Aztec Religion and Art of Writing

Investigating Embodied Meaning, Indigenous Semiotics, and the Nahua Sense of Reality

Isabel Laack

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Aztec Religion and Art of Writing

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By

Isabel Laack

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Cover illustration: The Aztec deities Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca as depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus/ Cihuacoatl*, folio 20 (1899 Hamy facsimile edition; digital reproduction by author).

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

This book is dedicated to my longtime mentor, Gregor Ahn,
whose passion for and dedication to the study of religion
has been an ongoing source of personal inspiration

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Foreword

With *Aztec Religion and Art of Writing: Investigating Embodied Meaning, Indigenous Semiotics, and the Nahua Sense of Reality*, Isabel Laack makes a significant contribution to Mesoamerican scholarship. It is different from other books on Aztec religion in many ways. When I first read the manuscript, I was intrigued by its original title, *Aztec Sacred Scripture? Searching for Their Sense of Reality*, which included a glyph—a question mark—in its title! I read her question mark as a serious invitation to travel along as she negotiates her way through the Nahua writing system, the heated debates about Aztec philosophy, European-based theories of religion, and her delight in being part of what has been called the "aesthetic turn" in scholarship. This book is a brilliant, multilayered "thought experiment meant to change the habitual thought patterns we typically use alongside the concept of *religion*." Laack means the study of religion in general and Aztec religion in particular.

What readers will find attractive is Laack's combination of intellectual courage (she dwells within the pictorials as an outsider, jumps in and swings away at the León-Portilla/Bierhorst debate), her self-critical awareness about her methods, and a pragmatism about the much wider cultural task she believes we readers of the Aztecs must engage in. For Laack, the question mark swings both ways—in her direction and ours. On the one hand, she writes:

> This research study is concerned with the ancient Nahuas' sense of reality—their cosmovision, ontology, epistemology, philosophy, and religion—with a particular focus on their writing system. This includes the search for Indigenous semiotic theories about the relationship between written visual communication and reality as well as an interpretation of how the writing system worked, as seen from a contemporary perspective. My viewpoint on these topics is shaped by my particular academic training: the secular study of religion in general and the study of the aesthetics of religion in particular.

Notice the key phrases here—"concerned with," "search for," "interpretation of"—her synonyms for the opening glyph. She is searching for "Indigenous semiotic theories" about Aztec writing not as an art form per se but as a key to *their sense of reality* as it is understood, somewhat nebulously, through *our sense of reality*. On the other hand, even while the book bears down, section after section, in the search for the "Nahuas themselves," Laack links this to

combatting the ecological and cultural dangers of the contemporary thrust of globally reducing the diversity of the earth and peoples, that is, the *Others*. She writes about her book:

> At least it might be one small step in defending cultural diversity from the threat of cultural homogenization, one step in raising awareness in a contemporary economized and rationalized world that destroys our natural environment—to raise awareness that there have always been and always will be alternatives to seeing the world and acting in it.

In twelve systematic and well-written chapters, Laack seeks the alternative by showing solidarity with writers of the "material turn and aesthetic turn" in the study of religion and culture. Laack's commitment to the "aesthetic turn" developed when she wrote her PhD thesis about religion and music in contemporary spirituality in Glastonbury, England (Laack 2011). She was drawn to "a small group of scholars of religion in Germany and Switzerland [who] started to rediscover the role of the aesthetics of religion" and argued for establishing the Aesthetics of Religion as a new theoretical and analytical approach within *Religionswissenschaft*, the scientific study of religion.

This insistence on a multidisciplinary method came, in part, from the value she found in Vincent Wimbush's flexible and fruitful approach to the category of scriptures, and she summarizes her main takeaway with these words:

> In his view, *scriptures* are writings that have become authoritative in their respective tradition, perform a centering function within them, construct meaning, and are constituted by important material and interpretative text practices (see Wimbush 2008b: 67).

