

# **The Earthly Thinking of Planetary Unity**

by

Terry Cochran

filename/nom du fichier: earththink.pdf

date: 02sept05

Address:

Département de littérature comparée

Université de Montréal

C.P. 6128, succursale Centre-ville

Montréal, Québec H3C 3J7

[terry.cochran@umontreal.ca](mailto:terry.cochran@umontreal.ca)

[A version of this text to be published in *Bridges over Water: Social Openness and Enclosure*, ed. Sanda Badescu, London: Cambridge Scholars, 2008]

<1>

Thinking about the land and the sea poses a number of thorny difficulties because these two concepts are completely interwoven; each is unthinkable without the other. Their relationship, however, goes far beyond the vagaries of abstraction, because it contains at its very core the fundamental problem of knowing that binds human experience with ongoing reflection. Land and sea inevitably mean land and what separates land from other land, it signals a certain stability face-to-face with the unknown, the unpredictable, the life-threatening, and so on, notions that vary according to degrees of superstition, historical understanding or just simple experience. From the very outset of recorded thought, the sea has stood as the outer edge of the horizon of human action; in this sense, prior to the transformations of early modernity, the sea was deeply embedded in a religious worldview, signaling what resists submission to human domination while being no obstacle for the divine will.<sup>1</sup> In the characterization of Psalm 93, for example,

Thou hast fixed the earth immovable and firm,  
thy throne firm from of old;  
from all eternity thou art God.  
O Lord, the ocean lifts up, the ocean lifts up its clamour;  
the ocean lifts up its pounding waves.  
The Lord on high is mightier far  
than the noise of great waters,  
mightier than the breakers of the sea.<sup>2</sup>

Yet once tied to the presumed supremacy of the human mind, the sea becomes another obstacle to be subjected to human understanding, an essential element in this historical grounding of human finitude. In other words, contrary to the ancient notion of divine intervention, the ensemble of land and sea boils down to a question of land and the in-between; this in-between articulates the lands among themselves, joining and disjoining them, bridging outcroppings of terra firma, rendering this in-between traversable, as in a bridge itself. Above and beyond the empirical, that is, the real encounter of land and water, on a seacoast where I can stand staring into open waters, the mental association of land and sea is a figure of thought.

This figure of thought has played a major role in fashioning the global perspective encroaching on every facet of contemporary existence; it has provided the means for assimilating, appropriating the earth,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Saint Augustin, *Œuvres I*, Gallimard, 1998, p. 1481.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 93:1-4, in the translation of *The New English Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

the planet as a whole, for seizing its inhabitants in a collective concept (that is, as a species, as “humanity”). From its origins as a “non-place,” as a disruptive or disorganized unknown, the sea has become more and more of a place, more inhabited and chartered; it has surrendered its destiny to such an extent that it exists only to give way to landfall, taking on all the characteristics of land itself. It has metaphorically become as solid as land, subject to territorial claims, the site of struggle over natural resources, and so on, no longer a mental obstacle in any way. The figure of thought uniting land and sea has fostered a planetary regime of understanding, expression of an integral wholeness. Ultimately, today, I would like to explore the underpinnings of this configuration of sea and land, of liquid and solid, if you will, in hoping to grasp certain of the figure’s sociopolitical, historical and philosophical implications and, in particular, as it concerned the notion of global humanity or the “universal human.” Before delving into the stakes of this tandem of concepts, however, I would like to try to render more precise the nature of this configuration, which represents an important nexus of modern thought.

