonial imagination, the *corpus mysticum* became conflated with the project of Christian empire.⁴

This historical process would seem to reiterate the dynamics of political theology in which the church prefigures the state, which leverages and ‘liquidates’ (Anidjar 2016) theologies into its service. Political theology elucidates how the state increases its capacity to manipulate adherence, identification, and submission by drawing on the potency of secularized expressions of ecclesial ideologies, as in Carl Schmitt’s ([1922] 2005: 36) pronouncement that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” Schmitt has recently been taken up by critical theorists (Agamben 2005; Anidjar 2016; Blanco and del Valle 2014; Rust 2012). Here it seems transparent that a politicized extension of the idea of the body of Christ would serve to stabilize the power of an emerging imperial state, above all a Catholic one. But the translation of Christ as a mystical body proved to be problematic, less easily subsumed within the Spanish colonial project. I summon a more complex understanding of church-state interactions by examining how one of the central tenets of Christianity yielded to colonial realities even as it resisted them. On-the-ground actualities in Mexico troubled Old World theological formulations, making their pure instrumentalization impossible. Where political theology typically reads religion through doctrine, formal systematics, and ecclesial power, theopolitics as I leverage it here centers vernacular, lived, or feet-on-the-ground theologies, those that “permeate everyday life” and also “participate in long histories of the body, affects, and material religion” (see the introduction to this special issue). Theopolitics suggests a more phenomenological approach in which religious ideologies and practices are enfolded, incarnate, and always contingent, subject to specificities of time and place. It reflects affective and situated histories: in a word, it is contextual. It is through a theopolitical lens, finally, that we confront the ‘mysterious materiality’ of the colonial *corpus mysticum* and its excesses.

The mystical body of Christ was destabilized and then reimagined and remade in response to the spiritual and political demands of the emerging global imperial church, but also by those who were to be absorbed as its subjects. Christ’s own flesh, Christ’s own body, was compelled to yield in the evangelization of Indigenous America. In the Catholic evangelization of the so-called

New World (a term I use only when considering Spanish perspectives), the concept of ‘church’ as a mystical body was rematerialized, re-enfleshed in relation to recently Christianized *Indios*. Through the idea of *corpus mysticum*, the Spanish missionaries in Mexico came to perceive the *Indios*—their bodies and flesh—as an extension of their own flesh-body and, perhaps more powerfully, of Christ’s. Some might regard this as a sort of theological cannibalism; indeed, the European project in the Americas has been condemned as a cannibalistic enterprise (Forbes 2008).

At the same time, cataclysmic violence and death, signaled here by the memory of Oñate’s terror, ravaged the colonial corporate body just as it came into being. Spanish missionary friars employed the word *mortandad* to describe each wave of death wreaked by violence, exploitation, and epidemic disease. With *mortandad* they pronounced a death event of apocalyptic scale, threatening the very Indigenous communities they sought to evangelize. In the Spanish mysticism of conquest, Christian salvation was an act that required not just two worlds, European and American, but also two bodies—*Español* and *Indio*, Spanish friar and ‘Indian’ convert. If New England Puritans’ hopes for the continent rested on possession of ‘emptied’ Indigenous lands, for Spanish colonials the future of the faith depended precisely on access to Indigenous bodies as commodified objects of conversion (Nemser 2015, 2017). The *mortandad* signified the catastrophic failure of the church’s effort to preserve Indigenous life, to put a stay on death. As the threat of Indigenous annihilation loomed, the colonial church confronted the raw precarity of the European mission in the New World. Christ’s New World body was put in jeopardy. The urgency of the *mortandad* brought bodies to the fore of the project of New World evangelization, until now misunderstood to be first and foremost a ‘spiritual’ conquest. The Indigenous lives cast into jeopardy by the *mortandad* were Catholic lives; the threatened bodies were Catholic bodies. As will become evident here, the embodied vulnerability of the colony and its Indigenous subjects played upon the affective world of the Spanish missionaries and the imperial global church to which they labored to give life. Forged in these fires, Catholicism transformed into an *ecclesia ex mortuis*, a church of the dead, a colonial institution shaped and defined in relation to structures of violence and death (Hughes 2021).

