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## González de Eslava and the Origins of Mexican Orientalism

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### Abstract

Orientalism bookends the literature of Hapsburg-era Mexico: if Cortés describes Tenochtitlan's temples as mosques and if early missionary plays paint the conquistador as a Muslim sultan, by the end of the seventeenth century Sor Juana uses Egyptian architecture as a signpost for her Mexican intellectual odyssey, *Primero sueño*. Little attention, however, has been paid to early depictions of East Asia in colonial-era orientalist literature. In this paper, I analyze the first Mexican play to treat East Asia, Fernán González de Eslava's *Coloquio II*. Written in the 1560s and performed soon after the first return of a fleet from the Philippines, this play broadcasts and codifies exoticized information about East Asia for Eslava's audience in the streets of Mexico City. While its East-Asian Orientalism departs from earlier depictions of the Middle East in many ways, *Coloquio II* ultimately calls for the same kind of crusading violence that characterizes early orientalist missionary plays. I then compare *Coloquio II* with another early orientalist play by Eslava, *Coloquio VII*, which eschews crusading violence and instead uses East Asia as a point of triangulation in the creation of an allegorical Mexican community. Here, the distance between Mexico and China corresponds to the distance between the play's Jewish protagonist, Jonah, and his Gentile antagonists. As Eslava examines and discards anti-Semitic stereotypes in the play, he also demonstrates that the attempt to bridge Mexico with China requires integrating Jews into sixteenth-century Mexican society. Thus, centuries before Sor Juana and Octavio Paz write about the East in their poetry, Eslava has already begun to use exoticizing discourse about Asian cultures in order to write Mexico into the center of the world while rethinking what Mexican society can become.

### Keywords

*coloquios*; proto-Orientalism; Jewish diaspora; anti-Semitic stereotypes; colonial violence

### Introduction

On October 8, 1565, a Spanish galleon named the *San Pedro* pulled into the Mexican harbor of Acapulco carrying spices and bearing tidings of an imperial breakthrough: Miguel de Legazpi, the commander of a Spanish military expedition to the Philippines, had established a base on the island of Cebu (Yuste López 26). This news, in and of itself, was nothing special. Spanish expeditions, under Fernão de Magalhães (1519-1521), Fray García Jofre de Loáisá (1525-1527), Álvaro de Saavedra (1526-1528), and Ruy López de Villalobos (1542-1544), had explored the archipelago without successfully

setting down permanent roots in it (Camino 24-31). What made Legazpi's expedition (1564-1565) different was not the news of colonization but the bearer of that news: the ship that sailed into Acapulco that day had come directly from the Philippines, east across the Pacific for the first time in European maritime history.

The ship's navigator, Andrés de Urdaneta, had overcome the problem that Saavedra before him had faced: westbound trade winds near the Equator made eastward progress difficult. Urdaneta "inferred that the trade winds of the Pacific might move in a vortex as happens in the Atlantic" (Camino 31), and thus sailed northwards until encountering an east-bound current near the latitude of Japan (Yuste López 28), which brought him across the Pacific to the coast of California and then south to Acapulco, "the best harbour on the Pacific Coast" (Parry 132). Urdaneta, himself a survivor of the disastrous Loáisía expedition (Camino 27), had ensured Legazpi's success: the settlement on Cebu could now be incorporated into the economic system of Spain and its colonies, instead of being left to wither on the vine. The discovery also reverberated globally by inaugurating two centuries of direct trade between Chinese, Filipino, Mexican, and Spanish merchants across the Pacific. Starting in 1566, just a year later, merchants began to use the Pacific currents to exchange Mexican silver for Asian luxury items in the newly conquered Philippine outpost (Camino 32). In the process, they transformed both the global economy and, as Tatiana Seijas notes, the local economy in Mexico (56).

While the ship's spices were being unloaded in Acapulco, news of the voyage ran ahead to the center of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, México-Tenochtitlan, where it reached the ears of a cleric named Fernán González de Eslava, a *radicado* who, although born in Spain, had put down roots in his adopted homeland. Eslava wrote plays on commission for the city government of Mexico, vast allegorical dramas that were staged in the city's plazas and churches. His omnivorous muse was capable of transforming nearly any aspect of early colonial society into theological and political allegory: his sixteen *coloquios*, performed during his lifetime and published a decade after his death, dramatize textile factories, silver mining, frontier warfare, inheritance law, smuggling, labor strife, plagues, and *encomiendas*. Just as East Asian spices were ground up and ingested by Mexican citizens, Eslava took the raw material of Legazpi's expedition and transformed it into a complex spiritual allegory about greed, violence, and imperialism, a play performed in the center of Mexico about the farthest reaches and newest territory of the Spanish Empire.