In this figure, two different planes of thought intersect, each, however, depending on and deriving from the other. In sketching out these modes of thinking, as well as their conjunction, I would like to quote Immanuel Kant, who traced out the general lines of what has come to be known as “cosmopolitical” understanding. In his *Critique of Judgment*, he remarks:

Land [*Land*] and sea contain not only monuments [*Denkmäler*: what bears witness for thought] of mighty primeval disasters that have overtaken both them and all their brood of living forms, but their entire structure - the strata of the land [*Erdlager*] and the coast lines of the sea - has all the appearance of being the outcome of the wild and all-subduing forces of a nature working in a state of chaos.<sup>3</sup>

In subjecting to reasoned analysis the often violent encounter between land and sea, Kant seeks to domesticate the chaos, or what seemed to be chaos, and submit it to human understanding. In a sacred context, this chaos names the incomprehensibility underlying divine will, force, and action. Yet Kant’s remarks - uttered two centuries subsequent to the flurry of global exploration even if long before the age of fractals - proclaim that the mystery of the sea harboring the unknown or, rather, the unknowable, has been dispelled - in principle if not entirely in fact. The sea, so unfathomable that it seems to mimic infinity, takes the form of just another object of knowledge in the process of being dissected. Bearer of nonhuman history, of cataclysms taking place outside of human purview, it contains signs to be deciphered by human understanding, the material grounds for multiple allegories or interpretations generated in the name of knowledge or “science.”

This overarching interest in founding a new form of scientific thinking, in enabling the powers of

---

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, tr. James Meredith, Oxford University Press, 1978, (Part II, “Critique of Teleological Judgement,” p. 90 (translation modified); *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, p. 385.

reason to deal with objects still to be constituted and to unfold, rests upon unprecedented understanding of the globe as a bounded unity of land and sea. Far from being the sole thinker engaged in this drive to subject the globe to the human mind, Kant was and has remained exemplary in framing what has become the hegemonic worldview. The complementary aspect of this reborn figure of land and sea, transformed in assuming its modern trappings, concerns attributing to the human mind heretofore unconceivable powers of projection. Once again, Kant succinctly encapsulates this property of human understanding, which is

a totally active human faculty; all of its representations [Vorstellungen] and concepts are exclusively *its* creations; the human being thinks spontaneously with his understanding, thus creating *his* world [Welt].<sup>4</sup>

Humans always thought their world, elaborating images and mental projections of their “space,” of the confines, whether real or imagined, within which they envisage their existence. But, prior to what is euphemistically called the age of exploration, this “world” did not and could not correspond to the globe as a (potentially) knowable locus of human life.

This global question literally permeates the concept of modernity, whose very basis for existence derives from the presupposed overlapping between the imaginary of the human world and the globe as an integral planetary whole. Or, to put it differently, modernity means that the globe belongs to the human imaginary as the encompassing backdrop of its world; part and parcel of the modern projection, the ensemble of land and sea coalesce into a global totality no longer dependent on the empirical. In the context of a global sphere under the dominion of the human mind and technology, the sea is no longer the sea, the land is no longer the land. As the recent study (November, 2004) by the Arctic Council - the intergovernmental forum on the Arctic region - openly acknowledges, the gradual depletion of the Arctic’s frozen landmass will in coming decades make this ocean navigable, thus creating an upheaval in the circuits of global transport, exploration, and balance of power. In other words, in the contemporary planetary projection, the opposition between land and sea is wholly reversible; in this “Arctic” instance, the elimination of land allows for deeper command of this region, overturning the traditional historical vision of the sea as the perilous obstacle to territorial mastery. In sum, sea and land, having lost their specificity, belong to an economy, a regime of understanding whose primary focus bears on the real and symbolic appropriation of the globe.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kant, “Der Streit der Fakultäten,” *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1977, p. 342; my translation.

<2>

At this juncture, I'd like to turn to this striving toward appropriation of the global sphere, which is inextricably bound up with the relationship between terra firma and its aqueous barriers of separation. Strictly speaking, the moment when the world became one, when it submitted itself fully to human understanding, is a historical and, by extension, political issue. Contrary to commonplaces about the so-called "age of discovery" and, particularly, about Columbus's role in it, the globalness of the world has little to do with its being a sphere, and Columbus had no role in establishing the veracity of the world's roundness. Aristotle and Herodotus had already written about the spherical form of the earth; this theoretical knowledge was well established in intellectual thought. Nor is it a question of encountering the Far East, which from the late Middle Ages entered into European discourse, following accounts by Marco Polo, or, in Middle Eastern context, through the 14th-century narratives of Ibn Battuta, among others. In distinction with the Portuguese Bartolomeu Dias (1485) or Vasco da Gama (1497), however, Columbus closed the circle, and the finitude of the earth became accessible to understanding. The voyages taking place under his command, which were far from gratifying financially or territorially, made possible an imaginary that had real, concrete manifestations. In his March 4, 1492 letter to the King and Queen, written from Lisbon, Columbus invokes the theme of this conference:

