*M*

*ike: “My mom told me that Mexico is really dangerous”.*

*Santiago: “Si, está lleno de mexicanos”.*

An attentive reading of the film *Babel* by Alejandro González Iñáritu reveals the legacy of Christopher Columbus’ first voyage to the Americas over 500 years ago. Interpreting this film on an intertextual level, we can trace the formation of Western identity within the context of the Americas, scientifically, sociologically, materially and ideologically back to fifteenth century Spain. Literature and visual media are interpreted within certain contexts, which exist based on social and historical events, economic drive and hegemonic systems of power. Western culture gets created and then gains its own strength and identity as it differentiates itself from other non-Western cultures. Through a hermeneutical approach and a careful understanding of the processes of subjectification, the issues of power and resistance, as well as domination and dependence, one can see that the construction of the colonial identification subject, based on fifteenth century ideals. I will attempt to show in this essay that the current relationship of power between Western and non-Western cultures manifests itself through a creation of fear of the “other”, as a construct, and that modern-day images are the legacy of the original Spanish vision of the Americas. This fear can be traced back to the initial descriptions formed by the early European explorers of the fifteenth century in the zones of contact, which would become the sites of the construction and invention of the autochthonous subject.

*Babel*, a 2006 international [drama film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drama_film) directed by [Alejandro González Iñárritu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alejandro_Gonz%C3%A1lez_I%C3%B1%C3%A1rritu) and written by [Guillermo Arriaga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillermo_Arriaga), won the [Golden Globe Award](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Globe_Award) in 2007 for Best Motion Picture and was nominated for seven [Academy Awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_Award). The story places a U.S. family of four, the Joneses, within the context of simultaneous situations that occur in Morocco, Japan and Mexico. In this way, we see three continents: Africa, Asia and the Americas, each with its own varied history of colonial exploration, rapine of human and natural resources and subsequent religious and economic control. As Claire Taylor suggests, “the legacy of colonialism is an on-going negotiation between Iberian nations and their former colonies” (58). Similarly, the legacy of Mexican colonization requires on-going negotiations between its Western (Europeanized) neighbor and its own indigenous heritage. *Babel* tells the story of the relations between these three continents with the West.

The narrative of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9) is an [etiology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etiology) that explains the origins of the multiplicity of languages. [Yahweh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YHWH) was concerned that humans had too much freedom to do as they wished, so he brought multiple languages into existence. As a consequence, humans, now divided into linguistic groups, could no longer understand one other. This anecdote has a varied history in the Indies[[1]](#footnote-1). In Mexico, [Dominican friar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominican_friar) [Diego Duran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diego_Duran) (1537–1588) reported hearing this account from a hundred-year-old priest at Cholula, shortly after the conquest of Mexico. Duran tells the account of the Ixtlilxochitl, who built a tower so high that it would reach Heaven and the giants. They became bewildered and fled in all directions (Duran 5).

To understand the significance of this film, we must first examine the historical events that set the mechanisms in place, beginning with the formation of Spain as an empirical force in fifteenth century. The epistemology of Spanish ideological thought has deep roots in the theories of ancient philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle. Scholars and intellectuals greatly esteemed their value as the authority and source of truth. Medieval Europe sentiment reflected a constant conflict between Plato who provided instruction on all things invisible, and Aristotle who theorized on the laws of nature and things visible. Aristotle’s natural slave theory would play out later as a significant device used towards the legitimization of the Spanish conquest. Spanish society, holding a supreme faith in the Catholic Church, maintained a secure belief in their absolute superiority over others as a divine providence. Historical deeds were intertwined with two meanings, a natural interpretation as well as a supernatural one (Zamora, *Historicity and Literariness* 338). Authority during the sixteenth century was the ultimate guarantor of truth and this essentially meant Christianity. Today, however, our concept of truth relies more on rationalistic beliefs[[2]](#footnote-2). The Catholic Kings were convinced in their belief that they were “chosen” by God and were born to be royals. Their moral duty and obligation was to serve in this capacity. True servants to God, it was their Christian inspiration to grow the number of disciples in the church and to expand their superior influence over others, as an act of charity and responsibility. In this historical context, there existed no separation between a duty to evangelize and a duty to expansion. It was a right and just action. Later, under the direction of Charles V, Spain would justify its conquest, as well as each historical occurrence, as a theological and supernatural act of divine guidance and providence, as a reflection of their views of Christian cosmogony.

King Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284) whose *General Estoria* and *Estoria España* created a collection and formal recording all of the knowledge that was known at the time (and as many believed would ever be known). This legacy would serve as a written account of everything authoritative for all future history. Most meaningful literature of this period was didactical in nature with the purpose of *enseñar deleitando* and many influential figures of the time wrote in Latin, establishing their authority and knowledge. Known as *el Sabio,* Alfonso X contributed greatly to Spain’s deep reverence for the written word, continuing respect for Latin and their desire to record events for historical purposes[[3]](#footnote-3). This will prove to be important later as early explorers such as Columbus and Vespucci continue this tradition of recording their tales “for history”. Their documentation would provide the world with the first indigenous images, borne out of a Western perspective.