Eslava's play about the Philippines voyage, the *Coloquio segundo hecho a la jornada que hizo a la China el general Miguel López de Legazpi, cuando se volvió la primera vez de allá a esta Nueva España*, is of additional relevance to modern audiences because it is the first Mexican literary work to treat East

Asia, a region that earlier proto-Orientalist texts and performances had left unexamined. Cortés, in his 1520 letter to the Hapsburg emperor, describes Tenochtitlan in the language of a Muslim city, transforming native temples into *mezquitas* (62). Nineteen years later in the city of Tlaxcala, native elites and missionaries create a performance in which European and Native American armies work together to conquer Jerusalem and convert its Muslim sultan—made to resemble Cortés—to Christianity (Motolinía 102 *et passim*). At the very beginning of colonial Mexican history, we find conquistadors and Native Americans using images of the Middle East to think about one another. East Asia, in contrast, would not make its Mexican stage debut until Eslava's Philippine colloquy.

The *Coloquio segundo* is thus a vital data point for the origins of Mexican Orientalism, a cultural phenomenon that would go on to influence the writings of two of the region's greatest poets, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Octavio Paz. The Tenth Muse and her twentieth-century biographer tend to see in the cultures of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and East Asia not a Hegelian obsolete stage in human development, but instead a coeval mirror. Thus Sor Juana's pyramids and obelisks in *Primero sueño* superimpose Egyptian and Mexican landscapes upon one another, just as Egypt sustains the nun's Mexican intellectual project by allowing her to link women to wisdom through the goddess Isis (Paz, *Trampas* 229-41). Paz's collection of poems *La estación violenta* similarly incorporates Indian and Japanese cities into a round-the-globe tour that suggests not a Hegelian teleology but a never-ending cycle akin to the solar calendar that lies at the heart of the final poem in the collection, the cyclical "Piedra de sol." These later poets seem to incarnate what Julia A. Kushigian calls the "nonmanipulative perspective" of Latin American and Spanish Orientalism (1), based on the "undeniable affinity that the Hispanic world shares with the Orient that is unique and somewhat exclusive" (109).

González de Eslava's *Coloquio II* poses a challenge to Kushigian's positive interpretation of Latin American Orientalism. To be sure, the play does not portray "China" as a barbaric, obsolete space, but instead as a space of fertile difference that must be visited and set into contact with Mexico. Yet the play also portrays and celebrates the imperial, crusading violence that is required to set East Asian objects and information into motion. The incorporation of these goods ultimately serves an imperialist/reformist project, as Eslava, like the Spanish Crown, proposes a paradoxical peaceful conquest, an attempt to expand the transoceanic Spanish empire while avoiding the cruelty of the conquest of Mexico. A quixotic quest, to be sure, but one central to Eslava's poetics: the playwright is neither a fire-and-brimstone critic of imperialism nor a mindless booster of Empire, but instead a moderate reformist intellectual. His treatment of the early stages of Philippine colonialism, as we will

see, mirrors his treatment of his own possible Jewish origins: Eslava seeks incremental liberation within the wider frame of Catholic orthodoxy and colonialism. Such incrementalism should not be discounted. Even when Eslava adopts orthodox religious or political codes in his plays, his work is fundamentally ex-centric: it reshapes and distorts imperial geographies to place Mexico at the center of the universe.

### **Anachronistic Orientalism?**

Edward Said's vision of Orientalism, the dominant paradigm in most sectors of the humanities since the publication of *Orientalism*, will require substantial modification if we are to connect it to a sixteenth-century Mexican play about East Asia. To begin, Said limits his geographical scope in *Orientalism* to the Middle East and India instead of China and the major Pacific islands, at least partly for autobiographical reasons (27). Although later works like *Culture and Imperialism* broaden to include the Caribbean and Africa, we face more fundamental difficulties in Said's preferred agents of Orientalism (French, English, and American intellectuals and artists, never Spanish *radicados* or New World *criollos*) and Said's focus on the Modern, never the Early Modern. If Orientalism is, as Said suggests, a "system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States" (6), a sixteenth-century Mexican Orientalism will stretch Said's thought away from the Modern, away from French- and English-speaking intellectuals, and away from the regions that most preoccupied them. Our vision of Orientalism cannot "remain unchanged" in the process.

Faced with the difficulty of translating modern thinking about Orientalism to twentieth-century Latin America, Kushigian concludes that Said's theory "leads to results that are wholly unsatisfying and frequently erroneous with respect to the Hispanic world" (2). She argues that Hispanic Orientalism, whether Spanish or Latin American, is fundamentally different from the French-English-American complex analyzed by Said. It arises out of "a much more profound historical and intellectual contact with the Orient than that of its rivals in Western Europe" (2), a profound contact which produces "a spirit of veneration and respect for the Orient unparalleled by other Western European nations" (3). Ultimately, according to Kushigian, this purer sort of inspiration "promotes an unstable relationship between East and West" and creates "persistent dialogue with the East" (14). If at times the "polyglossia" (104) of Latin American Orientalism includes "a dialogue of discourses, reflecting on antithetical denial of and openness to the Other" (10), this "colliding of two

discourses” nevertheless escapes the trap of binary thinking and produces “an enriching discourse that does not seek to exercise social or political control over the Orient” (11). Since, in this account, Latin America achieves knowledge without exercising power, Kushigian argues that “history should not be rewritten so as to include the Hispanic world in a conspiratorial system of domination and exploitation of the East” (2).