Focus on the phrase "interpretive text practices," because Laack translates it to include Nahua pictorial writing *and* its intensively emotional ceremonial cycles as one key to understanding Aztec scriptural forms, lives, powers, and meanings. The Nahua pictography practices were an efficient system for "communicating complex, nonlinguistic kinds of meaning and knowledge about reality," while their ceremonies and rituals provided knowledge about the human body as an element of the cosmic body and its many parts and sections. And, like the glyph in her original title, she presents many questions for readers, including:

> How did the Nahuas relate writing to reality? What role did they give manuscripts, paper, writing, and themselves as human beings in the

> unceasing flow of cosmological forces? What happened in the act of painting and writing? Did they have concepts of ("sacred"?) scribal creativity? What role did they give the bodily senses in their epistemology and in their beliefs about how to understand reality and how to express these insights in *writing*? What did they think about the proper method for interpreting their writings? What types of hermeneutics and semiotics did they have? In what way are "religious" views of the cosmos interrelated with their concepts of *scripture*, *hermeneutics*, and *semiotics*?

To aid her, and us, in this quest, she travels with a diversity of scholars: Walter Mignolo, Alfredo López Austin, John Bierhorst, James Maffie, Inga Clendinnen, Elizabeth H. Boone, Ninian Smart, and Miguel León-Portilla. Some of their ideas she embraces, some she does not. She also takes stands and manages to play fair with opponents and those who have not yet caught up to the "aesthetic and material turn." She knows that the task of "writing history in a postcolonial way after historiography's crisis of representation and attempting to understand the bygone culture of the pre-Hispanic Nahuas is no easy endeavor." But she gives it her total effort, and I especially like this illuminating summary of what she has discovered about the Nahua cosmos: "Conveying this kaleidoscopic nature and complex web of relationships, the Nahuas played with semblances and references in their cultural media, including their elaborate rituals." Rituals were the art of the Nahuas, and art was ritually expressed. Laack shows clearly that throughout the Nahua world the deities played major roles, and so their presences, powers, and semi-Otherness animated the writing system—those colorful strings of glyphs found in manuscripts and speech acts, and on sculptures, costumes, and pottery. Deities embedded in aesthetic and material culture animated the Nahua world so that its many moving parts kept moving.

In other words, according to Laack, the Nahuas knew that if they wanted to find the "really real," they had to create art and writing as well as act out the beauty of those messages in their dances. When they did all that, they came to know their gods firsthand, face-to-face, and center-to-periphery. But this knowledge was in the forms of both question marks and exclamation points. That is the sense of reality that Isabel Laack has opened for us.

Davíd Carrasco
Neil L. Rudenstine Professor of the Study of Latin America
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The present book is a revised and abridged version of a manuscript accepted as the Habilitation Thesis for the *venia legendi* in *Religionswissenschaft* (study of religion) by the Faculty of Philosophy at Heidelberg University on January 24, 2018. I am very grateful to the Faculty of Philosophy, the Habilitation committee, and my three examiners, Gregor Ahn, Michael Bergunder, and Andreas Grünschloß.

I consider it a great privilege to acknowledge the generosity, kind support, and guidance of many colleagues and friends during this project. Most of all, my work would not have been possible without Gregor Ahn, my supervisor and mentor of many years. Thank you for igniting my passion for reflexivity and profound in-depth academic thinking, which allowed me to develop my own unique style of thinking that was, nevertheless, fundamentally shaped by your teaching and intellectual guidance. I am eternally indebted to you for your unceasing institutional, academic, and emotional support, and for your faith in me. Thank you for your unwavering belief in sincerity, integrity, and fair play in collaborative working relationships and in the necessity of humane working conditions in academia.