To understand the convergence of factors, we must now examine how Spain moves towards its Renaissance in 1492 with five key events in history. First, the unification of the Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon that began with the marriage of [Ferdinand II and Isabella I. Second, the fall of Granada, which effectively ended the eight hundred yearlong Moorish control in the [Iberian Peninsula](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iberian_Peninsula).](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_V_of_Spain) Third, the publication of *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (Grammar of the Castilian language) in 1492 by [Antonio de Nebrija](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_de_Nebrija). This document, dedicated to the [Spanish language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_language) and its rules, would foster the formation and unification of one single authorized language, Castilian. Fourth, the expulsion of the Moors and the Jews from Spain, which meant that all citizens were forced to either convert to Christianity or face exile to Muslim North Africa. Those *conversos* who converted and remained in the country were met with severe suspicion and mistrust. Those whose Christian ancestry were pure and undiluted, the *cristianos viejos,* were considered the most elite in society. All others were deemed inferior. Fifth, the exploration of the New World by Columbus who, being refused by Portugal, was financed by the Catholic Kings.

Spain, now without any major internal territorial conflict, could embark on a great phase of exploration and colonization around the globe. How the Christians dealt with the Moors who they had defeated would foreshadow much of what would happen in the new world. The papal bull from Pope Alexander VI of Spain in 1493 expressly donated power and authority to the Catholic Kings: “And we make, appoint, and depute you and your said heirs and successors lords of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind; of the New World” (Gibson 38). No other country, for example England or Italy, was granted the rights or privileges of expansion. The social context of the Spanish sense of superiority was well put by Sepúlveda in *Demócratas Segundo*: “a decir verdad muy pocas son las naciones que pueden compararse con España” (32).

What did it mean to be a Spaniard in the sixteenth century? Medieval ambivalence and conflict were two overriding drives that existed within each Spanish citizen. One vacillated often between the opposing dichotomies of life: of virtue and sin; damnation and salvation; good and evil; natural animal and rational animal; free will and predetermination; masculine and feminine, negative and positive; harmony and discord. We will see an important dichotomy emerge in the New World, that of the division between the savage and the civilized. The medieval body and soul was borne out of conflict in a bipolar world and this ambivalence would be evident in later colonial texts: “el cuerpo al alma, el apetito a la razón, los brutos animales al hombre, es decir lo perfecto a lo imperfecto, lo peor a lo mejor” (Sepúlveda 84). Many passages in the Columbian texts express these oppositions in terms of gender (Zamora *Gender and Discovery* 173).

The process of Spain’s empirical rise began with Christopher Columbus in 1492. His *Cuatro Viajes del almirante y su testamento* became sources of information for the Catholic Kings and influential public. His travel accounts were largely responsible for creating the image and picture of the new world, which previously had none. Columbus describes the endemic qualities of the “indies” with a vocabulary that he admits was insufficient for capturing the splendor. The world was mesmerized: “Las vistas muy fermosas y verdes y fértiles”, “el cantar de los pajaritos que parece que el hombre nunca se querría partir de aquí” (33). “…tenellos en la misma isla captivos, porque con cincuenta hombres los terna todos sojuzgados y los hará hacer todo lo que quisiere” (24). The New World was an exotic paradise, she was a beautiful woman and she is ours for the taking[[4]](#footnote-4).

The Renaissance movement impacted society’s predominant thinking. The Spanish citizen was influenced by *las novelas de caballería,* an idealization of martial life, heroism and chivalry. Literature of this nature would be the overriding theme of one of the most widely known international novels, *Don Quijote* as well as the popular legends of King Arthur. To fight until the death was an ideology synonymous with being a Spaniard and to be a Christian meant to be a true servant of the Catholic Kings. He was brave and valiant and this literature produced an image of unreachable male perfection. The women of Spain were heavily influenced by Queen Isabella’s fascination with the sentimental novel, which exalted passion and love[[5]](#footnote-5).

Two of the most significant figures associated with the conquest of the Americas are Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro[[6]](#footnote-6). Like Don Quijote[[7]](#footnote-7) himself, fame and success motivated Cortés to travel to the new world. The image of a courageous and chivalrous man, willing to die in service, was a concept that permeated the fabric of being a Spaniard. But men like Cortés were not driven by altruism to evangelize and live in poverty but rather to separate from Europe to build an independent live of a *hidalgo* with servants, gold, wealth and titles. Success meant a comfortable independence by settling territories and receiving payment. Driven by wealth for both themselves and for their future offspring, they did not colonize and hope to return to Europe[[8]](#footnote-8). In his conquest of Mexico, the daring and bold Cortés would act out the *Reconquista* of Granada with an economic interest in gaining the support of Spain and its royals: “E como traíamos la bandera de la cruz, puñábamos por vuestra fe” (Cortés xvi). His *Cartas de Relación[[9]](#footnote-9),* originally intended as a justification of travel for the Catholic Kings, would be the first description of the marvels of Mexico and his words, like the words of Columbus, would form the discourse for centuries to come: “Se baila el agua a sus altezas con el señuelo dorado de donde se dice haber llevado Salomón el oro para el templo” (xiv). Less concerned with assimilation into a new society or the resultant eschatological effect on a culture, Cortés’ descriptions confirmed Vespucci and Columbus’ vision: they were child-like, barbaric and in need of faith conversion. As Stevenson suggests, it is highly unlikely that the conquistadors “who were locked in a life and death struggle with the Aztecs, could easily have discerned the esthetic virtues in the opposing culture, even had they wished to be broad-minded” (15). Cortés viewpoints were medieval, subscribing in a belief of pansophy, of one universal power and knowledge. He often cited Latin:[[10]](#footnote-10) “hay chozas hechas donde están personas por guardas y que reciben *certum quid* de cada cosa que entra” (81). As the world was reading the accounts of first “discoverers”, the image of the autochthonous subject was subtly being formed. Later conquistadors such as Francisco López de Gómara and Bernal Diaz del Castillo would reinforce this image: “esta gente era bárbara, ydolátrica, sacrificadora, matadora de inocentes, comedora de carne humana, expurcíssima y nefanda sodomía” (Diaz 478). They were not merely describing America; they were constructing her, piece by piece. O’Gorman’s seminal analysis shows us that the Spanish were engaged in the *invention* of America. That is, the way that America made its historical appearance within Western culture could not be explained by the usual idea that it had been *discovered.* Taking this a step further, America continues to be an inspiration/invention borne out of western paradigms and ideologies from the fifteenth century and earlier. This invention is formed from the construction of knowledge by the colonizer and as such, there must be an “other” for the Westerner to be who he is. In a Gramscian approach, the dominant class, in order to be more powerful, must exert intellectual and moral leadership and move beyond its narrow interests. This is made possible through a nexus of institutions, [social relations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_relations) and ideas. In interpreting *Babel* the Spanish colonizers become the Gramscian U.S. hegemonic West, who have a very real stake in maintaining their economic interests, just as the early explorers and colonizers did.