This is discernible through a fine-grained, almost exegetical reading of letters sent from church personnel in Mexico to the Spanish king during a pronounced period of crisis in the last decades of the sixteenth century. Appeals to the *corpus mysticum* sharpened and became more urgent, even desperate, as the death toll of the colonial cataclysm seemed to the Spanish to come to its irreversible and final culmination. For this article, I have analyzed manuscript sources, some 135 letters gleaned from the Archivo General de las Indias (Seville, Spain), in a theological register not common among historians. The theologies articulated in these documents are not formal doctrine: they are written and invoked in a

context of crisis in the service of emotional pleas, either for a personal benefit or a structural intervention. For this reason, I deem them vernacular. The letters also reveal the theopolitical roots of affective attachment to social, political, and territorial settlements. To be clear, the lives of those who died under structures of colonial violence are neither encompassed within nor defined by the emotional and theological worlds of Spanish observers, no matter how heartfelt, wrenching, or compassionate.

But what became of this new mystical body, the fleshy entity of the *corpus coloniae mysticum*, in relation to the flesh-consuming, hungry-for-flesh *mortandad*? What was the relation of the bodies of the vast corpus of the dead to the body of Christ as a living theopolitical entity, one that was concrete, materialized, and affective? Could the New World *corpus mysticum* survive as a body without bodies? In the Indigenous demographic cataclysm, the compelling Christian concept of mutual belonging to and integration within a shared ecclesial body confronted the destruction and devastation of the *Indios*. The *mortandad* threatened the mystical body itself: the corpus of the church-colony was now understood as a body not supremely powerful but rather injured and at risk.

Ave Verum Corpus: The Colony as an Injured Body

He is the head of the body, the church, he is the beginning and first born from among the dead.

— Colossians 1:18

In the last decades of the sixteenth century, the bishop of Michoacán, Juan de Medina Rincón, begged the Spanish king to release him from his duties in the New World and allow him to return to Spain after almost 50 years of ministry in Mexico. The bishop mourned his failure to intervene successfully on behalf of the *Indios* and suffered crushing despair at their unmitigated exploitation, abuse, and enslavement. In several letters to the king, the wearied bishop elaborated a complex theology of colonial embodiment in relation to the *mortandad*. In one of his final epistles, he appealed to the idea of *Indios* as the wounded feet of the body of Christ:

This land is being destroyed and lost so that it seems that the predictions and conjectures made by some that the *indios* will surely reach their end are coming to fruition. With great haste the *indios* travel toward their end because in all parts and regions many are falling ill and many more are dying from the slow and deadly pestilence that never ceases. The natives have always been the *feet of this body*, but although the head that governs sees their fragility and weakness, it nevertheless continues to walk around on them [the feet], and they get worse and weaker. The *indios* are exploited

for agricultural labors, for the construction of buildings, for work in mines. They say that these things are necessary for the Republic—that the *indios* will last as long as they will last, *as a spoon made of bread*.⁵

In equating the colony with the mystical body of Christ, Medina's theological imagery is of an injured body rendered into parts, of a shared body divided against itself, and of a broken body equated with bread. With its evocative Eucharistic resonances, the use of 'bread' suggests that in some way the *Indios* were transformed, transubstantiated into the Eucharistic host. Once subsumed within the corporate, mystical body of Christ, the bodies of Mexican Catholics became continuous with and co-identified with the bodies of Spanish missionaries, especially with the monastic religious orders. This is true of both individual bodies and the collective body of the *Indios*. Native Mexican territorial bodies were similarly subsumed within the European Christian imaginary: the colony became a theopolitical, fleshy thing.

The infrastructure of Catholicism had to be improvised, not just simply imported, into the colonial setting. The church is a "mysterious superorganic body" (Norget et al. 2017: 13), and in Mexico this body needed to reconstitute itself as flesh, blood, and bones. This was even more true in relation to the *mortandad*, which threatened the bodies of suffering *Indios* as well as the stability of the nascent colonial body. At the service of the emerging global imperial church, the sixteenth-century *corpus mysticum* was not secularized but rather transubstantiated into a jurisdictional concept. It now referred to a theopolitical body that resisted the violent and extractive structures of global imperial Christianity even as it extended Spanish dominion over Indigenous peoples and territories. For Spanish missionaries, the colony became sacramentalized in relation to the body of Christ.