The colonization of the Philippines poses a challenge to Kushigian. While the twentieth century does not feature Latin American imperial adventures in East Asia, the 1564-1565 Legazpi expedition and the ensuing colonial relationship between the Philippines and Mexico demonstrate that Latin American history does include space for something that resembles European-style Orientalism. If Said defines Orientalism as “a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world,” as well as “a discourse that . . . is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power” (12), then it seems clear that sixteenth-century writers and dramatists working in Mexico formed part of an Orientalist tradition, one that joined knowledge about Asian cultures to the power exercised in the conquest of Tenochtitlan, in the second wave of conquests in the Mayan and northern Chichimec territories, and in the occupation of the Philippines themselves.

Said believes that “[c]ontinued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture” (*Orientalism* 6). We have already briefly noted how Cortés and the 1539 Tlaxcalan dramatists “invest” in the system of Orientalist power-knowledge, and reap the rhetorical rewards of this investment (whether to justify conquest or to locate a place for Native American military culture within conquest). Eslava does the same, but in turning from the Middle East to the Far East, he takes the nascent tradition of Mexican Orientalism in a new direction. Writing at the very inception of the “trans-Pacific partnership” between Mexico, the Philippine archipelago, and China, Eslava still imagines that Mexico’s conquest history will repeat itself in the Far East—that settlement on the Philippines is prelude to the conquest of mainland China, just as the Caribbean served as outpost for the conquest of mainland America. Eslava simply has not had enough time to assimilate all the relevant information about the region, whether the differences between the islands and the mainland, the differences between ethnic groups within the archipelago, or even the spread of Islam in the southern islands, where according to John Leddy Phelan “the Muslims were sufficiently well entrenched to repulse Spanish penetration for 250 years” (8).

Eslava's play, ripped from the headlines, omits much from its vision of the Philippines. Yet it nevertheless presents a complex approach to mercantile wonder and crusading violence that has much to say about Eslava's Mexican context. Said believes that Orientalism "has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12). Eslava's *Coloquio II* likewise tells us more about sixteenth-century Mexico than about East Asia.

### ***Coloquio II* and the Philippine Conquest**

The Spanish find in the Philippine archipelago a civilization unlike any in the New World: the diverse and disparate people groups in the archipelago do not have the centralized empires, blood sacrifices, and massive temples of the Aztecs, but they do have an alphabet, a decentralized but resilient political system, and prior experience with monotheistic religions—namely Islam, which was spreading north from Indonesia when Legazpi's expedition first sighted the archipelago on February 13, 1565 (Camino 31). Eslava's tone of wonder at the riches of East Asia immediately calls to mind Columbus's attitude towards the people and objects he encountered in the Caribbean, and is similarly bound up in what Stephen Greenblatt calls the wonder of marvelous possession. Unlike Columbus, however, Eslava does not describe his islanders at all, in terms either positive or negative. His wonder is strictly material, and his characters describe their reactions to only three things: rice, gold, and cinnamon. A character named Simple marvels at what he has heard and seen about these exotic objects: "Dizque comen pan de mijo / en las islas donde están," says Simple, passing on the news that he has heard from sailors about Philippine cuisine; he likewise marvels at the "cadenas / de oro fino, bien labradas" and "canela / de los árboles cogida" that he himself has seen being unloaded from the ship (I:56). Simple experiences a kind of second-order colonialist wonder: although neither sailor nor explorer, his contact with the stories and products of colonialism motivates him to join a future Philippine expedition.<sup>1</sup>

These three physical objects, rice, gold, and cinnamon, are the concrete motives for Simple's desire to journey west. They also serve in the play as raw material for Christian allegory. If Simple thinks primarily of the objects' use value (he wants to taste the rice, smell the cinnamon, wear the gold), the characters Paz and Amor Divino note instead their symbolic exchange value, their ability to be transformed into statements about Catholicism. As they argue, the "pan de mijo" or rice is a type of the Eucharist; the "cadenas / de oro" can symbolize either the chains of suffering or the necklaces of glory; and cinnamon mirrors the salvific powers of the Tree of Life (I:56).<sup>2</sup> These spiritual goods are related to material, East Asian objects, but Paz and Amor Divino consider spiritual "objects"

superior. They also use location words to further distinguish between the objects: rice is consumed in “las islas donde están,” in the Philippines, but the Eucharist is found “[a]cá” (56), which is to say in Mexico.