The intertextuality of interpretation requires the awareness that meanings are produced, as Barthes suggests. The reader through a process must actively create meanings. Signs must be received and understood, or they are not meaningful. Existing in language, the reader is always engaged in a connotative decoding that allows him or her to understand the meaning on a deeper level:

A linguistic system, the language (or modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first. (115)

Visual images are so very complex with meaning, and no other text can offer such direct testimony about the world. Berger demonstrates this idea in *Ways of Seeing*: “In this respect images are more precise and richer than literature” (10). A film such as *Babel* must be examined with an understanding that there is a structure of elements at work to form meanings, stereotypes and metaphors that allow viewers to “fill in the gaps” with their own interpretations. It is impossible as individuals to separate ourselves from our historical pasts. These Anglocentric or Eurocentric beliefs that we hold today have deep roots and a long complex history. As Adorno suggests, its imperative to maintain a cognizance to: “avoid divorcing texts from the circumstances that produced them-however irretrievable these circumstances may be. To be not only theoretically enlightened but also historically responsible is a twin goal worth pursuing[[11]](#footnote-11)” (139).

Analyzing the early texts reveal a plethora of language depicting the natives as barbaric, disgusting, uncivilized, child-like and dangerous: “su barbarie, inhumanidad y delitos nefandos” (Sepúlveda 58); “they kill each other cruelly…they eat each other” (Vespucci 50). Legal documents confirm early Aristotelian discourse: “since by nature they are inclined to idleness and vice and have no manner of virtue or doctrine” (*Laws of Burgos* 11) and “Natural law requires the more prudent to become, as it were, the law, lights, and guide of those of weaker understanding” (8). Acosta, a Spanish Jesuit Missionary in his didactical document *De procuranda indorum salute* admits certain savages hardly have any human sentiment: “…a la tercera clase…entran los salvajes semejantes a fieras, que apenas tienen sentimiento humano…” (47). The papal bulls confirm the discourse as “barbarous nations”, “unclothed” and “eating flesh”. These documents, with their tremendous political weight, were the very authorization for Cortés and other conquistadors to voyage to America for “gold”, “spices” and other “precious things”. The papal bull of Alexander VI, however, is clear in it’s intention of expanding its power base by increasing the number of Catholics: “Desiring that our holy Catholic Faith be enlarged and increased” (Royal Orders Concerning Indians 1493 41).

We cannot exclude from the argument the concept of racist discourse. As Delacampagne suggests, racial terminology, as we know it today and have known it since the nineteenth century, did not appear *ex nihilo*: “It is the fruit -or the inheritor- of other, older discourses, whose first elements can be located in the philosophers of antiquity and whose course can be charted through the theologians and scholars of the Middle Ages…It developed in the midst of a system of thought that strove to be rational; it progressed hand in hand with the very foundations of Western rationalism (83).

Europeans, before the nineteenth century, could never have accepted natives as “anything but inferior, degenerate”.The image of the Indian (or perhaps that of a Mexican or Moroccan in this film) certainly did not appear *ex nihilo* either. The term *barbarian,* often used by Spaniards to describe the local natives, was a term initially coined by the Greeks. The epistemology of the word shows that it was used to classify all non-Greeks and to establish and define Greek superiority over the Persians (Delacampagne 85). These terms[[12]](#footnote-12), used by Columbus in his *Diario*, by Cortés in his *Cartas de Relación* and Diaz in his *Historia Verdadera* were intentional and meaningful. The genesis of the images of the native as uncivilized and barbaric can be traced to these early works.