In the New Testament, the metaphor of a body made of distinct but interdependent anatomical parts served Paul in his struggle to unite a nascent but fractured church. In his letters to the Corinthians, Colossians, and Ephesians, Paul developed a vision of ecclesial commons that is enfleshed, incarnate in its very members—in limbs, hands, and feet. Christ appears as the head of this body composed of many parts, each with its own integral value in relation to each other and the whole. In fact, before the church was regarded as a mystical body, it was described in relation to the Eucharist as "*mystical flesh*" (Lubac 2006: 102). It was an inclusive vision: Paul employed the language of Christ's body to insist on the inclusion of women and Gentiles in the church. Given Paul's preoccupation with the world's immanent end, the theology of the *corpus Christi* was not intended to uphold or secure a desired political order. Nor, finally, was the New Testament concept of 'church as body' territorial or jurisdictional in scope: the original vision of ecclesial belonging did not evoke or extend particular Christian claims on space or geography.

The thirteenth century saw a momentous shift in which the language of mystical body, once narrowly ecclesial, extended to a range of political organizations and entities beyond the church. The *corpus mysticum* was transformed into a political fiction: the *corpus politicum*. For the twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, this represented a profound crisis. For de Lubac, “it is precisely the becoming-fictive of the *corpus mysticum* that represents the signal disaster of collective spiritual life in the Middle Ages” (Rust 2012: 104). This theological shift reflected the increasing saturation of state and church power, as well as larger social transformations in Europe in the early thirteenth century, in which social and political authority was no longer concentrated in singular heads of state (i.e., the Pope, the Emperor), but shifted to “ruled collectives, the new national monarchies, and the other political aggregates of human society” (Kantorowicz [1957] 2016: 193). Thus began a pattern of secularization in which political resonance came to infuse the ecclesial concept, even as the power and significance of the ecclesial concept was lent to the sacralization of other social institutions. In the process, the *corpus mysticum* became simultaneously less materialized and less mystical. As Kantorowicz puts it: “Here the mysterious materiality which the term *corpus mysticum* ... still harbored, has been abandoned: ‘... changed into a corporation of Christ’ ... exchanged for a juristic abstraction” (ibid.: 202, citing Rudolph Sohm).

This is the *corpus mysticum* much as we encounter it when it arrives in the Americas: thinned out and abstracted in its application to a range of secular bodies. It is now disembodied, disincarnate, and decoupled from the sacrament of the Eucharist and its potent and mysterious materiality and is therefore more available for oppressive political projects, including imperial ecclesial regimes. Yet, compelled to account for Indigenous Catholic suffering under colonial rule, Mexico was in fact the location of the rematerialization of the *corpus mysticum*. Here we observe “dimensions of the *corpus mysticum* that resist sublimation into sheer *corpus politicum*” (Rust 2012: 104). The *corpus coloniae mysticum* could not simply justify exploitation of subject colonized peoples; it also made this exploitation visible and protested against it. In its New World translation, the *corpus mysticum* referred to and engendered particular affective attachments to the colony as a theopolitical enterprise but also to the *Indios* in their abject suffering. The fragile vulnerability of the broken body of Christ echoed and elucidated the fragility of the colony as a mystical body ravaged by *mortandad*, eliciting anxiety, tender concern, grief, and sorrow in Spanish missionaries. The Catholic feelings that so often mediated devotional engagement with Christ, characterized by excess and abundance, were transferred to the *Indios* and to the colony itself. Most of all, in the colonial setting the emotions considered here seem to have the capacity to address and even resolve, for Spanish missionaries, the persistent paradox of global imperial Christianity—the raw and ultimately irreconcilable contradiction between the brutal reality

of colonial violence and the utopian promise of Christian conversion. Rendered as a divine body, the colony was at once powerful and vulnerable, whole and broken. These are qualities definitive of the theopolitical: resolution through affect and oscillation between opposites—between power and vulnerability, intimacy and distance.