Over there, the sea is the calmest in the world for navigating and is less dangerous for caravels and boats of all sorts... There are never storms because I saw, in all the places where I went, grass and trees growing right down to the sea.<sup>5</sup>

I don't want to linger over the touch of hypocrisy in this letter, which aims to lay the groundwork for obtaining finance for voyages still to come. Nor will I insist on the naivety of the belief, rapidly contradicted by further experience, that these distant waters are calm and stormless. Yet once traversed, the deep seas become as land, and the domestication of the ocean translates immediately into a planetary wholeness, a finite dimension ready for investment in all senses, from the financial to the ideological. The experience giving rise to this letter, as well as the numerous reports penned by Columbus, does not constitute theoretical knowledge but the knowledge of understanding in its Kantian meaning, as the faculty where the human world spins out its images, becomes lived imaginary. In the written remnants of this 1492 expedition, experience becomes concept and image, and the world becomes newly whole, spawning the concepts of hydrosphere, lithosphere, and atmosphere, the constituent elements of the planet. The series of historical accidents making way for the Americas' entry

---

<sup>5</sup> Columbus, "Lettre aux Rois Catholiques," *La découverte de l'Amérique*, vol. I, p. 319. This passage comes from a letter rediscovered only in 1985; I've translated it from French but will retranslate it from Spanish when I locate the original.

onto the world stage, stamping this territorial otherness with a global essence, has irrefutably melded Americanism with the globalization it unveiled.

In the 21st century when no wilderness hideaway is wholly free from global hegemony, piercing the thick layers of historical sediment to grasp the significance of overseas globalism seems a daunting, if not impossible, task. One of the primary consequences of globalism presents itself in the form of a conundrum: in the wake of global understanding, there can never be, nor can there ever have been a clear-cut first time. This statement apparently defies all logic to the point of being nonsensical. Yet with regard to Columbus, whose globalizing accomplishment has been universally heralded in written historical record, the firstness of his expedition has unceasingly been placed into question. I am referring, for instance, to assertions that the Vikings had already explored these continents or Thor Heyerdahl's belief that Egyptians had already made the voyage in papyrus vessels, among other diverse claims. Rather than endorsing any one of these various pretenders who might have "discovered" these continents and prefigured global awareness, I would like only to underscore the consequences for global knowing and understanding. Once inscribed in history, the first time immediately loses its precedence; in establishing the global figure of thought, a prism through which history itself becomes visible, the Columbus accounts foreground a regime of historical understanding based on continuous reenactment.

In this repetitiveness, this inexorable and endemic secondariness accompanying the global consciousness of modernity, the inability to posit an original moment surfaces in the language itself. In the global frame of reference, the sea of difference severs the old from the new. Like creation from the void, the "new world," something "new" that does not duplicate, reflect, or renew the old world, comes into view as the previously unacknowledged rest of the world, as more of the same engulfing known portions. It completes the world, creates the possibility of seeing the world as an integral unit. The old world and the new world compose the planet as a whole, just as the Christian tradition rewrites the relationship between the Greek testament and the Hebrew testament, renaming them the old and new testaments, as if they both belonged to the same sacred text, the same Bible.

