On the Postcolonial Turn in Latin American Criticism (apropos El Inca Garcilaso)*

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This article is located in the debates which have marked Latinamericanist theory and criticism in the last quarter century or so. It explores the problems of using the figure of El Inca Garcilaso as symbolic in some way of the emergence of a collective Latin American identity. The first part centers on a critique of some of the limitations of postcolonial theory in this regard, particularly Walter Mignolo’s influential idea of the colonial Baroque as an expression of the “creole wound.” The article suggests that the appropriation of El Inca Garcilaso (as a positive or negative paradigm) is somewhat ahistorical, that it would be more accurate to think of the Latin American 17th century as involving something more like a “creole interregnum,” with its own peculiar forms of hegemony. The second part looks, by contrast, at the concrete historical appropriation of the figure of El Inca by Túpac Amaru II (José Gabriel Condorcanchi) in the great rebellion he led in Alto Perú in 1780–82, which suggests the lines of an alternative, egalitarian modernity for Latin America.

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Every form of cultural identity is inauthentic, is a kind of imposture. That is certainly the case with the name “El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega,” or “Garcilaso de la Vega, llamado el Inca,” as he was often called in Spain during his own lifetime, perhaps to distinguish him from the famous poet Garcilaso de la Vega. (The child —in 1539— of a Spanish conquistador, Sebastián Garcilaso de la Vega and an Inca mother Isabel Suárez Chimpu Ocllo, his given name at birth was Goméz Suárez de Figueroa). I am far from having the scholarly authority to speak about el Inca Garcilaso or his work. At best, I know it superficially. But I know enough to at least suggest that Garcilaso might be said to be the founding moment of that Latin American cultural inauthenticity. We are just over four hundred years away from the publication of the Comentarios reales and perhaps a quarter century from the high point of the postcolonial “turn” in Latin American criticism. This seems like a good occasion then to mark a limit to a certain conception of Latin American identity that sees a figure like Garcilaso, even in its negation or Aufhebung by postcolonial criticism, as foundational, adequate to the complexities of the experience of Latin American coloniality and postcoloniality, and therefore still productive of significant meaning for Latinamericanism.

The Ecuadoran indigenous critic Armando Muyolema has suggested that the discourse of Latinamericanism as such is a form of “creole imposture” (2006). Simply stated, his argument is the following: the claim of Latin American culture to be anti-colonial during the period of Independence and the formation of the Latin American nation states in the early 19th century, is an imposture because it comes mainly from the creole and mestizo sectors, rather than the populations that were actually conquered and colonized: that is, the indigenous peoples and the Africans brought to the Americas mainly as slaves. Those populations could sympathize, or not, with the goal of Independence. But Independence was not their project, nor did it solve (indeed it may have even deepened in