Mexico's Phantom Limb: The Wounded Feet of Christ's Broken Body

Drawing on biblical theologies and late medieval Catholic piety, the colonial *corpus mysticum* was at once whole and fragmented: even as it summoned collective belonging, it spoke to a 'body in parts' (Hillman and Mazzio 1997). In the colonial theopolitics of the *ecclesia ex mortuis*, peoples and communities were dismembered, rendered as parts—specifically as the feet of the mystical body of Christ. Recall Bishop Medina Rincón's observation that the *Indios* have always been "the feet of this body."

Colonial thinkers invoked one of the most potent Christian theological formulations when they imagined *Indios* as the feet of the mystical body of the colony, appropriating sacred language to reckon with their subject status. As feet, subject Indigenous peoples were the extremity upon which the colony precariously stood. Colonial writers held that 'feet' referred to a hierarchical social structure, even though the New Testament explicitly rejects an interpretation of the body of Christ as a structure of inequality. The theological, even ontological, status of *Indios* as feet relegated them to a particular economic, social, and racial status within the colonial regime. The medieval French political thinker Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) elaborated this hierarchy in *The Book of the Body Politic* (1994: 90), which addressed "the whole of the people in common, described as the belly, legs, and feet, so that the whole be formed and joined in one living body, perfect and healthy. For just as the human body is not whole, but defective and deformed when it lacks any of its members, so the body politic cannot be perfect, whole, nor healthy if all of the estates of which we speak are not well joined and united together." De Pizan goes on to explain the particular place of agricultural laborers as the feet of the body politic: "Of all the estates, they [the simple laborers] are the most necessary, those who are cultivators of the earth which feed and nourish the human creature ... And really it is the feet which support the body politic, for they support the body of every person with their labor" (ibid.: 107).

In a section titled, "Mystical Body of the Republic," from his treatise *Política indiana*, the seventeenth-century Spanish jurist Juan de Solórzano Pereira (1776) correlated laboring classes in Mexico with the feet of the body politic. Solórzano identifies diverse sectors of the colonial society with parts of a

corporate body, specifying feet in a list of integral parts, each of which should know its role (ibid: 80):

All of these offices form the Republic into a body composed of many men, as of many members, that help one another, and assist one another to endure. Among these, of the shepherds and farmhands, and other such roles, some are called feet, and others arms, and others fingers of the same Republic, with each being compulsory and necessary, each in their ministry, as the Apostle Saint Paul so seriously and wisely brought us to understand.

Concluding with Paul's biblical foundation, Solórzano affirmed the inherently theological nature of the colony. For Solórzano, the body of Christ was placed at the service of the foundational colonial structure: the division of New Spain under law into two political entities, the República de indios and the República de españoles. These two parallel republics were united as a single mystical body within a single political realm. In this way, the theological status of Indigenous people as the feet of the *corpus mysticum* referred to their subordinate status within the colonial economic structure. In other words, while they constituted part of the body of Christ, they were a degraded, even rejected part. In this way, the inclusive theology of *corpus mysticum* provided a theological framework for the unequal structure of Mexican society.⁶

Missionaries in Mexico also described the *Indios* as the feet of the body of Christ in their self-appointed capacity as *conservadores de indios*, as protectors of Indigenous life, to argue against abuse and exploitation. Identifying the *Indios* as the feet of the body of Christ is theopolitical insofar as feet do not map properly onto the political schema for the exercise of extractive power in the colony. Remember how Bishop Medina worried that the 'head' of the colony continued to walk around on feet that were already weakened, battered, and abused by disease and exploitation. Fragile and damaged, the feet of the body of Christ had become unsustainably fleshy. For the Franciscan friar Pedro de Oroz, an epidemic outbreak in 1576 devastated the *Indios* as the feet of the colonial body. Not just abused and broken, the feet were altogether annihilated, vanquished. Oroz described destruction of biblical proportions. The land had been utterly emptied.