Ambivalence, as a medieval theme in Spanish history, returns as a recurring theme in the Renaissance. There exists a push and pull between economic and religious interests and Queen Isabella herself maintained a contradictory posture. She attempted to mandate the good treatment of natives through the *Reglas Ovando* in 1503, while still endorsing the *encomienda* system because of its earlier success in motivating the brave warriors of Granada. Her position on this topic would later provide significant support for the economic interests of the conquistadors. The *Laws of Burgos of 1512,* intended to provide guidelines for the conquerors to protect, reduce violence and encourage mutual Christianity and prosperity was, in effect, used as ammunition to justify the riches pouring in from the New World. Solidifying the *encomienda* rights and their perpetuity, it regularized the poor conditions and virtually made enslavement legal. For example, the *Laws* state that the Indians must live in a community among the Spanish (15), they must help cultivate and extract gold (24), reap the fruits and bring profit to “my Kingdom” (5), Indians shall be obliged to build a structure to be used for a church (17), they must be compelled and forced to associate with the Christians, to work on their buildings, gather and mine gold, till the fields and produce food for Christians (5). The resultant effect of this document was to condone and support the *encomienda* system and place the *caciques* squarely in charge of enforced labor. The document’s true spirit and intention was to convert to the faith, to encourage mutual existence in a community, to pay the Indians fair wages to earn a decent living: “It has always been our intent, desire, and will, to have greater regard for the salvation of souls and the indoctrination and good treatment of the said Indians than for any other consideration”…(42). The Queen’s desire to treat the natives well is ambivalent in the use of the terms: “compel”, “force”, “till”, “work”, “erect” and “produce”. This interpretation would be all the justification needed for the conquerors to force eternal servitude and labor on the Indians. Terms like “master” (36) reinforce the idea of slavery as well as the concept that “lost or runaway Indians…shall be deposited as prescribed until the said master is found” (36). Interestingly, this papal bull recognizes that Indians are “being brought in daily from neighboring islands”, however, its only caveat to the practice is that they be indoctrinated into the faith. It is clear that these uprooted individuals were brought in as slaves for the purpose of labor. The social, political and religious forces that drove the conquerors to classify the indigenous as a barbarian without morals or religion would ultimately be used to justify and condone slavery. Spain’s perceived rights to superiority and its obligation to expand the empire of religious subjects would authorize Cortes’ procrustean approach to the Americas.

How exactly how would this history relate to the interpretation of *Babel* today? In the film, Richard and Susan Jones’ relationship with the indigenous third world is equally as ambivalent and confrontational. While the Jones’ do venture into Moroccan Africa, they do so only within the confines of an organized Western tour group, many of whom are British. As Susan sits in a tent in the desert, she washes her hands with antibacterial soap[[13]](#footnote-13), as a signifier that they are among the dirty, the barbaric. The medieval theme of ambivalence and conflict returns. Three non-Western figures are represented: the Mexican nanny who is both dominated by and dependent upon her U.S. employer; the Moroccan savages who are seen to kill mercilessly and to later lie about it; and finally the sexually explorative and curious Japanese girl. These images, constructed from Western perspectives can be analyzed through the theories of Said and Bhabha who suggest that the Orient was Orientalbecause it was discovered to be *Oriental*. The Oriental woman never spoke for herself. He spoke for her, he represented her, he was foreign, male and he possessed her (6). Here our imaginations of the Orient are realized in the film. Chieko is deaf; she cannot speak for herself. She needs a representative, to help her, to speak for her, to possess her. The construction of the colonial subject “demands an articulation of forms of difference” (Bhabha 96). We see this contrast in *Babel* through the *chiaroscuro* placement of two blue-eyed, white, blond haired children among a group of brown eyed, dark skinned, dark haired children. By deploying themes of “foreignness”, mixed-ness” and “impurity” (97) Western cultures construct their own national identity from this “difference”. Traditional analyses of racial and cultural differences, which are stereotypic, get re-arranged moralistically and nationally. Susan and Richard’s Western identities are formed through the contrast of white and dark: of American colonialism and Mexican dependency, of civilized U.S. medical institutions and an uncivilized native *curandera* healer in Africa; of clean homes as differentiated by homes with dirt floors. As noted, the purpose of colonial discourse was to justify its conquest. In modernity (or post modernity) the discourse is used justify the employment of the nanny, her long hours of work, her being forced to work even during her own son’s wedding. The discourse is to establish systems of instruction.

As David Edmunds affirms in *New Visions, Old Stories: The Emergence of a New Indian History*: “Indeed, until the late 1960s the history of Native-American people, if taught at all, was a component of frontier history courses in which Indians, like geological barriers, severe climatic conditions, and wild animals were obstacles to the Euro-American settlement…By the early 1970s the focus of Native-American history began to change” (3). This text, as a mechanism of colonial discourse, gets interpreted and re-interpreted over the years. As Stam suggests in *Literature through Film*:

…filmic adaptations of novels are fascinating in their own right because they reveal the constantly changing discursive grids – cultural, generic, ideological, industrial – through the source novels have been processed and reinterpreted. Filmic adaptations embody and ‘act out’ these grids, rendering them palpable, substantial, visible, and ‘audible’. (364)

It is in this context that a point must be made regarding the problematic of *who is writing about what where and why*? Mignolo theorizes that the issues should be drawn in relation to the *locus of enunciation* constructed by the speaker or writer (122). The etiology of our interactions and beliefs today share the original vine of documentations that are Western and European in origin. To make it possible to understand the diversity of interactions in colonial situations in the New World experience we must make clear: “in which of the cultural traditions to be understood does the understanding subject place himself or herself?” (126).