This strategy serves to erase any intrinsic value that rice, gold, cinnamon, or East Asia in general might possess, in favor of language games that seek surprising allegories. This seems to also be Eslava’s approach in a brief Orientalist moment in his longest play, *Coloquio XVI*, in which a character named Prudencia narrates a snake-charming scene:

Que la sierpe sabe tanto  
que se sabe defender  
cuando la quiere empecer  
el mágico con su encanto.  
Ella se remedia sola  
por instinto que ha tenido,  
pone en la tierra un oído  
y al otro tapa su cola. (II:276)

The (failed) snake-charming scene does not aim to make general or essentialist comments about any “Oriental” cultural (unlike the unforgettable painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme of the snake-charmer, familiar to readers of the Vintage Books edition of Said’s *Orientalism*, in which a phallic snake coils itself around a naked boy as luxuriant potentates look on). Instead, in the allegorical or emblem tradition, the uncharmed snake offers a lesson for the prudent: individuals tempted by vice ought to remember their mortality (cover their ears) by “mirando que son de tierra” (putting one ear on the ground) and thinking about “el fin que han de acabar” (covering the other ear with the snake’s “end”). These allegories erase the material particularity of the East Asian goods and stereotypes that Eslava possesses, but they do so in a playful fashion that anticipates the language games of Gracián’s masterpiece *El criticón*, with its Baroque splendor of overlapping (and often contradictory) allegories. Eslava decontextualizes and deracinates the snake charmer, but deracination and decontextualization are at the core of his poetics.

This is not to say that there is nothing material at work in Eslava’s treatment of East Asia. Numerous scenes in his plays seem to critique the colonizing mission by accusing would-be colonizers of greed. This is one reading of Simple’s interactions with Paz and Amor Divino: trapped by the colonial desire of possessing physical objects, Simple needs to learn that he can possess spiritual goods of greater value by remaining “acá” in Mexico, where he can find the Eucharist. Other plays offer



similar critiques. In *Coloquio VI* one crooked gambler suggests to another that he flee to China to escape punishment for his crimes (I:186), while in *Coloquio VII* Teresa demands that her husband bring her to China so she can possess silk clothing and ignores his declaration that “es bueno el pueblo en que estamos” (I: 204). Emigrating to East Asia, in Eslava’s plays, is almost always portrayed negatively.

The most extreme example is in *Coloquio XVI*, when wicked *criollos* and *encomenderos*, who spend most of the play plotting to hunt and devour Native American converts to Christianity, boast about their ability to cross the Pacific: by acquiring false titles of nobility they blow hot air into the sails of vanity, and “van a dar al través a las islas de los Ladrones, que somos nosotros, y hacen escala antes de dar al través en la isla de Zebú o de Belcebú” (II:234-35). The “islas de los Ladrones” are the archipelago now known as the Marianas, which de Magalhães named on his way to the Philippines; Cebu is the central Philippine island on which the famed explorer died in battle in 1521 and upon which Legazpi, commander of the 1565 expedition, established the Spanish base of San Miguel de Cebú (Thomas 505-06; Marato Camino 31). The Gracianesque language game Cebu = Beelzebub, like the reference to the islas de los Ladrones, uses East Asian geography to construct an allegory for evil. This evil points at least partially to the inhabitants of the region (the alleged “ladrones”) but primarily criticizes the Spaniards and Mexican *criollos* who are seduced by the promise of new and easy conquest.<sup>3</sup>

It may be a coincidence that Simple, in the Philippine *coloquio*, shares a first name with the admiral Miguel de Legazpi. Alternatively, this similarity of names may serve to indict the entire Philippine conquest. I suggest instead that Eslava’s treatment of would-be Pacific colonizers reveals his mild reformist tendencies: he neither rejects colonialism (the path of Las Casas) nor embraces it whole-heartedly. These reformist tendencies appear most strongly in *Coloquio II*’s treatment of two potential conquistadors of China.

The character Soldado is the classic type of the Latin *miles gloriosus*, boasting in his sword and in his acts of violence against Mexico’s *mestizo* population. The mariner Vizcaíno likewise boasts in his lineage, bragging that his uncle is Miguel de Legazpi. “Gran fantasía es el mío,” declares Vizcaíno, switching into a comic stage dialect in which he refers to himself using second-person verbs: “a China vas en navío, / general traes al lado, / Legazpi tienes por tío” (I:66). The allegorical figures Paz and Amor Divino, who earlier in the play sought to transform Simple’s greed into piety, now attempt to co-opt the negative character traits of Soldado and Vizcaíno: Paz chastises Soldado for threatening to mutilate Simple (I:65), while Amor Divino tells the proud Basque that “No acepta Dios la persona / sino el corazón contrito” (I:66). If the other plays criticize would-be conquerors of “China,” this play

instead converts them away from wrath and pride.