The *indio* vassals of your majesty have suffered great trials of *mortandad* and hunger ... Whereas the loss and misery are public, general, and evident to all, so too is the sorrow and sentiment ... We are like the holy prophet that heard a voice of lamentation and sadness; crying I see our land abandoned, our tabernacles and churches deserted and empty. Such tears, most Christian King! The holy land where *once was the feet of our head and lord* is now in the hands of our enemies.⁷

Imagine the chaos that resulted from "incomplete bodies" (Hillman and Mazzio 1997: xv), from vanquished parts. The corresponding emotions manifested

here include sorrow, misery, lamentation, and sadness for a holy body that has been conquered as if by a mortal enemy.

The correlation of *Indios* with Christ's feet makes painfully manifest the dual status of Indigenous persons as both abject matter and holy flesh in the colonial Catholic imagination. To be the feet of the body of Christ is an ambivalent status, reflecting at once subjugation and adoration. In the colony, feet came to stand for the brokenness of the body of Christ. Christ's feet are at once a manifestation of his humanity and an object of contemplation and devotion. In the Gospels, the disciple Mary lovingly dries Christ's feet with her hair and anoints his feet with precious perfume. In churches and shrines across the globe, the feet of Christ are the most accessible part of his body to the faithful, whether a statue, a hung crucifix, or an image of Christ standing bound and awaiting judgment. Feet are the first, sometimes the only, part of the sacred image that can be touched or caressed by the devotee. In Catholic iconography, Christ's feet also suffer torment. The 500-year-old Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516) created by the German religious artist Matthias Grünewald depicts an afflicted, plague-ridden image of Christ crucified. His tormented body is anguished almost beyond recognition: we hear "the wild scream of the arms and fingers" (Stieglitz 1989: 95). Behold the afflicted feet of a tortured and diseased Christ: pierced by heavy spikes, bloated and decayed, these feet speak only of death. And still, they are intended as an object of religious meditation and contemplation. These resonances energized and enabled the attendant emotions that were evoked in descriptions of colonial society as a broken or wounded body.

FIGURE 2: Tormented feet of Christ, Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516). Matthias Grünewald. Photograph: *Isenheimer_Altar_(Colmar)_jm01221.jpg* © Jörgens.Mi/Wikipedia, CC-BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Perhaps the most powerful and evocative appeal to adoration of the *Indios* as the feet of Christ comes from the Augustinian friar Juan de Figueroa. In 1580, writing with great emotion about the colonial *mortandad*, he explains:

The *indios* are very afflicted and [the *mortandad*] threatens the *indios* in particular which is the principal thing your Majesty has in the kingdom and without *indios* [it] will be very difficult and very miserable and this is the truth. And the *indios* need some reprieve and respite from the labor of public works that are not essential, because in the end everything hangs on and depends on the *indios*, because nothing can be done without them. *They are the feet*, the hands, and the arms of those who are here. The Conde shows that he is very desirous of favoring them, of loving them, of showering them with gestures of tender kindness and care.⁸

The word used here, *acariciar*, is uncomfortable and difficult, bringing to mind an almost devotional attention: “to treat with love and tenderness, to shower with demonstrations of care and affect.”⁹ This suggests a caressing as if one might gently fondle or stroke the feet of Christ. The vulnerability of Christ in his wounded and flayed humanity and his transcendent divine power were both manifest in Spanish religious understandings of the colony—which was always simultaneously imperiled and supremely potent.

These emotions and postures figured centrally in the theopolitical affective regime of the *ecclesia ex mortuis*. Tender attachments, such as those that emerged in relation to the *corpus mysticum*, threatened Indigenous sovereignty and enervated the work of dispossession. Sacralized by the *corpus mysticum*, colonial jurisdictions were superimposed upon pre-existing Indigenous territories, particular native-ethnic corporations or states. For the Spanish, claims to Christian sovereignty in the New World were premised upon the structures of cataclysm. The full symbolic resonance of the idea of *Indios* as the feet of the body of Christ cannot be understood separately from acts of colonial violence against Indigenous people. At the same time, the *corpus mysticum* also stands for resistance to and survival of these acts.