Just as the Nietzschean *Will to Power* follows the Greek heroes’ quest for power, glory and greatness, one can see the parallels of the Spanish quest for world domination in the sixteenth century to that of the U.S. today. In a transposing of the two, both powers are threatened by the “other”. Cortés frequently compared his conquest of Mexico to the Christian heroes in the Battle of Granada

against the Arabs[[14]](#footnote-14). It is, perhaps, safe to the say that U.S. utilizes the same stereotypes and images of the uncivilized and barbaric to support its economic and power interests. If a metaphor is a comparison between two unlike things that have something in common, then just as the numerous examples of great and titled lords of Spain after the battle of Granada, were deserving of lands, goods and rent for themselves and their descendants, so should Cortés in his desire to maintain a suzerain state. Is Iñáritu depicting a similar *cacique* system? The stronger, more able U.S. would continue to employ these images to ensure the continuity of the balance of power between the U.S and other non-Western countries, that is between the Joneses and their nanny and their attempted killer in Africa.

Amelia, the nanny, becomes an “authorized version of otherness” but as Bhabha suggests, she is merely pretending by playacting (126). She lives and works in the U.S. but when she returns to Mexico, where she is her “real self” (125). The film’s metonymic representation of civility versus barbarity makes Amelia “almost the same but not quite”. The nanny mimics being a true U.S. citizen, but she is not. The otherness reveals itself when, against all Western, rational “civilized” thought, her nephew Santiago runs into the desert and leaves her alone with her two young charges. Fleeing from the law, he is an uncivilized animal caught between two worlds of Mexican and Mexican-American. He is in both places yet he is in neither place, on each side of the border and neither. He tries to escape the omnipresent and crushing power of the U.S. Border Patrol (of institutionalized hegemonic Foucauldian power) and he simply tries to live with freedom and sovereignty, the same desires of the sixteenth century indigenous. Emphasizing the “otherness” and leveling the weight of its own power, the U.S. government “immediately and definitively deports” Amelia because she has “seriously broken the law”. This show of enmity emphatically declares: “You were almost one of us, we trusted you, we left our most precious possessions with you. You’ll always be the ‘other’ and you’ll always de different. You’ll always be savage” (Bhabha 127). It is “almost the same but not white”. This is always produced as the site of interdiction (128). The nanny’s punishment “is always a problem of authority” (128). They underscore the views represented in society today of U.S./Mexico border relations. Mignolo highlights the precarious position of living between two worlds when he highlights the story of Gómez-Peña: “I live smack in the fissure between two worlds, in the infected wound: half a block from the end of Western Civilization and four miles from the start of the Mexican-American border, the northernmost point of Latin America. In my fractured reality, but a reality nonetheless, there cohabit two histories, languages, cosmologies, artistic traditions, and political systems which are drastically counterposed” (128). Santiago is living in a world trying to construct its own traditions and attempting to coexist. He maintains allegiance to his suppressed self yet he realizes his colonial self. He is resisting and claiming at the same time but ineffective in both. Jack Forbes offers a detailed history of the complicated self-identity of Mexican-Americans today and Mexican national identity and admits that it is impossible to arrive at a single definition. However, the self-deprecation and self-hatred that results from an identification, not by themselves but, by the dominant group – by the treatment (or mistreatment) they receive makes it difficult to organize around a national identity (164). Santiago is a palimpsest; he is a complexity of layers built, one upon the other. He is a result of his past, his history, his colonial status and his indigenous status. They are still faintly visible; they show up in him occasionally.

Amelia mimics being a U.S. citizen, in this film we realize she will never quite be one. The discourse of mimicry is constructed around ambivalence. In order to be effective, mimicry must continually show its difference. Like camouflage, mimicry is a form of resemblance. However, it differs because it displays it in part, metonymically. The noble savage might become noble but he will always be savage. The U.S. finally confronts its fear in *Babel*: to be in an uncivilized barbaric society without the medical care or support of Western institutional power. These creatures are metonymically the “vilest of human kind” (Bhabha 129). Mimicry is fixated on the colonial subject as a form of discriminatory knowledge within punishment discourse – the question of the “authorization” of colonial representations (129). As Fanon suggests, this culture fixed in its colonial status is both present and mummified. Santiago is both present but also maintained in his colonial status as a barbaric savage and twenty-first century Mexican-American. He is both barbaric and animalistic as he runs into the dark desert, like achild fleeing. The film juxtaposes Santiago against the Western “responsible, civilized man” who presumably would do no such thing. Columbus in his *Los cuatro viajes del almirante y su testamento* described the indigenous subject as a *mancebo*, a man-child (22) fleeing responsibility and *muy cobarde* (79) and he is *temeroso sin remedio*, a hopeless coward, he is an animal. Santiago is jaguar-like, indigenous, running into the dark desert, into the wild. He is unencumbered and lacks moral valor, consistent with Aristotelian theories of natural slavery. He is past in all of these and yet he is also present through his fear of jail or deportment. Here are the complementary parts of the discursive whole, as Zamora suggests. On one hand, the discourse is mercantilistic and imperialistic and on the other, the colonial subject must reject Western power and authority. This social reality is suddenly and at once the “other”.