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Figures

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Introduction

1 Introducing the Subject

The people currently known as the "Aztecs" lived in the Central Mexican Highlands roughly five hundred years ago. As immigrants from the north, they arrived in the Valley of Mexico at the beginning of the fourteenth century CE and intermingled with the local people. They rose to political and cultural heights in the fifteenth century, only to be brutally conquered by Spanish invaders in the third decade of the sixteenth century. The so-called Aztec Empire was a political alliance between three major groups in the Valley of Mexico: the Acolhua living in the town of Texcoco, the Tepanec of Tlacopan, and the Mexica living in the twin cities Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan. Tlatelolco and the now-legendary Tenochtitlan formed the heart of the "Aztec Empire." These cities were picturesquely located on two islands within Lake Texcoco, which covered a large part of the bottom of the Valley of Mexico during that time. The valley, a high plateau 2,200 meters above sea level, was surrounded by skyscraping mountain peaks, among them the famous volcanoes Popocatépetl (5,624 m) and Iztaccíhuatl (5,230 m). When the Spanish conquistadores first saw the city, an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 people lived there (Matos 2001: 198), making Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco one of the largest cities in the world at that time. With the twin pyramids, the ceremonial center, and the marketplace at its heart, the city spread out into the lake with people's living quarters and fertile chinampas (raised fields). A large aqueduct from Chapultepec on the close western shore of Lake Texcoco supplied fresh water. In addition to items made by local farmers, craftspeople, and artisans, traders from afar and tribute collectors brought exotic food into the city, along with fine clothing, highly crafted tools, laborsaving devices, beautiful jewelry, and every other imaginable type of article.

The Triple Alliance controlled large parts of Mexico, conquering cities and villages through military campaigns. Politically, it was not so much an *empire* as we think of it—subjected local rulers were typically left in power and local language and culture were largely left unchanged. The local rulers only had to ensure a constant flow of tribute payments to the capital. In this way, the influence of Tenochtitlan reached from the Pacific shores on the west to the Caribbean on the east. Cultural exchange and trading between the different ethnic groups was encouraged; the political fundament, however, was relatively unstable. Many people in the conquered towns harbored negative sentiments toward the Mexica because of the high taxes and tributes. Thus, when the Spaniards arrived, many local armies joined the few Spanish soldiers in their

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fight against Tenochtitlan, hoping to free themselves from Tenochtitlan's tight grip without realizing the far greater anguish that the Spaniards would bring. Despite the awe that Europeans feel to this day for Tenochtitlan's magnificence—the dreamlike manifestation of the legendary, glorious island city—images of Aztec culture are typically painted in rather dark colors. We imagine the Aztecs as deeply imbued with superstition, carrying out questionable military campaigns such as the "flower wars," waged mainly to obtain fresh supplies for cruel and bloody heart sacrifices at Tenochtitlan's main temples. These sacrifices were extensive and shocking rituals on which the Aztecs spent an excessive amount of time, energy, and money. Historians imagined life in Tenochtitlan as harsh and joyless, ruled by the pessimism that only a cyclical concept of time could generate as well as by a deeply felt fatalism dominated by the belief in a near end of the world if the gods were not nourished with an endless supply of sacrifices. Terrified by predictions of doom, Tenochtitlan's last ruler, Motecuhzoma II, easily gave in to the Spanish soldiers commanded by Hernán Cortés, whom Motecuhzoma believed was the god *Quetzalcoatl* returning to reclaim rulership of the Mexica. Thus, when the Spaniards came upon the Aztecs, it was a clash of semiotics, as scholar Tzvetan Todorov (1984) concluded. This clash ultimately led to the Spanish victory because their superior sign system enabled Cortés to think politically, improvise, and act strategically. Motecuhzoma II, on the other hand, was too preoccupied with reading the omens, understanding the will of the gods, and acting according to a tradition that offered no strategy for dealing with the Spaniards. This all-encompassing image of Aztec culture, including the interpretation of their defeat, is strongly shaped by European projections of the Other and by intellectual imperialism rooted in the will to conquer, dominate, and exploit. One of the major objectives of this study is to challenge these images and to attempt to understand—inspired by a postcolonial perspective—how the Aztecs perceived reality. One of the most important steps on this road is to look closely at the sources with a raised level of reflexivity.