The warriors are converted *from* two traditional Christian sins, and are converted *to* the model of the Christian crusader, as each becomes “soldado . . . del gran Capitán divino” (I:66). At the play’s conclusion, Soldado and Vizcaíno each utter prayers that demonstrate their continuing vocation as worldly soldiers. Soldado asks for “gracia . . . para vencer mis contrarios” on this earth; “caminaré por el suelo,” he declares, “hasta ver las alegrías / con que premias en el cielo” (I:67). Vizcaíno, although he continues to mangle verb forms, makes a similar prayer (referring to himself as “Perucho”): “Señor, a Perucho en lides / muestra cómo vencerás, / también aquesto le pides, / que pues convidas acá / en cielo también convides” (I:67; “vencerás” and “pides” ought to be first-person singular). It might be possible to interpret “vencer” as possessing a purely spiritual meaning, but each character uses language to root himself in this world (“caminaré por el suelo,” “convidas acá”). Furthermore, a confusing declaration by Vizcaíno seems to reinforce his continuing military vocation: “Que si ya pecado has muerto, / como creo matarás, / Perucho tienes por cierto / que en Hostia cubierto estás” (I:67). The fourth verb “estás” is conjugated correctly (Vizcaíno is talking to Christ, the only possible candidate for being hidden in the Sacrament), while the third verb “tienes” should be “tengo.” The interpretative crux is the couplet “si ya pecado has muerto, / como creo matarás.” I suggest that the subject of “como creo matarás” is in all likelihood Vizcaíno, who is preparing to commit acts of violence in Asia. His ability to kill as a Christian crusader functions here as a metaphor for Christ’s ability to destroy sin. Paz, who has the last word, affirms these militaristic prayers:

Pedistes en la oración  
 entrambos como cristianos,  
 teniendo gran devoción,  
 las armas siempre en las manos  
 y a Dios en el corazón.  
 Teniendo en El confianza  
 los contrarios venceremos (I:67).

The “armas” here are not heavily allegorized weapons (like the Shotgun of Amorous Delights that Halagüeña wields in *Coloquio XVI* [II:229]) but the actual weapons that the characters wield while praying; the “contrarios” likewise are flesh and blood enemies, not the sins who appear in allegorical form in Eslava’s other plays.

Thus if this play adopts a reformist position, it does not criticize colonial violence as such. Rather, it preaches a kind of redeemed colonial violence: soldiers, purged of their base materialism

and prideful ways, will be able to enact, not hinder, the physical and spiritual conquest of new lands. This position in fact echoes various reforming efforts in Eslava's Mexico, such as attempts to regulate the soldiers fighting the nomadic Chichimecas to the north of Mexico City, a conflict that continued throughout the second half of the sixteenth century (Powell 52-53). A 1569 conference with representatives from the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians addressed the question of whether Christian soldiers could take Native American slaves on the northern frontier. The council ultimately "condoned only a limited slavery" (Powell 106): slavery had to be permitted as a kind of bonus pay for the soldiers, given the viceroyalty's inability to pay them sufficiently high wages, but the practice of slavery could be reformed by creating tribunals (to judge whether the slave was a legitimate prisoner of war or an improperly enslaved civilian) and by freeing slaves after a fixed term of service. The friars thus condemn total war and total slavery, but—at least in 1569—they do not yet oppose slavery and war themselves.

This reformist but non-pacifist approach to military violence, expressed in the 1569 council, also links us back to the Philippines voyage, which departed from Mexico just five years earlier. Philip II's instructions to Miguel de Legazpi, the conqueror of the Philippines, commanded a peaceful conquest, as John Leddy Phelan shows in his study of Spanish imperialism in the archipelago: "The government of Philip II regarded the Philippines as a challenging opportunity to avoid a repetition of the sanguinary conquests of Mexico and Peru. In his written instructions for the *Adelantado* Legazpi, who commanded the expedition, Philip II envisaged a bloodless pacification of the archipelago . . . the royal instructions admonished the commander to commit no aggressive act which might arouse native hostility" (8-9).

Phelan considers these instructions "an outgrowth" of the anti-colonial agitation of Dominicans like Las Casas (9), and believes that the Philippines were "a testing ground" for Lascasian idealism. This goes one step too far, however. Las Casas's semi-utopian schemes sought to incorporate Native Americans into Spanish religion and political life without using any form of slavery (Thomas 414-15). Legazpi, in contrast, divides Filipinos into *encomiendas*, creating a system of forced labor and tribute in order to reward his crew and the Crown (Phelan 95). He simply wants his soldiers to avoid the massacres that, in Spanish America, jeopardized the work of imperialism by depopulating once-wealthy regions, hardening local opposition, and providing propaganda to Spain's rivals. Clotilde Jacqueland believes that Legazpi was relatively successful in his mission: he "resisted every provocation to combat" (173) in Leyte/Abuyo and ultimately founded San Miguel de Cebu after indigenous leaders on Cebu began to respond to "Legazpi's pacifism and friendly gestures" (174), even if such

friendliness was ultimately only “a tactic to gain time” while awaiting a hoped-for Spanish departure (176; all translations mine). Phelan makes a similar argument: although there was some bloodshed it was not “sanguinary,” and Legazpi deserves “credit in large measure for realizing substantially but not completely Philip II’s ideal of a pacific occupation” (10).