Through the master tropes of metonymy and synecdoche, Iñáritu evokes images of the barbaric through his street scenes in Mexico. Santiago enlists the support of the local Mexican children, as well as little Mike and Debbie, to find a chicken for dinner. He enters the chicken coup, picks up a live chicken and swings it rapidly around in the air. Its neck is efficiently snapped and is instantly killed. With the task at hand completed, the Mexican children gleefully skip away to continue playing. Mike and Debbie, however, stand there dumbfounded, frozen with abject fear and astonishment at this horrific image. The Anglocentric narrative constructs the “safe” world of civilized white blond, blue-eyed children from its differentiation from the crazy, chaotic, backwards, uncivilized culture of Mexico. U.S. identity did not absorb these non-western influences; it was constituted by them. *Babel*, a set of three stories that represent the big story of life, is itself a synecdoche. In film media, a synecdoche can be viewed as a close-up. These small constructed and invented images of the native stand for a much larger thing. The stories in *Babel* give us, as viewers, access to the big story the big picture and it works because the part really does stand for the whole. We are invited to “fill in the gaps”. Although we may only have access to the part, we construct our understanding of the whole. Chieko, the Japanese teenager, is depicted as the Asian girl-sexual object, a geisha. She acts out sexually when her mother dies and her emotionally distant father doesn’t know quite how to cope. In medieval Spanish society, the orphan was the most alienated of children, often being depicted in literature as a rogue picaresque character. A motherless daughter shares similar disenfranchisement. Chieko, now without the guidance of her mother runs the danger of falling into a life of ill-repute and rampant sexuality. She is lost; her rebelliousness is manifested through her sexual self-exposure to boys[[15]](#footnote-15). This fetish links her to the sexual voyeuristic secret that exists within Yussef and his own sister as he masturbates underneath her bedroom window. This theme of sexual deviance can be traced back to Vespucci’s *Letters:* “Everyone of both sexes goes about naked (48)

Their women, being very lustful, make their husbands’ members swell to such thickness that they look ugly and misshapen; this they accomplish with a certain device they have and by bites from certain poisonous animals. Because of this, many men lose their members which rot through neglect and they are left eunuchs. (49)

Columbus’ early colonial texts described the indigenous bodies: “muy fermosos cuerpos y muy buenas caras” (21), “cabeza muy ancha…los ojos fermosos y no pequeños” (22). Zamora suggests that beauty and fertility ultimately transform into possession and domination. By attempting to explain the innate inferiority of certain peoples, as Aristotle had theorized over a century earlier, one can justify subjugation and power over another. Half of a century ago, Columbus marked the beginning of the mimetic process as he suggests to the Catholic Kings that the indigenous should be taught to dress and act like us (79). Through Western intervention, the uncivilized will live better, morally, economically and socially. Early texts describe the native sexual behavior as lacking in moral character because of their practice of polygamy and intermarriage: “They take as many wives as they wish and a son may couple with mother, brother with sister, cousin with cousin and in general men with women as they chance to meet. They dissolve marriage as often as they please, obeying no order in any of these matters” (Vespucci 49). Later, the *Laws of Burgos of 1512* would regulate this activity to be consistent with the norm of Western behavior:

Also, we order and command that, among the other things of our Faith that shall be taught to the Indians, they shall be made to understand that they may not have more than one wife at a time, nor may they abandon her; and if the persons who have them in encomienda see that they have sufficient discretion and knowledge to undertake matrimony…chiefs be made to understand that they may not take wives related to them (26).

The enterprise of world domination by Christian Europe needed legislation to justify their actions. The influences of these earlier generations have residual effects on successive ones. Richard, as his fear grows at his wife’s impending death in Morocco, turns frustratingly to Anwar and says: *“What about you? How many wives do you have?”* Anwar replies: *“I can only afford one.”* Reflecting similar discourse Chieko says: *“They look at us like we're monsters.”* Iñáritu articulates the trope of fetishism to the imaginary. The film gives the stereotype its fixity and place. Here the audience can “fill in the blanks” with the “same old story”. The polygamy, the sexual savage masturbation and the teen’s sexual voyeurism are all both “gratifying and terrifying” (Bhabha 111), not only titillating but also clearly marking the difference between the civilized and the savage. The Moroccan beast is, and always has been, amoral. After all, why didn’t he fess up when he found out that it was his errant bullet that had killed someone? Why didn’t he do the right thing when the police were investigating the murder? The *mise en scéne* in *Babel* imagines the Moroccan family as revolting; they eat with their hands while squatting on a dirt floor. They have no furniture, dishes, or napkins and they talk with their mouths full. The text again anxiously confronts its fear of the vile African. The earlier texts of Columbus, Cortés and Vespucci are essential components to the interpretation. They had already fictionalized these third world characters as “lacking” and “deficient” in moral Christian values.

There is, however, a quest for this third world subject. The West needs him, but only if he is made palatable in a certain way. Writers such as Shohat and Stam highlight the reaction of Bertolt Brecht to the classic and imperialist film, *Gunga Din* (1939): “…The Indians were primitive creatures, either comic or wicked: comic when loyal to the British, and wicked when hostile… Despite the fact that I knew all the time that there was something wrong, that the Indians are not primitive and uncultured people…” (351). In this sense, the two Moroccan brothers become wicked when, while a white woman is dying, they fail to tell the truth to the police. He is wicked when he is sexually deviant. Similarly, the Mexican nanny is palatable when she loves the children, working long hours to accommodate her employer but wicked when she makes the wrong decision to take the children across the border to “dangerous” Mexico. She is both obedient and savage; she does not abandon her charges but she is depicted as a silly child by removing them from the country and “risking their safety”.