For the Spanish, the loss of Indigenous life in the *mortandad* threatened the very notion of the colony as a mystical body. Spanish missionaries who witnessed and grieved the *mortandad* succumbed to the nightmarish vision of a land that seemed to them utterly emptied of people. The body of the church had to be remade: it was no longer a corporate body of the living but a body of the dead. The mortality crisis gave birth to a spectral church, an ecclesial body absent of living persons. No longer a church of the living, it was a church of the dead—an *ecclesia ex mortuis*. This church born from the *mortandad* was a ‘dead body commons’.¹⁰ The church as body thus shaped itself in the likeness of the *mortandad*. Its sacred form with yielding curves and hard edges, its skeletal scaffolding, the soft flesh of its human vulnerabilities, its contours and core

substance—they all conformed to the defining mold of *mortandad*. Political theology orients around the idea of the distribution of life and death as forms of inclusion and exception. Here, Mexican colonial theopolitics foregrounds a body commons that defines the limits of life but also encompasses the afterlife in all its violent forms.

The Foot that Speaks: Mapping the Indigenous *Corpus Mysticum*

If the foot shall say, because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?

— 1 Corinthians 12:15

What significance could a divine body rendered into parts (Christ's blood, Christ's feet, Christ's flesh) have had for Indigenous Christians in Mexico as they suffered and survived the colonial *mortandad*? Catholic *pueblos de indios* resisted absorption into the Spanish vision of a colonial flesh-body, even as they embraced, against all odds, Catholic sacred power. Against the Spanish lament for wounded bodies and an emptied land, surviving *pueblos de indios* imagined their own *corpus mysticum*: a shared body of Indigenous Catholic corporate belonging.

This abundant theopolitical vision appears in a well-known collection of Indigenous-authored maps drawn in the last decades of the sixteenth century: the *mapas* of the *Relaciones geográficas* (Geographical Reports). Of 76 extant maps in the *Relaciones geográficas* collection, most were painted by Indigenous artists with varying degrees of autonomy from Spanish structures of control. They come to us from *pueblos de indios* who understood themselves to be Christian, often for multiple generations, for *tiempo inmemorial*, or time immemorial. I read the maps as communicating a colonial, vernacular theology, but this time a Mesoamerican one, worked out through feet, footprints, and walking. In the *mapas* people are represented in startling abundance. Where the Spanish mourned empty towns and despaired over greatly diminished populations, the maps are testaments to the continuity of human presence. They represent human life in abundance. If one looks carefully, reference to the human form abounds: thickly populated settlements are not abandoned but caringly protected; domestic dwellings crowd the landscape; ancestors in royal lines, shadowy as ghosts, are close at hand. Governing lords, *principales*, sit in observant vigilance over their communities. And most importantly for this interpretation, footprints crisscross the terrain, marking human activity.

Ubiquitous in Mesoamerican cartography both before and after the Spanish invasion, footprints are the predominant representation of the human form. In some maps, pedestrians, pilgrims, and the footprints they leave behind appear

together. But even more frequently footsteps are unaccompanied. Spanish missionaries imagined the *Indios* as the feet of the colonial body of Christ. In the *mapas*, footprints are the most common form of self-representation indicating the presence of Indigenous persons: feet are *pars pro toto*. Notably, Spanish bodies are almost wholly absent from the maps, except for the rare landowner or governor lurking around the edges, or (in one map) a friar nearly hidden in the shadows of a darkened church doorway.

For Mesoamerican cultures, inhabited spaces were “living, breathing entities” (Solari 2013: 78–79). Now, through sacred, ritual labor, *pueblos de indios* transformed these ancestral territories into living Catholic bodies. In 1538, at one of the earliest celebrations of Corpus Christi in the Americas, the Tlaxcalans memorialized the body of Christ through landscape practice, recreating “their own local landscape in front of the church” (Wake 2016: 72), complete with mountains, trees, abundant flowers, and wildlife. Art historian Amara Solari (2013: 68–70) reads a Maya map from the Yucatán as suggesting the superimposition of Christ’s wounded body, pierced with arrows, over Indigenous territory, his limbs oriented to the cardinal directions. Some contemporary Maya communities speak of “the world as a maize field tended by Jesus” (Taube 2003: 462). In Indigenous Mexican theopolitics, Christ’s body was sometimes conflated with Indigenous territories in a way that simultaneously inscribed both Indigenous and Christian power.