Eslava’s staged dialogue between Paz, Amor Divino, and the two soldier figures resembles to at least some degree Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s prologue to the play *El divino Narciso*, in which a Spanish missionary, Religión, commands the conquistador Celo to hold back from killing a Native American queen. Religión does not take the sword out of Celo’s hand but instead seeks to moderate, restrain, and reform zealous violence so that it serves her purpose: the conversion of Native Americans (who cannot become Christians if they are executed). Eslava’s *coloquio* enacts a similar script in 1566, one that matches the military reforms sought by Philip II in his instructions for Legazpi’s 1564 voyage, as well as the recommendations of the 1569 council on the Chichimec War. His play condemns the material greed of Simple, but it tames and converts the military prowess of the conquistador figures. If Orientalism tells us more about the Orientalist than the Oriental, Eslava’s early Orientalist exploration of the Philippines locates him in a political context in which rulers and intellectuals—from Philip II down to friars and secular clergy—seek to avoid the brutality of the first decades of colonialism without calling a halt to Spain’s imperial expansion.

### ***Coloquio VII* and the Jewish Diaspora**

This sort of middle-of-the-road reformism is also how Eslava treats the question of the other Abrahamic religions. Islam appears briefly in *Coloquio XII*, a ripped-from-the-headlines celebration of the Holy League’s victory over the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1572. The play’s lone Muslim character, the defeated warrior Turco, is a caricature who boasts in broken Spanish of his plans for revenge. The Christian crusader Soldado neutralizes Turco’s threat not by executing him but by enslaving him, tying him up and then locking him in a box onstage (II:104-05). Soldado’s judicious use of force matches the celebratory tone of the play: like the members of the victorious Holy League, Soldado defeats the Turks in a productive, not destructive fashion. His capture of multiple prisoners leads to holy profit: “Ella fue divina empresa; / y vamos luego a vender / la gente que dejé presa” (II:108). This argument matches what we have seen in Eslava’s other plays: the playwright celebrates victories that utilize the enemy without destroying him.

*Coloquio XII* is perhaps more surprising because of the strange Abrahamic transference that takes place at its conclusion, in which the Christian victory over Turkey is superimposed onto the

biblical Jewish victory over Egypt. According to an angel who appears in the play, the Pope—member of the victorious Holy League—is a spiritual and military leader “como Moisés” (II:112). A dead Christian soldier reinforces the comparison: the Pope is “nuestra guía / por el desierto del mundo” and he “hizo abrir el mar profundo / donde se perdió Turquía” (II:112). This allusion to the Exodus becomes explicit only a few lines later, as the soldier declares that “los turcos son los de Egipto, / los cristianos pueblo Hebreo” (II:112). The play ends by citing Psalm 115, in the vernacular, not in Latin—a psalm that calls for blessing on Israel and on the house of Aaron. All of these Jewish elements operate within a typological reading of Exodus that does not, in itself, call into question the Catholic beliefs that were held or feigned by Eslava’s audience in the public spaces of Mexico City. Yet the statement “los cristianos [son] pueblo Hebreo,” however allegorical it may be, nevertheless is striking (especially when declaimed by an actor in the most public spaces of Mexico).

As Ángel Rama has speculated, Eslava may have been a *cristiano nuevo*, a descendent of Jewish converts to Christianity (Rama 208). His plays include many Jewish characters, among them the biblical Jonás or Jonah, the hero of *Coloquio VII*, which we will examine shortly. His poetry likewise addresses the theological issue of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity: in a poetic debate with the important early Mexican poets Francisco de Terrazas and Pedro de Ledesma, Eslava wonders how the “ley vieja,” the Law of Moses, could be false if it was given by God. Terrazas and Ledesma take the position that the Old Testament has lost all validity, and ultimately prevail in the poetic debate, yet Eslava’s decision to take the pro-Jewish position, in Margit Frenk’s words, “nos revela a un Eslava preocupado por una de las cuestiones teológicas que inquietaban a los cristianos de origen judío,” an Eslava who “ha acusado a Dios de haber sido injusto con el pueblo judío al negarle la salvación y castigarlo con el exilio y la persecución (26; 29). I do not have space to go into the many references to Judaism in his plays, but they fit the hypothesis of a *converso*-descended Eslava. Anti-Semitic slurs appear most frequently in the mouths of his lower-class characters, who are in turn condemned by allegorical figures of higher religious authority. *Coloquio VIII* is representative: when an allegorical figure representing Judaism is mocked by her anti-Semitic servant, an angel intervenes not to join in the taunting but to criticize the anti-Semite: “No le des aqueese enojo / Que es persona principal” (239). Eslava may have no choice but to portray Judaism as false, but he always calls it noble.

Just as with the question of violence in the Philippine colloquy, we need to understand Eslava’s subtly pro-Jewish interventions as part of a gradualist reform strategy. As Rama notes, “cualquier eventualidad que consideremos en el sentido de que hubiera sido converso, creo que debe ser en este exacto espíritu de plena incorporación al cristianismo, aunque conservando, por su situación de

hombre de un tránsito espiritual marcado, la presencia muy viva del Antiguo Testamento y los vínculos con el pueblo judío originario” (208). Eslava is unlikely to be what the Mexican Inquisition would call a “Judaizer,” a Jew who officially converts to Christianity but continues practicing or spreading his religion. Rather, if he is a New Christian, he one who is combating blood prejudice against Jewish converts to Christianity. Ultimately, regardless of Eslava’s intentions, the plays themselves serve to mock and critique anti-Semitic prejudice.