Iñáritu’s directorial style of “jumping” from scene to scene is itself a form of narration. The audience feels as if a narrator exists in the background to whisper to us: "meanwhile, on the other side of the world". In this "story-world" these diegetic elements that belong to the film's narrative world are important to drawing the image. The trope of fetishism is reflected in the mystical/savage/fetishistic/exoticism of the town *curandera* who simply runs her hands over Susan’s face reciting prayers, as the audience slowly comes to realize that she is wholly inadequate for the task at hand. We are forced to mentally juxtapose this anxious image against the Western notion of medicine. Medicine is deeply and historically rooted as an institution of authority, power and control; in which Foucault argues that individuals are regulated in ways that are often subtle and thereby seemingly invisible, leading to acceptance of such systems: “the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power” (198). And our fear is realized: being stuck in third world Africa without civilized medical care, on the brink of death.

Authority and power in *Babel* are not only are manifested through institutions of medicine but also through the U.S. Border Patrol. Amelia, living as an illegal immigrant for sixteen years, fully expects that the U.S. authority will come to her aid in the desert when they find her, lost without food or water. She will then be able to save young Mike and Debbie, whom she has left behind to get help. The border patrol agent is dark-skinned, speaking both Spanish and English. She feels extreme relief: is this her brethren coming to rescue her? In a display of enmity, she is shocked and dismayed when the system suddenly turns on her, blaming her for her recklessness that “endangered the lives of others”, clearly translated as “endangering white children”. Her supposed compatriot, a modern-day *cacique*, has fully accepted his authority as an enforcer of U.S. policy. He uses this to defeat the colonial subject. It is evident; Amelia is white but not quite. Her pleas of *ayúdame* are met with handcuffs. Punishment in a capitalist society, as Foucault asserts, is a generalized function and discourse tells us that crime now attacks the whole of society and there are economic, social and political reasons to exert our power to punish. We will all be threatened otherwise. The human body is a political investment that is to be used, subjected, transformed and reformed in the mechanics of power (138). Or put another way, “pioneering American spirit always under threat” (Bhabha 99). There is no other choice but to punish Amelia.

Anthropophagy, a terrifying stereotype, marks points of identification and alienation. They create fear. This plays out in emotions of ambivalent fear and desire. Original images of cannibalism date back to original images painted by explorers:

…they take captives and keep them, not to spare them, but to kill them for food: for they eat each other, the victors eat the vanquished, and together with other kinds of meat, human flesh is common fare among them…one father was known to have eaten his children and wife, and I myself met and spoke with a man who was said to have eaten more than three hundred human bodies…I saw salted human flesh hanging from house-beams, much as we hang up bacon and pork (Vespucci 50).

Today images of a third world nation “out of control”, “chaotic” and “lacking in authority” persist. The myth of ancient Greeks derived from classical traditions, are refashioned in Medieval Europe, and then refashioned again in U.S./Mexico relations. Natural slaves, as defined by Greek theory, are categorized as barbarians with no social order or governing system of control. The papal bulls including *The Laws of Burgos* cite Indians as evidence of those who lack a system of doctrine and government. This thinking morphs yet again into the discourse of today’s image of Mexico as a chaotic, corrupt, narcotics-ruled system of police and government[[16]](#footnote-16). The desire of colonial mimicry and interdictory desire may not have an object but it has strategic objectives. It is a “metonymy of presence.” The animal-like lawlessness of the indigenous is a metonymy of presence. The tension builds in *Babel* as they enter Mexico. Mike innocently states: “*My mom told me that Mexico is really dangerous*” to which Santiago replies: “*Si, esta lleno de Mexicanos*”. This theatrical metaphor highlights two amazed young children seeing for the first time, the active, loud and dirty street life of Mexico. The theme of fear returns: Fanon’s articulation of a white girl, looking at him and turning to identify with her mother says: “Look, a Negro…Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened.” Fanon only can conclude that it is ‘but an amputation, an excision a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood. But I did not want this revision[[17]](#footnote-17)” (85).

Similarly, a sense of order and control is lacking in Morocco as we see children playing with guns that ultimately kill the innocent. Painfully cognizant of the polarity of the two continents, Richard frustratingly screams when he finds he cannot escape Morocco to obtain proper medical care: “*This is your fucked-up country, it's your responsibility*!” In an Althusserian approach, it is the material institutions, rituals, and discourses that produce these ideological beliefs, not the subjective beliefs of individuals. These beliefs and ideas are the products of social practices, not the reverse.