In sum, what I want to suggest is that the geographical unearthing of this surplus world gives a reiterative foundation to the human mindset. Beyond its obvious metaphorical power, its intrinsic force or representation, the re-naissance signals more than a rebirth of abandoned values, perspectives, and beliefs: it moves into the foreground elements that lay dormant prior to the conjoined physical and ideological seizing of the globe in its wholeness. It creates the effect of a first time that can only be enforced by authority, however implicit or explicit it might be. Whereas the relationship of sea and land coalescing into a figure of thought to undergird global understanding, the global human or the universal human, as it is known in philosophical discourse, becomes its personification, yet another figure of sorts. Real globalization - whether it is designated as conquest, exploration, discover, decimation or encounters based on supposed reciprocity - underwrites the emergence of the universal human, a fiction bigger than life offering a backdrop to ongoing engagements of the "other." Today's proliferation of labels such as the

multitude, diversity, and hybridity – fruit of the search for neologisms expressing the “inter,” the “trans,” the “multi,” in addition to the generalized “other” – takes place really and figuratively on this global terrain. These flailing concepts, conveyed by words so often bandied about that they’ve exhausted their capacity to produce meaning, support the edifice of present-day humanistic knowledge. The modern guise cloaking the incessant rewriting of collective identity rests on an unacknowledged globalism that is much more than the globalization catchword on the breath of every participant in knowledge production.

The extension of the earthly horizon to global scale submits itself to representation in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These representations – whether histories, logbooks, or speculations – seek to replot the coordinates of the human spirit, melding the previously unknowable, even unconceivable, with longstanding accounts of human reflection. In attempting to come to terms with the irruption of this “new” world, inscriptions assume the firstness of the encounters they describe, as I have briefly tried to indicate. Yet accounts of these pristine encounters are criss-crossed by earlier understandings literally embedded in the psyche of tradition.

In whole or in part, faithfully or in free discrepancy, the fundamentals of these early global contentions are reactivated and reiterated at every conquest, at every depiction of conquest. Even benign take-over, the eventual outcome even of encounters between presumed equals, enjoys no exemption from this process of representation in the planetary age christened several centuries ago. At the onset of this old new globalism, no less scientific than political, philosophical, and geographical, no preexistent history eases these jolting experiences into submission. Confrontation takes place across a divide, a sea of difference, if you will, or as a result of unresolvable incomprehensibility between different visions or linguistic and cultural expressions of the “world.” The “many” on this side – the European many who possess the ink and spread it liberally in the wake of exploration – stand against the nameless scores on the other side. The clash of two disparate entities requires a common ground, a global concept, so to speak, to permit their intermingling. After centuries of cosmopolitical linkages and stratification, we have grown increasingly unable to come to grips with the demands of incomprehensibility and how it necessarily inhabits us. What were once absolute incongruities become watered-down variations, more of the same, a sort of regimented dissimilarity holding no surprise, permitting no astonishment.

<3>

Against this broad backdrop, so vast as to be global, in what follows I would like to evoke this set of issues and figures of thought in less abstract fashion. While in the shadow of global modernity, the outset of which cannot be pinpointed, there are early attempts to put into discourse the clashes with absolute otherness (along with the phenomenon of world finitude it implies). Among this select group of writings, whose number is quite small, Bernal Díaz Del Castillo’s *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* offers a blow-by-blow depiction of Cortés’s 1519 conquest, which, 15 years after Columbus’s final

expedition, was fundamental for European supremacy in the Americas and for Spanish subjugation of what will become Central America. Writing in nonerudite Spanish, excessively vernacular for the epoch, Díaz del Castillo grapples over and over with a foreignness that outstrips his understanding, and the narrator in his historical memoir exhibits traits of the individual striving to rationalize the inexplicable, to render palatable to the mind the prodigious nature of the invasion and its inflicted agonies.

Prior to joining Hernán Cortés's campaign to subdue the new, unknown territory for the king of Spain, Díaz del Castillo participated in a shortlived "expedition" led by Hernández de Córdoba. In the course of this exploration, Díaz del Castillo's party was met by a cluster of "Indians" overheard to be repeating what resembled the word "Castilian" even though their speech was wholly unintelligible. Specifically, in the context of a largely nonverbal exchange carried on by extemporaneous signing and gesturing, Díaz del Castillo registers that "they made signs with their hands[asking] if we came from where the sun comes up, says 'Castilian, Castilian,' and we didn't pay much attention to that talk about 'Castilian.' And after this talking they made us other signs..."<sup>6</sup> These sounds, given meaning by the small coterie of Spaniards who deciphered them, would be, in any universe of experience, more than *unheimlich*. After traversing a large chunk of the globe, embarking on unknown land belonging to what to the Europeans seemed mystifying and mysterious peoples, the expedition members detected an indirect, even implicit, evocation of their place of origin, their state of allegiance. Deep in an unexplored territory whose inhabitants speak languages not only incomprehensible but unrelated to European linguistic development, such a verbal apparition would be akin to hallucination. After all, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, monster figures still adorn the unknown or dangerous regions in contemporary cartographic representations of the earth.