Such a project has important implications for our Orientalist reading of Eslava. Said privileges representations of Islam in his account of Orientalism, portraying the Muslim invasions as Europe’s “lasting trauma” (59) and painting Muslims themselves as a kind of ultimate Other to Europeans. Eslava’s poetics shows a different way of engaging with the peoples and cultures of the “Orient.” His treatment of Judaism collapses overly rigid boundaries between “us” and “them” (he is a possibly Jewish creator of Christian images about Jews) and evinces a diasporic consciousness that undermines distinctions between “here” and “there.” The result is a Mexican Orientalist poetics that, while rooted in Mexico, extends transoceanic tendrils in all directions. Eslava’s Orientalism tells us about Mexico, but what it most firmly tells us is that Mexico is multiple, not unitary.

*Coloquio VII*, which reenacts the Jonah story, is of course focused on sea travel. In the biblical narrative, the prophet—commanded to preach God’s wrath against the Assyrian city of Nineveh—decides for mysterious reasons to flee by ship in the other direction, to the city of Tarshish. Eslava adopts a somewhat different geography: the ship’s point of origin is not Israel but Mexico, as we learn from an argument between two spouses who board the ship with Jonah. And these two seek to embark not for Spain but for China, where Teresa, the proud daughter of a conquistador, will be able to obtain the silk clothing that her unworthy husband cannot provide. If Simple in *Coloquio II* desires raw materials (gold and cinnamon), Teresa instead wants the manufactured goods that China exported to Spain via Manila and Mexico, in return for Mexican silver. This economic link served, in Carmen Yuste López’s term, as an “alternativa intercolonial,” a way for residents of Mexico and Manila to serve not as mere conduits of trade, but as agents (21). The literary character Teresa in the sixteenth century, like the Puerto Rican mariner Alonso Ramírez in Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora’s seventeenth-century testimony/novella (*Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*), shows that Mexico has become, by means of its trade link to Manila, no longer mere periphery but center of its own.

We see something of this new centrality in *Coloquio VII*, specifically in the geographical confusion that Eslava introduces. According to the story’s biblical frame, the characters are in the Mediterranean sailing west; according to Teresa’s plan to immigrate to China, they must be in the

Pacific sailing west; and yet the ship runs into a storm while sailing northeast near the 27<sup>th</sup> Parallel, which is to say, at the latitude of Florida on the way to Spain. There is, then, something not quite right about Jonah's ship—a suspicion confirmed by the vast amount of contraband that we learn is aboard. Its location and cargo slippery and shifting, our only firm point of reference is the ship itself, which can, as Rama has suggested, be read as a kind of allegory for Novohispanic society (234-38). Mexico becomes so much the center of Eslava's world that everything but the ship vanishes.

This play has important implications for the way Eslava, a Spanish *radicado*, uses transoceanic trade to set down roots in Mexico and redefine it as the center of his world. Yet it also, as I have suggested, expresses a kind of diasporic consciousness. The play, of course, has a central Jewish character, Jonah, and it makes much of Jonah's Jewishness. To begin, it reinterprets the biblical narrative to make Jonah more sympathetic to Christian spectators. The book of Jonah is quite vague about the prophet's motivation for not preaching to Nineveh, but early Christian theologians, as Rama shows, interpreted his flight to Tarshish as stemming from anti-Gentile prejudice. A seemingly justified fear: according to Jewish scriptures, Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, would eventually conquer and exile the ten tribes of Israel, dispersing them throughout the world. Eslava lays out a different motivation in Jonah's opening monologue: if the prophet preaches God's wrath, and Nineveh repents and avoids destruction, the original message of wrath will turn out to have been false. In other words, God—who told Jonah to preach a destruction that was never going to happen—will turn out to be a liar. In Eslava's telling, then, Jonah resists his mission not because he hates Gentiles, but because he cannot reconcile God's omniscience and omnibenevolence. This is, of course, exactly what Eslava himself tries to do in the poetic debate with Terrazas over the validity of the covenant between God and Israel: how, he asked then and asks now in this play, can a good and omniscient god contradict himself?

In addition to creating a deeply sympathetic portrait of Jonah—one impossible to separate from his Jewishness—Eslava questions anti-Jewish prejudice. We first encounter anti-Semitism as the prophet attempts to ask a *villano* for information about the docked ship. This figure, named "Tocina," makes a sly allusion to dietary law when he says that Jonah's questions sound like "tocino en sartén" (I:211). His hostility becomes open just a few lines later when Jonah calls him "hermano": "No seréis hermano mío, / porque no quiero pariente / vestido como judío" (I:211). Tocina's prejudice causes him to refuse to answer any of Jonah's questions. Such hostility might be interpreted as playing for laughs. Yet Eslava has just performed so much work to classify Jonah as a sympathetic character, a thoughtful theologian who cannot reason his way out of a genuine theological conundrum—and a

tender-hearted man who takes no pleasure in Nineveh's destruction—that Tocina's stubborn refusal to countenance the presence of a Jew on board might instead be read as a rebuke to the prejudice that descendants of *conversos* faced. After all, Tocina's rejection of "parientes judíos" takes on additional meaning in the light of Jonah's role in Christian theology as a type of Christ, whose three days in the belly of the fish parallel Christ's three days in the tomb. The play's conclusion makes this link explicit in such a way that Tocina's stubborn rejection of the Jewish Jonah becomes, in fact, a rejection of Christ and of Christianity.