Let us begin this endeavor by discussing the use of the term *Aztec*. This name was apparently introduced by Alexander von Humboldt (1810, 1997) and made popular by US historian William H. Prescott in his *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (Prescott 1843). Since then, it has generally referred to the mainly Nahuatl-speaking ethnic groups that formed the Aztec Empire in the century before the Spanish conquest. It particularly refers to the Nahuas who lived in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco and controlled the Aztec Empire politically and militarily. Humboldt chose this name because it relates to the migration myth of this Nahua group, which recounts how their ancestors had come from a place called *Aztlan* before they settled on an island in Lake Texcoco at the beginning

of the fourteenth century CE. However, people living in pre-Hispanic Mexico never used this name themselves. Postclassic Mexico was ethnically diverse, and identity was bound mainly to the locality where one lived. For example, the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan were the *Tenochca*, the people living in Tlatelolco the *Tlatelolca*. Since settling jointly within Lake Texcoco, these two groups collectively identified as the *Mexica*. This denomination was later chosen for the postconquest capital Mexico City and finally for the independent state Mexico itself. When we speak of the Aztecs, it is typically the Mexica as the dominant ethnic group in the Triple Alliance we refer to, and it is the Mexica we have the most knowledge about.

This book, however, will use the name (*ancient*) *Nahuas* instead[1] because it includes the larger ethnic group that settled in several towns in the Central Mexican Highlands and which shared the *Nahuatl* language and important cultural and religious traits.[2] Today, more than 1.5 million people speak a variant of Nahuatl, most of them living in Central Mexico, with some major expatriate groups in the United States. Although Nahuatl has changed in the last five hundred years due to internal development and contact with Spanish, contemporary Nahuatl is nevertheless relatively similar to Colonial and Classical Nahuatl. Political officials and notaries used Colonial Nahuatl in early colonial times, whereas Classical Nahuatl is known to us through the writings of the early missionaries and mission-trained Indigenous authors. With the colonial transcription of Classical Nahuatl into the Latin alphabet, regional differences became standardized and a form of orthography established (R. Cortés 2008: 90). Most of the sources relevant for this study are written in Classical Nahuatl. With regard to transcription and spelling, throughout this study I use the simplified, modernized Franciscan system for Nahuatl terms to ease the reading for nonlinguist readers (see Bierhorst 2009: xi).[3] The modernized Jesuit system, in comparison, based on the grammar by Jesuit priest Horacio Carochi (Carochi and Lockhart 2001), includes diacritics (especially the marking of long vowels and glottal stops) and thus better serves linguistic needs.

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1 I continue to use the term *Aztecs* in summaries and indirect quotes of those works whose authors used this term, particularly in works that were written before scholarly debate about using the term had begun.

2 For a recent outline of the scholarly controversy over the terms, see Rodríguez-Alegría and Nichols (2017: 2–3).

3 Where translations of Nahuatl terms are provided in the text, they will—if not stated otherwise—follow the translation given in the *Nahuatl Dictionary* as provided by the University of Oregon at <http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl/>. This database compiles different translations of Nahuatl terms from the main traditional and modern Nahuatl dictionaries, such as Molina ([1571] 1880) or Karttunen (1983) and from manuscript sources such as the *Florentine Codex*.

In contrast to the Classic Period Maya, the preconquest Nahuas and their close cultural neighbors, the Mixtecs, used a pictorial writing system instead of a phonographic writing system that notated the sounds of their respective languages. This pictorial writing system uses pictograms that show stylized objects (such as houses) and ideograms that visualize abstract thoughts through combinations of pictograms (such as a temple pierced by an arrow for *conquest*) or conventionalized abstract signs. All signs were arranged on pages in an intricate way, displaying a narrative syntax and complex concepts of time and history (see Leibsohn 1994, Boone 2000). Writing in traditional style on Indigenous paper and linen appears to have prevailed until the seventeenth century, progressively adapted to the changing cultural environment and the changing needs of the Indigenous population in their interaction with the Spanish (Arnold 2002: 227). Mastery of this writing system, however, was gradually lost during colonial times and only a few primary sources from pre-Hispanic Central Mexico written in Indigenous pictorial style have survived the conquest wars, the burning of Indigenous books by frenetic missionaries, and, finally, the corruption of time. What remains is a handful of precolonial manuscripts and several hundred (early) colonial documents (see Cline 1972, 1973, 1975a, 1975b), among them tribute records and property plans, histories of ethnic groups and genealogies, calendars and astronomical measurements, and cosmologies and songbooks, along with handbooks for rituals and divination.