But Díaz del Castillo wrote about this brief encounter as just one minor event among others, en passant, and the "Castilian" evocation excited little curiosity. Until Cortés, who had not even been present when the event took place, later brought the issue to the fore, this frightening eruption of phonemes received little commentary. In Cortés's interrogation of those witnessing the event, which included Díaz del Castillo himself, the reception of this strange exclamation takes a different turn altogether. Cortés's reaction, which at the outset of his own expedition merely tries to wrestle the enigma to reason, suggests a more solemn and masterly regime of knowledge, of understanding, whatever the initial shudders and anxiety this expression might have produced. Writing with full knowledge of all that transpired afterwards, Díaz del Castillo offers to the contemporary reader – and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century still partakes of that contemporaneity – an account filtering out the stupefaction, even shivering fear, that such an unpredictable burst of self-recognition might entail. Yet, in that account, that "true" rendering, this pre-

---

<sup>6</sup> Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la nueva España*, ed. Carlos Pereyra, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1992, p. 40. ["nos señalaron con las manos que si veníamos de donde sale el sol, y decían: "Castilan, castilan", y no miramos en lo de la plática del "castilan". Y después destas pláticas nos dijeron por señas..." (ch.iii, 40).]

Cortés episode constitutes an allegorical beginning of a different cosmopolitical understanding, neither kinder nor gentler, whose shadows are projected throughout the history.

To Díaz del Castillo and even decades later to his first readers, this evocation of the *language* of Castile, of the Castilian *tongue*, went hand in hand with their presence: in addition to the general physical accoutrements, the aboriginal people recognized the conquering soldiers by their way of speaking, by the articulated sounds whose meaning they were incapable of decoding. The entire course of Cortés's crusade, not its immediate and devastating success but its setting into place a new global economy of conquest, a cosmopolitical universality enduring to buttress even contemporary outgrowths of globalism, depends on the language question. Here, though, the language question concerns the mediating power of language and its conjunction with cosmopolitical understanding, not which language should dominate in which state, at the heart of a given collectivity. In Spain, ultimately a product of the outgrowth of Castilian tentacles, that language was Castilian, which was funneled through the fledgling state institutions.

The genius of Cortés, insofar as his actions laid the groundwork for an emergent global domain, derived from the frame of mind he exemplified, both historically and in Díaz del Castillo's true history. In questioning Díaz del Castillo and his companion, both witnesses of the linguistic apparition, Cortés remarked that he "thought often about it [the mention of 'Castilian'] and that there might by chance [*por ventura*] be some Spaniards in that land" (xxvii, 79). Above and beyond the calculated rationalism of Cortés's reflection, which ignored any potential spiritual meaning, whether foreboding disaster or foretelling a glorious destiny, this brief sentence, the product of Cortés's ruminations, marks a departure that is already second-hand. In retrospect, the import that this remark gives to an uncanny sound transforms the context of the divine as well as secular mission and, at the same time, transcended the circumstances of the Spanish crown's miserable quest for glory, wealth, and territory. Unbeknownst to its speaker, this utterance, in its implications and subsequent unfolding, cloaks both the imperial desire bound up with globalism and the undercurrent of betrayal coursing through the global mind. I could never do justice to this sentence in all its excruciating exactitude, as much a death sentence for nonglobal thinking as a series of anodyne words voiced on the Central American coast, but what follows aims, with a foreknowledge of the impossibility of its task, to sketch the consequences that this sentence enables and espouses.