The presence of footsteps and roads in the maps of the *Relaciones geográficas* evokes sacred, numinous power and simultaneously enacts ritual possession and repossession. Feet signs mark the Indigenous *corpus mysticum*. Consider, for example, the appearance of footsteps on the great Mixtec *Mapa de Teozacoalco* (1580). Depicting the sacred territory of the Mixtec people of San Pedro Teozacoalco, located in the modern-day state of Oaxaca, this is the largest and most well-known of the maps (Caso 1949). Composed of 23 discrete sheets of European paper bound together by adhesive, the map is so large that when displayed for consultation it occupies several library tables in the reading room of the Benson Library at the University of Texas at Austin, where it is currently housed.

Nestled within the many crossroads, fourteen churches punctuate the landscape, bound together in hallowed relation by the 46 boundary markers that refer to a geographically contiguous and connected territory. The map thus captures the social order and political organization of an extensive region. In its mystical globelike self-understanding, the community of Teozacoalco projected itself from the *mortandad* onto a Mixtec-Christian plane. The visual center of the *Mapa de Teozacoalco*, to the left and just slightly above the horizontal median, includes the large monastery complex with its church and enclosed walled atrial courtyard. Closely associated with the monastery church, the governing palace is now encompassed under its auspices. A sacred lineage of

ancestors ascends from the center. Alongside these other cultural structures and referents, the church forms part of a material matrix, an enervating heart or power center—a motif that is reiterated in other *mapas*.

This sacred matrix of Indigenous Catholic power appears at a major cross-roads, heavily trafficked by people and beasts of burden. The roads of the *Mapa de Tezacoalco* are densely populated and in active use, as is true for the maps in general. Every road within the sphere is well traveled. The annual rite of walking the perimeter of an ancestral territory was a common ceremonial practice throughout Mexico. The place names that serve as boundary markers on the circumference of the Tezacoalco globe appear precisely in the order that a pilgrim would encounter them while walking. Ceremonial walking reinscribed and activated geopolitical boundaries. Footprints on maps are often used precisely to mark the perimeter of a town but also to define and sacralize space and structures.

The ‘peripatetic dynamism’ of the maps, including most importantly their copious roads and footprints, worked in unison toward the capture of space but also, here, to define the now Catholic landscape as unceded Indigenous territory.

FIGURE 3: Sacred matrix with church, governing palace, and ancestral lineage. *Mapa de Tezacoalco* (1580). Oaxaca, Mexico. Detail. LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, the University of Texas at Austin.

The churches are circumambulated and enfolded within Indigenous territory. Here, footsteps signal complex economic, political, and social meanings, but they also bind the community as a single, sacred, and precious entity, a “monumental ceremonial precinct” (Carrasco 2020: 260). To walk a territory, to circumambulate it, as Carrasco and Sessions (2007: 445) explain, was to lay claim to it at the same time that it activated sacred power:

Circumambulation means “to walk a circle around” a valued territory, object, person, or holy ground. This ritual walking has often been represented by a circle or square design. The primary religious reasoning for circumambulating a territory is 1) to set it apart from what is on the outside of the pathway, 2) to approach the immense numinous powers at the heart of the territory in a respectful, oblique fashion, during which 3) the participants build up their own powers as they approach the heart of their new community.

Walking the landscape thus challenged the land claims made by Spanish colonial powers, including archbishops and bishops. Teozacoalco’s map provides a theopolitical grounding (the stakes) for its claim to enduring authority, power, and continuity into the future—at once Catholic and Indigenous. Roads and footprints gesture to the future as well, to where the person and the community are going. In the maps, almost all roads end at the doorstep of the church: it is the church that lies on the road ahead.

Conclusion

Always contingent, the Mexican *corpus mysticum* was grounded and manifest in the vernacular theologies and affects of the *mortandad*, the violent death world of the colonial cataclysm, and within the structures of Indigenous survivance that were strategized in response. As a theopolitical phantom, the foot stood as the part that remained outside of and resisted the colonial body politic as a violent, cannibalistic, and authoritarian enterprise. Consider the passage from the first letter to the Corinthians in which Paul posits a foot that acts autonomously from the body as a whole. Alienated from the body, the foot speaks and makes its claim, defending itself by reclaiming the dignity of its place in relation to the rest of the body. The colony was an (un)holy body at war with itself—a body of severed limbs and parts that could not stand. In the footsteps that haunt the maps of the Indigenous *Relaciones geográficas*, the phantom foot was a sign of Mexican Indigenous communities’ theopolitical refusal to be absorbed into the Spanish colonial flesh-body. We return then to the New Mexico activist brandishing his foot trophy. In the sixteenth-century Aztec *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*, the goddess Obsidian Butterfly likewise