Many of the early conquistadores and missionaries acknowledged the Indigenous writing as a proper writing system. Based on its widespread use and its efficiency in communication, they apparently accepted it as equal to their own alphabetical writing (see Rabasa 2008a: 235–241, Pillsbury 2011: ix). However, some of them classified pictography as a preliminary, evolutionarily primitive stage of writing, thus legitimizing the conquest and subsequent exploitation of the Indigenous people. This opinion came to dominate later European and American views of the Aztecs. It went hand in hand with European philosophies of language that are rooted in the discourse of the ancient Greeks, link rational discourse with phonographic script, and advocate the intellectual supremacy of (modern) Europe. This ideology has even influenced modern theories of literacy that assert that only phonographic writing is capable of intellectual precision and rationality (e.g., Havelock 1986). As a consequence, pictorial writing systems have remained largely neglected by most European literacy theories, which rely on the (exclusive) definition of *writing* as the visualization of language (see Coulmas 2011). In the last two decades, however, some scholars, based on their analyses of Nahua and Mixtec pictorial writing systems (starting with Boone and Mignolo 1994), have questioned this devaluation. It became obvious that these are highly efficient systems of visual

communication comparable to musical or mathematical notation or to geographical cartography and are no less capable than phonographic writing systems of transporting complex models of the world and people's place in it.

Although we are still far from comprehensively understanding the surviving pictorial manuscripts, the recent analyses have produced major breakthroughs in reading them. In this study, rather than analyzing the contents and visual structure of single sources, I raise far more basic questions: How does this particular form of visual communication work and what type of knowledge does it express? What does it tell us about the Nahua sense of reality? What semiotic theory informs their writing system? How did the Nahuas relate their writing system to other forms of expression and communication and to (their concepts of) truth and reality (as they perceived it)?

Thus, the study combines two perspectives on Nahua culture: one on their writing system and the other on their religion. In the last few decades, not only Central Mexican writing systems but also Mexican religions have been understudied. Religious aspects of Mesoamerican cultures have not been the prime focus of research among Mesoamericanists for several reasons within the disciplinary history of Mesoamerican studies (see Monaghan 2000). Similarly, few scholars of religion—among them Davíd Carrasco and Philip P. Arnold—have specialized in ancient, that is, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. In this study, I wish to open a new dialogue between Mesoamerican studies and the study of religion by applying recent theoretical, methodological, and epistemological debates within the academic study of religion to the study of Aztec culture. In doing so, I intend to present a fresh view on the relation between pictography and the Nahua sense of reality.

2 Indicating Sociopolitical Relevance

Why is it relevant to study the religion and the writing system of people who lived five hundred years ago and—seen from the European perspective—on the other side of the planet? Beyond intrinsically academic research interests, studying the ancient Nahuas offers valuable insights for issues and debates in our contemporary world, among them the discussion about the use of communication systems. In times of increasing globalization, there is a growing need for visual communication systems capable of transporting information across linguistic boundaries. Accordingly, in social areas intimately affected by global flows such as travel and information technology, the use of pictorial and iconic signs in addition to or in place of written language messages is already on the rise. To understand better how this type of communication works will

certainly make the process easier. Additionally, the last few decades have witnessed a fundamental change in media usage, from a society that strongly relies on phonographic literacy and print culture to one that is "returning" to a high relevance in orality and that uses new forms of visuality, including moving pictures and multisensorial media. This transformation, discussed at length since the publication of Marshall McLuhan's studies (McLuhan [1962] 2002, [1965] 2003), has provoked much criticism by cultural theorists who fear the degeneration of our civilization's intellectual achievements (e.g., Flusser 1992). This debate focuses, in essence, on the relation between thinking and language and has a long tradition in the European history of ideas, starting with Plato's examination of the intellectual transformations the implementation of writing produced (in *Phaidros*) through to the modern orality–literacy debate (Ong 1982, Goody 1986). In many cases, assumptions regarding the superiority of phonographic writing are well cemented, and far too few scholars step back to critically challenge them and reflect on their entanglement with colonial and elitist hegemonic interests.