Finally, Eslava reworks the theme of Jewish expulsion—something his family may have faced just a generation or two before his birth. Jonah, per the biblical story, is thrown off the boat to calm the raging waters, an action that might evoke uncomfortable parallels with the Inquisition's attempt to purge Mexico of Jews. I offer instead a different interpretation, based on the play's performance context. Eslava's plays were produced in public spaces, such as city plazas and churches, which means that when Jonah is thrown off the ship he is necessarily thrown into, not out of, the very public space that Eslava inhabited. The citizens of New Spain who keep the publically-funded play afloat with their tithes and taxes, figuratively swallow Eslava up and protect him, just as the fish in the biblical story does not eat Jonah but instead delivers him to safety. Even if Jonah is cast out of one allegory for Mexican society, he is received into another.

### **Conclusion: Transoceanic Orientalism**

As we have seen, the ocean plays a central role in Eslava's poetics, not simply as a void across which things happen, but as a space upon which and within which Eslava writes about the ship of Jonah, the naval battle of Lepanto, and the conquering voyage of Legazpi. This analysis responds to Dana Leibsohn and Meha Priyadarshini's recent call for increased attention to the ocean itself in Pacific studies (and by extension Atlantic studies), where the scholars "find far less commitment to the ocean and environmental history—winds and currents, storms and drenching rains, oceanic events and their effects—than to the events, habits of mind, and daily practices that took root on land" (3). Eslava's repeated interest in putting oceans on stage reveals a playwright who seems to become at home in the currents of transoceanic economic exchange, at home within diaspora, and ultimately at home in the belly of the fish. The roots that this Spanish-born *radicado* sets down in Mexico end up diffusing across the Atlantic and Pacific, making New Spain so much the center of his networked universe that it begins to fuse with the oceans that surround it. "Anáhuac," the Náhuatl name for the region that would become New Spain, means "the place near the waters" (Díaz Balsera 16). Eslava may not know



this etymological fact, but his plays embody it: performed in the lacustrian city México-Tenochtitlan, capital of a kingdom that straddles the Atlantic and Pacific and that has always depended on managing the flow of water (Mundy 27; 191-99), Eslava's poetics are fundamentally about transoceanic diasporic networks.

Just as in Sor Juana's *Primer sueño*, the Tlaxcalan play *La conquista de Jerusalén*, and Octavio Paz's poetry, the Orient in Eslava is not made distant but instead drawn near and superimposed onto Mexican geography. If Eslava's Near Easterners (the Jews, portrayed negatively or sympathetically, who populate many of his plays) are always close to Mexico, his Far Easterners (the Filipinos and Chinese who appear only obliquely in *Coloquio II*) are more nebulous. While the representation of otherness in his plays varies (in predictable ways), his common project is clear: incremental reform within the boundaries of militant Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Judaism is not portrayed as a coequal religion to Christianity, but prejudice against Jewish-descended Christians is mocked and condemned. In the same way, the peoples of "China" will not be left alone or converted with Las Casas's nonviolent methods, but Eslava (like Philip II) wants crusaders to use violence as judiciously as possible.

Thus for all the differences between Eslava's Orientalism or proto-Orientalism and the mature discourse analyzed by Said, one key similarity remains: Eslava's representations of Asia, its peoples, and its religions are "a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient" (Said 60), a discourse of power that, in Eslava's case, grows more effective precisely because it seeks to reform away the most brutal expressions of imperialism, and because it attends to the two-way currents and filaments that link the multiple centers and peripheries of the Early Modern world to one another.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Eslava's *Coloquio VII*, a bickering Mexican couple decides to emigrate to China to more easily possess fine silk clothing (I:207).

<sup>2</sup> Coloquio XVI makes a similar allegory out of cinnamon, comparing it not to a tree but to the cross (II:252).

<sup>3</sup> As Carmen Yuste López notes, the Spanish government would eventually attempt to regulate the profits of trans-Pacific merchants in order to preserve the long-term stability of the Manila galleon system: "limitó a una cantidad específica en dinero el monto de las mercancías que podían embarcarse de Manila a Acapulco y al duplo exacto la cantidad de plata que podía salir de Nueva España en el viaje de retorno. . . Con estas normas, la Corona se aseguraba que las ganancias no sobrepasarán un 100%, al tiempo que presuponía impedir el crecimiento de una vía de tráfico mercantil alterna" (35). Eslava's criticism of excess trade matches the Crown's political priorities.

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