FIGURE 4: Foot as a war trophy. *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*. Puebla, Mexico, Amate. Circa 1545. Detail. 109cm x 204 cm. Permission of David Carrasco.

emerges triumphantly from the womblike cave, wielding a severed foot as a war trophy while leading her people to Aztlán.

Theological ideas cannot be fully sublimated or ‘liquidated’ into the state, or even into the purely political, because they refer not only to the world of formal systematics but also to that which is lived, experienced, felt, and enfleshed. They cannot be fully abstracted or completely concretized. Nor can they be subsumed within extractive, authoritarian, or imperial projects. There is always a part that cannot be cannibalized.

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Notes

1. I preserve the colonial Spanish word for Mexico's Indigenous peoples here and throughout to indicate the particularity of Spanish worldviews and viewpoints, and to capture the religious and political power of the colonial category. The term *Indio* (never capitalized in colonial documents) was also routinely used by subject Indigenous peoples to identify themselves as they navigated colonial institutions. Much of this meaning is lost in translation into the English word 'Indian'. Daniel Nemser (2017: 27) asks: "What is the 'Indian' but a bundle of qualities, capacities, and obligations occupying a specific location in a field of social relations?"
2. The Bulls of Donation issued by Pope Alexander VI shortly after the 'discovery' of the New World in 1493 signaled the church's original and final jurisdiction over Indigenous territories and bodies.
3. The function of the body of Christ as a colonial category finds a partial parallel in the history of the United States among the Puritans of New England in relation to racial communities. Heather Miyano Kopelson (2014: 104) explores the meaning of the body of Christ for the Puritans, who imagined incorporating African and Indigenous peoples as "explicitly unequal ... parts of the body of Christ." Alexander Haskell (2017) points out that *corpus mysticum* was a resonant metaphor for English colonizers beyond the Puritans, although it never appears to have been inclusive of Native Americans.
4. Connaughton (1999) explores the idea of *corpus mysticum* in Mexico for the post-Independence period, but without reference to the long historical trajectory of the concept in Mexico.
5. Letter to the King from Bishop Juan de Medina Rincón, AGI, México 374, Cartas y expedientes de Michoacán 1561–1700, 8 de marzo de 1581. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. Italics added.
6. The future of the colony was dependent on the labor of Indigenous people. Historian Andrés Reséndez (2016) argues that throughout the colonial period Latin America's Indigenous people were not just a peasant class, but rather an enslaved people. This interpretation begins to grapple with the suffering of Americas' Indigenous people, but it also erases the fact that under colonial policy *Indios* were legally free subjects, 'vassals' who owed their labor, their services, to the king. Indigenous people denounced their treatment as slaves precisely because they considered themselves to be free subjects of the king. To be clear, free did not mean equal, nor did it mean exempt from conditions of servitude.
7. Letter from Fray Pedro de Oroz to the King asking for delay in the preaching of the *Cruzada* because of the epidemic, AGI, México 283, Cartas y expedientes de personas eclesiásticas 1575–77, noviembre de 1576. Italics added.
8. Letter from Fray Figueroa, AGI, México 285, Cartas y expedientes de personas eclesiásticas 1580–81, 25 de octubre de 1580 (a second date on the same letter reads abril de 1581). Italics added.
9. Acariciar. v. a. "Tratar con amor y ternúra, halagar con demostraciones de cariño y afecto." *Nuevo diccionario histórico de español*.

10. Here I am adapting Orla O'Donovan's concept of the 'dead body commons' (see <https://www.brocher.ch/en/chercheurs/orla-odonovan/>). For O'Donovan, this relates to the idea of the dead body as a 'medical commons', as returning to the collective. By this term, rather I mean the large commons of the dead, not individuated or discrete bodies, but the unindividuated dead.

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