In Mexico, in contrast to Europe, the medium of the image has never lost its strong appeal, even after the conquest. According to analyses by art historian Serge Gruzinski, the image was deeply embedded in the Mexican cultural *imaginaire* during the times of Christian baroque religiosity. Because Mexico was far less affected by the introduction of print culture than other countries, this baroque sensibility toward the image has carried on into postmodern consumerism and contemporary forms of media usage, including the immense relevance and global power of Mexican telenovela productions (Gruzinski 2001: 220–226). Taking this sensibility and history of visual media usage seriously, we should avoid falling for easily applied evolutionary scales that link media usage with developmental stages of entire civilizations. Engaging with ancient Nahua pictography presents an excellent way to gain insights into the complexity of nonphonographic writing systems. This, in the end, might help us overcome ethnocentric and intellectualist-elitist biases.

Thus, an important reason for engaging with cultures from ancient Mexico concerns European colonialism and its history of exerting immense physical and epistemic violence. The history of suppression and exploitation of Indigenous people in Mexico has not ended, even after the country's independence. Many Mexicans with Indigenous ancestry still live in tremendous poverty and social discrimination. Standing in stark contrast to this reality, the ancient, pre-Hispanic Mexican cultures have been given an important place in national Mexican identity, since the colonial fight for independence from Spain to this day. The Aztecs, especially, have been glorified in this process, mainly in the Mexican arts and crafts movement. Who does not know Diego Rivera's murals

about the history of Mexico and Frieda Kahlo's adoption of "traditional" Mexican clothing, jewelry, and visual imagery? This appropriation of pre-Hispanic cultures has also influenced national academic archaeology and anthropology circles. In the middle of the twentieth century, it stimulated the founding of Nahuatl studies and linguistics by such imposing figures as Ángel María Garibay Kintana and Miguel León-Portilla. In the United States, descendants of Native Americans have been raising their voices both politically and academically for a long time, and the rest of society seems to have (slowly) started listening to them. In Mexico, however, this process is still very much in its infancy, with the first Mexicans identifying positively and publicly with their Indigenous ancestry, taking academic jobs in the fields of anthropology and archaeology, and initializing projects to save Indigenous languages and writing systems.[4]

Mesoamericanists, regardless of their ancestry, have a responsibility when studying pre-Hispanic American cultures to disclose and challenge the colonial legacy and epistemic violence in academic interpretations of Mexican ways of living. We should always keep in mind that the first knowledge Europeans gained about America was embedded in the colonizing endeavors of conquistadores and the missionary attempts of Christian friars and priests. Western academia has its roots in this history of colonialism. The Western study of non-European cultures was naturally shaped by European views of the world and by Europeans' conceptual categories; it has always been, and continues to be, influenced by sociopolitical interests. The first interpretations of Mexican culture and religion were formulated by comparing it to Christianity and the "classical" Greco-Roman world. For example, the Franciscans compared Indigenous cultures with ancient European paganism, regarding them as highly advanced but misguided civilizations—misguided because the Indigenous people did not yet know Christ's message (Lee 2008: 2–3). The later Dominicans and Jesuits discovered similarities with Christian dogma and rituals such as fasting and self-sacrifice. They interpreted the legendary Quetzalcoatl as the historical St. Thomas preaching to the "Indians"; they compared Texcoco king Nezahualcoyotl with King David, who had intuited a peaceful, true, and one God and thus paved the way for the arrival of Christianity. All of these projections fed into a long history of interpreting Aztec culture (Lee 2008: 2–6, 191–193).

4 See, e.g., the projects on the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas website <http://www.macehualli.org/>, accessed March 20, 2018. See also the Mexican government's Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas website, <http://www.inali.gob.mx/>, accessed November 26, 2018.

Early sixteenth-century Europeans who heard reports about the new colonies were plagued by a fundamental question: Were the people encountered actually humans or did they represent a lower position in the Great Chain of Being? If they *were* humans, was their civilization similarly advanced to the European one or did it present a lower social subdivision in the chain? This issue on the nature of the "Indians" was fiercely discussed in the Great Debate of Valladolid, summoned in 1550 by Charles V of Spain to discuss the Spanish colonization and the legitimacy of war against the Indians. Bartolomé de las Casas, one of the fourteen theologians summoned to the debate, called attention to the advancement of the Indian civil society and to the Indians' capacity for rational thinking. His opponent, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, however, equated the Indians with women, children, and monkeys. Because of this proposed equivalence, the supremacy of Europe (that is, European adult males) seemed only natural to him and the enslavement of the "Indians" legitimate (Carrasco 2014: 23). The Great Debate of Valladolid stood at the beginning of a European history of Occidentalism (Mignolo 2000: 13),[5] that is, views of the people of the Americas that fluctuated between the noble savage and the wild man (see Keen 1990).