The legacy of the original Spanish vision of the Americas remains today – that of the ongoing negotiations between Western nations and the colonial identification subject. This construction, based on fifteenth century ideals, and its relationship of power between Western and non-Western cultures manifests itself through a creation of fear of the “other”. Perhaps a destabilization of Spanish medieval binary oppositions such as good and evil, savage and civilized or Christian and idolatrous might replace another way of thinking - one that is integral not fractional, interconnected not independent or cyclical not lineal. There may not one binary way of thinking, but rather an expansion of the limits of the Western imperialist panoptic vision. As Zamora outlines, texts respond to specific social needs, which reflect the predominant cultural ideologies. What is significant is that these original texts continue to influence our views today. Is it possible that the West, in its desire to maintain its social, cultural, economic and political power, continues to hold on to these original images from 500 years ago? As the film *Babel* seeks to relate the modern implications of ancient myths on the origins of human inability to successfully communicate with each other, its images have invited us to see ourselves in the way that history has already created for us. Filmic images are always understood through their interpretations and a closer analysis reveals the influence of the Spanish vision of the Americas.

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1. *Popol Vuh,* the sacred book of the Quiche Mayas, narrates that the language of all the families that were gathered at Tulan was confused and none could understand the speech of the others. http://www.varchive.org/itb/confus.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a modern sense, Western rationalism is a view that employs [reason](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reason) as a source of knowledge or as a justification. As a [theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory), based on the works of Socrates, Descartes and Kant, rationalism is a truth that is intellectual and [deductive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deductive). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a sharp contrast to Western historical documentation, Tuhiwai Smith offers an alternative under her heading: Is History Important for Indigenous Peoples? She suggests that western history is assembled around a set of interconnected ideas, one of which holds that history is one large chronology. Non-Western ideologies place less importance in a linear chronological history and emphasize a circular re-telling, one that would seem anachronistic to the Westerner. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Zamora analyzes the Columbian writings from the perspective of the feminization and eroticization of America: “[Columbus} affirms that the globe is not round at all…rather it is shaped more like a pear, or a woman’s breast. The garden is situated on the nipple…since it is closest to heaven” 174). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an excellent study showing how literature and local history mesh to create a genre see *Piccolomini en Iberia: Influencias Italianas en el Génesis de la Literatura Sentimental Española* by [Jaime Leanos](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=ntt_athr_dp_sr_1?_encoding=UTF8&search-alias=digital-text&field-author=Jaime%20Leanos). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the purposes of this argument I emphasize Cortés’ conquest and not Pizarro, as it relates to this film. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cervantes, giving voice to Don Quijote, questions: “¿quién barrenó los navíos y dejó en seco y aislados los valerosos españoles guidados por el cortesísismo Cortés en el Nuevo Mundo?” (93). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an interesting discussion on the economic interests of the early conquistadors and the development of written histories for the purpose of securing *encomienda* grants and their perpetuity, see Adorno’s, *Polemics of Possession* chapter 6, The *Encomendero* and His Literary Interlocutors. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Cartas de Relación* would be translated in many languages and Cortés’ romantic image of the Americas would be shared worldwide. Claude Joseph Désiré Charney, a French traveler and archaeologist, translated *Cartas* calling it “the most interesting”. Local Spanish culture was insatiable in their appetite for descriptions of New World. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There are numerous examples of the employment of Latin as a tool for establishing authority. Adorno comments in *Polemics of Possession* that Gómara, in his defense of conquest, proclaims: “Whoever wants to understand the justification for it should read Dr. Sepúlveda, the emperor’s chronicler, who wrote most learnedly about it in Latin” (165). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Adorno makes a solid argument regarding colonial discourse. While it allows us to go back and understand earlier history, it also spans over 500 years and all continents. In the 1500’s and 1600’s, Spanish America was a market trade of slaves and natural resources. Colonialism and imperialism really refers to British industrialism and the reorganization of colonies beginning in 1760. See Adorno’s *Reconsidering Colonial Discourse for Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century Spanish America.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Raymond Williams in *Keywords* provides a thoughtful analysis of the historical interpretation of certain words such as civilization and culture. Civilization: “polishing of manners”, “a general condition of state, [which] is still contrasted with *savagery* or *barbarism*” “an achieved state…capable of being lost as well as gained”. Culture: “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. McClintock’s chapter entitled *Soft-soaping empire* provides an interesting discussion of the Victorian era’s soap advertising industry as an allegory to imperial progress. Soap promised to wash from the skin the stigma of racial and class degeneration: “The first step towards lightening the white man’s burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears’ soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place – it is the ideal toilet soap” (128). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Las Casas in his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* clearly objects to the conquistadors’ use of this analogy: “lo que ellos llaman conquistas, siendo invasiones, violentas de crueles tiranos, condenadas no sólo por la ley de Dios, pero todas las leyes humanas, como lo son y muy peores que las que hace el turco para destruir la Iglesia cristiana” (105). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For an enlightening discussion regarding the process of encoding the erotic in Hollywood mainstream film, see Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Stemming from Freudian psychoanalysis and sexual fetishism, Mulvey shows 1950’s cinema, such as Rear Window, as an ideology of a dominant patriarchal order and sexual voyeurism. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There are numerous discussions regarding the history of the Mexican government. Lomnitz, writes in *Ritual, Rumor and Corruption in the Constitution of Polity in Modern Mexico*: “Corruption as a series of phenomena has played an important role in social change and in social reproduction in Mexico" (Journal of Latin American Anthropology). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See “Decolonizing Methodologies by Tuhiwai Smith for a revealing look at the effect of analysis on indigenous peoples: “Any consideration of the ways our origins have been examined, our histories recounted, our arts analysed, our cultures dissected, measured, torn apart and distorted back to us will suggest that theories have not looked sympathetically or ethically at us” (38). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)