In standing firm against the irrational, Cortés reached the just conclusion, thinking it highly likely that subjects of the Spanish crown had already penetrated the area. We're no different from Cortés and easily recognize him as one of our own, a modern globalist. The uncanny irruption of this European inscription, of this Castilian word, holds no mystery that is not already dispelled by calculating logic. More importantly, though, this linguistic incident offers banal but irrefutable evidence that there is no first time. The readers of del Castillo's history can never ascertain the nature of his own reaction to hearing Castilian in Castilian where he thought to have been the first European; he wrote his history too long after the events in question, and his historical record manifests the profound influence of Cortés's turn of mind,

which is resolutely that of a successful globalist. In the cosmopolitical domain, in a world conceived and constituted as an integral whole, nowhere remains untouched, everywhere constitutes a site of potential repetition. Without the possibility of pristine experience, we loop along a predetermined trajectory reiterating what has gone before, drawing impetus from consequences that we misrecognize as originary events. This repetition concerns the conjunction of language and empire, of universal subjects and temporal state allegiance. Cortés understood that the “Castilian” vocalization signaled the presence of Spanish subjects who spoke the Castilian language. No less than the Cortés mission’s spectacular success – that is, the profitable annihilation of global adversaries – the Spanish imperial venture hinges on these Castilian “sleepers,” those lying dormant in global backlands who awaken to provide mediation between asymmetrical ensembles on a global scale.

Cortés, a practical man, set out to locate the assumed referent of these utterances of “Castilian.” He sent out letters to what he learned were two survivors of a Spanish vessel, lost and shipwrecked eight years earlier, that had originally seventeen passengers, including two women. All being captured and divided among indigenous factions, the others suffered various mortal fates, some being sacrificed to the gods, some dying from fatigue or overwork. Jerónimo de Aguilar was the first to receive Cortés’s communiqué and the beads buying his freedom; he immediately traveled the five leagues separating him from his compatriot survivor. There Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero read the letters together, in a community of two, as it were, but their reception of the presumably good news could not have been more divergent. Of the two Spaniards, Guerrero had irrecoverably “gone native” and refused outrightly to join the ranks of his mother country.<sup>7</sup>

Aguilar, on the other hand, becomes a recurring presence in the conquest story; his linguistic skills, which include the ability to communicate in the Mayan dialects, became a fundamental component of the Spanish physical and spiritual assault. Initially, though, Aguilar’s shedding of his aboriginal exterior to reassume his presumably underlying Spanishness did not take place without a moment of misrecognition and a fumbling about. One of Cortés’s soldiers, designated to meet the arriving group of nonEuropeans, saw only “Indians (because Aguilar was neither more nor less than Indian)” (chap.xxix, 83). As far as his Spanish onlookers were concerned, the individual who would later be called Aguilar was just another member of a small party of Indians. Judging solely from appearances, it was impossible to call a Spaniard a Spaniard. Aguilar’s hair was trimmed in the same way as his companions, and his tattered clothes could not be distinguished from theirs. He had a sandal on one foot, the other on his belt, with his oar resting on his shoulder. His foreignness was unremarkable.

---

<sup>7</sup> Here I omit details of his refusal, which are very telling about the relatively few options available to those resisting the global enterprise. Guerrero was in fact a precursor of contemporary anti-globalists. He never meets Cortés and, after the few pages of the true history devoted to his story, fades into the jungle to remain only a counterexample, a sort of flawed model, of the mediated identities prevailing in an emerging cosmopolitical sphere.