The phenomenon of Occidentalism does by no means belong to the past, as the example of the Maya civilization shows. For quite some time, the ancient Maya were viewed as peaceful stargazers, an image expressing a deeply felt longing for civilizations alternative to the West. However, this image was proven incorrect starting in the 1950s with the deciphering of Mayan writings. The new historical insights about the bellicose Maya, nevertheless, do not keep contemporary Westerners from looking to the ancient Maya for peaceful spiritual inspiration.

Whereas some of these projections and images are easy for scholars to dismiss as fantasies far removed from historical truth, it is much more difficult to overcome the epistemic violence that has been employed by using academic concepts rooted in the European intellectual history. Often, categories such as *religion* or *writing* are used to describe American Indigenous cultures without reflecting whether these categories do justice to Indigenous ways of conceptualizing the world. The strongest and most fundamental intellectual imperialism, indeed, is the idea of the supremacy of Western science itself, believed to be the ultimate achievement of humanity in understanding, interpreting, and explaining both the physical and social worlds. Working in the field of

5 Latin American philosopher Walter Mignolo coined the term *Occidentalism* in reference to Edward Said's (1978) famous concept of *Orientalism* to refer specifically to the images that non-Americans, mostly Europeans, have of American cultures.

academia and using its methods and epistemology, it seems almost impossible to break free of these assumptions in any other way than by dropping out and following a spiritual path or a path of practical sociopolitical commitment. And I must confess, although I have been studying Nahua culture out of intellectual curiosity and driven by the wish to overcome epistemic violence, this book is nevertheless going to present the next necessary step of my professional qualification and academic career. Thus, it will, in the end (hopefully), lead to long-term employment at a university financing myself and my family and enabling us to live in economic security. There is no denying that.

Notwithstanding this—since I am deeply committed to the academic path—I still believe it is better to apply the highest measure of reflexivity I can muster and to search for new ways to understand the ancient Nahuas than not to study them at all. I am not sure how I feel about the ethical consequences of the demand to "speak for the subaltern" (Spivak 1988)—is it a new form of arrogance and imperialism to deny the subaltern their own agency? However, I still feel it is better to write this book than not. At least it might be one small step in defending cultural diversity from the threat of cultural homogenization, one step in raising awareness in a contemporary economized and rationalized world that destroys our natural environment—to raise awareness that there have always been and always will be alternatives to seeing the world and acting in it. It is not my attempt to idealize Nahua culture—I am deeply grateful that at least some people today believe that human sacrifice (be it for religious, political, or economic reasons) must be condemned, to address the most ghoulish aspect of Nahua culture. Nevertheless, Nahua culture contains highly fascinating ways of living in the world, and I hope my readers will join me in tackling the unfamiliar in it while at the same time searching for commonalities.

3 Realizing the Aesthetics of Religion

This research study is concerned with the ancient Nahuas' sense of reality—their cosmovision, ontology, epistemology, philosophy, and religion—with a particular focus on their writing system. This includes the search for Indigenous semiotic theories about the relationship between written visual communication and reality as well as an interpretation of how the writing system worked, as seen from a contemporary perspective. My viewpoint on these topics is shaped by my particular academic training: the secular study of religion in general and the study of the aesthetics of religion in particular.