Seeking to cleave his appearance, to express an interior distinct from his outer, completely autochthonous image, Aguilar mouths essentially three words in Spanish, apparently not yet capable of coming up with a complete sentence. Seemingly offered as an introduction, he utters “God and Holy Mary and Seville” (“Dios y Santa María y Sevilla”) (chap. xxix, p. 84). These are not just any three words. They signal, first, an appeal to transcendence generally, although in the emerging cosmopolitical dimension, invoking God means exceedingly more than religious justification, more than the deceitful cynicism that asserts the most unrighteous acts of colonial barbarism to be expressions of divine justness. The allseeing God, monotheistic by definition, furnishes the global vanishing point, the abstract perspective from which the world can display its hypothetical unity. The hailing of holy Mary, whose phantomlike image repeatedly appears in ferocious, protective splendor as the conquest unfolds, evokes the means of God’s human incarnation marking the beginning of Christianity, the universal religion bound up with the cosmopolitical. Just as Christ embodies God in the terrestrial setting, so does Mary, the mother Mary, intercede with the Godhead, in the medieval elaboration of her role that will become entwined with the universal Church itself.<sup>8</sup> And, lastly, Aguilar hails Seville, the port of Spain that was the point of departure for Spanish ships heading for what becomes designated as the New World, first embarking on a voyage into the unknown. Enjoying a monopoly on Spanish commerce with the New World, Seville becomes a major global hub in a more figurative sense, as Aguilar’s croaking intimates. He invokes a series of linkages exceeding a mere abstract grid of national identity, for he literally espouses the coordinates of human identity that will be the point of reference, the intangible measure for depicting the floating selfhoods of the cosmopolitical age. In another, more conceptual register, his utterance indicates the transcendent or divine realm that cannot be reduced to an earthly dimension, following it by reference to the moment when a transcendent God manifests himself in terrestrial guise by being born of human flesh, and ending with a global site that serves as a point of transfer between the old and the new worlds, between the known and the unknown, between a localized Europe and a globalized planet, between sea and land, as well as the global projection providing their unity.

For Aguilar, however, expressing the cosmopolitical trinity – transcendence, immanence, and global point of reference – does not suffice, and the scene of misrecognition continues. It comes to an abrupt end only when Cortés, looking right at him, asks, “Well, where is this Spaniard?” (chap. xxix, p. 84). Completing the swatch of coordinates of modern existence, what might be termed the quadripartite of cosmopolitical identity, Aguilar speaks for himself for the first time in the first person, responding “yo soy” (“it’s me”). From this moment forward, from his first-person utterance of self, presumably in an approximate right pronunciation, a massive machine of rehabilitation starts up to smooth his way back into the fold, to enable him to become once again a functioning Spanish subject, which, I would like to underscore, means a global subject. Ever the scavenger on the lookout for something or someone to

---

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to popular belief, the “Santa Maria” was not the name of Columbus’s larger ship, which was probably called *La Maria Galante*, a name never mentioned in his writings.

further his own ends, or those of the Crown he represented, Cortés was seeking to learn how he might benefit from what crossed his path. For Aguilar, however, the effect was different. He was able to resituate himself in discourse, take back his Spanish self, let it emerge from its buried recesses without, however, entirely divesting himself of his otherness. Almost immediately the references to his poor pronunciation disappear, his fluency returns, and his global European identity is successfully revived. Specifically, after his almost immediate reintegration into the Spanish ranks, he becomes an interpreter - or, as Díaz del Castillo calls him, a “tongue” - for the invading forces.

In conclusion, I would like to return briefly to the idea that this conference has taken as its object a figure of thought - the configuration of land, sea, and bridge - that has been fundamental, both metaphorically and concretely, in consolidating the idealized global entity. I've attempted, broadly and without a doubt somewhat inadequately, to suggest the primary implications of this figure, of this amalgam of figures. The task is all the more difficult because of the insidious nature of this configuration of presuppositions, which has constituted the modern or contemporary worldview by its very invisibility, somewhat like transcendence itself. Whether religious or not, the vanishing point of a unifying global universalism incarnates a perspective through which the earth can be conceived as one and its inhabitants as variants of the same. Today's self-proclaimed secular faiths, values, and beliefs such as human rights, democracy and the prerogative to imagine potential enemies, projected on a global scale, mimic this same universal point of reference. Within this global horizon, the meanings and presuppositions of which reside more and more beyond the realm of discussion, of fundamental questioning, the figure of Aguilar should give us pause. As an early representation of the global mediator, a go-between permitting an ongoing meld between diametrically dissimilar cultural, political, and linguistic spheres in an emerging cosmopolitical context, Aguilar is first and foremost a planetary subject, whose essential mode of being derives from his chameleon nature, from his participatory role in the production of hegemony. I fear that this is what we are all becoming, some more successfully than others.