This academic background inspired both my research interest in this study and its methodological and theoretical perspective. However, I will not use this perspective to narrow the focus of the research by singling out the religious from the nonreligious aspects of Nahua culture. It is not my intention to judge whether Nahua knowledge about reality was in essence "religious," "philosophical," or "scientific" (or even "magical," "superstitious," or "pseudoscientific"). Each of these categories has been used to either downgrade or upgrade Aztec culture on an evolutionary scale of civilizations. The definition of *religion* and its relational concepts has been a major debate within the study of religion, leading to the question whether this discipline has an exclusive object and employs a special methodology. The study of religion has been, throughout history, largely dominated by understandings that are deeply engrained in Western, Christian, and Protestant world views and heavily laden with an ideology that supports Western colonialism and imperialism. Scholars such as Talal Asad (1993), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), Russell McCutcheon (1997), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) harshly criticized this legacy and questioned applying the concept of *religion* cross-culturally. In the aftermath of these critiques, some scholars now ignore the problematic issue of defining *religion* altogether, while others take a radical discursive perspective and confine themselves to analyzing the concept itself rather than the practices labeled as "religious" (e.g., Bergunder 2014). Still others acknowledge the Western identity of the concept and the inherent problems when applying it to non-Western cultures, but they also point out that *religion* has been used globally since the beginnings of European colonialism (e.g., Houtman and Meyer 2012a: 3). In addition, one could adopt a pragmatic, critical realist perspective when analyzing non-European, nonmodern cultures (Schilbrack 2010) and examine whether people in the respective cultures used a similar concept or whether the academic use of the concept illuminates any aspects of the studied culture and helps in their interpretation.

Classical Nahuatl has two Indigenous concepts of interest in this regard: *tlamaniliztli* and *nemiliztli*. Alonso de Molina (1977: 125) translated *tlamaniliztli* as "costumbre de pueblo" (customs of a people or village). Nahua wise men also used this term in their dialogue with the twelve friars in the *Coloquios y Doctrina Cristiana* to refer to their traditional way of living (see, e.g., Lehmann 1949: 102). *Nemiliztli* is similar and translated by Frances E. Karttunen (1983: 166) as "vida, conducta, manera de vivir" (life, lifestyle, way of life). Neither concept differentiates between a general way of life (or culture) and a religious one (or religion). Molina specifies for the Spanish "religion" the Nahuatl translation of *teoyotica nemiliztli*, which Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo (2007: 42) directly translated to mean "that an individual is leading a religious, i.e., a spiritual or

divine, pure life." However, the problem with this compound term is that it is not Indigenous. Rather, it was constructed by missionaries attempting to translate their concept of Christian religion into Nahuatl (Pharo 2007: 28). To closely understand the Indigenous associations with these terms would require extensive analyses of their discursive contexts. At this time, it is sufficient to state that the Nahuas had no Indigenous concept that singled out *religion* from other aspects of culture.

Notwithstanding this, we can ask whether identifiable patterns of behavior or cosmovisions that we could name "religious" exist, as seen from any contemporary Western understanding. There is an ongoing and extensive epistemological debate within academia about the ontological status of academic concepts. Briefly put, my own position in this debate comes close to the critical realism Schilbrack voiced (2014b: 91–96, 115–116). It is not an "antirealist" position (Schilbrack 2014b: 85), since I argue that *religion* is not "solely the creation of the scholar's study" (J.Z. Smith: xi). First, many outside the academic realm use the term (see Bergunder 2014: 275–279) and, second, people's practices and beliefs exist independently of the scholar's mind (even if not necessarily independent of scholarly discourse). *Social facts* are constructed but are nevertheless real in the sense of shaping people's lives. Having said that, I do not follow a position of "naïve realism" (Schilbrack 2014b: 85), believing that mental concepts ontologically mirror reality (as in the correspondence theory of truth). Rather, I see concepts as historically and culturally relative and as dynamic parts of linguistic (and nonlinguistic) discourses characterized by the *play of signification*. Used in academic research, they are only heuristic tools for making sense of the complex world of human behavior.

Any academic engagement with ancient Nahua culture and religion is confronted with a contemporary Western commonsense understanding of *religion* that has influenced many academic studies (see Bergunder 2014: 251). When applying this implicit understanding of *religion* to the Nahua culture, four main problems come into play:

1. Reification: With the problem of reification, the concept of *religion* essentializes and homogenizes cultural diversity and dynamics by implying that religion is a static object with clear-cut boundaries. As the cultures of Postclassic Central Mexico were highly dynamic, it is no longer adequate to speak of "the religion of the Nahuas" in the singular.
2. Autonomy: With the problem of autonomy, the concept of *religion* separates religious and nonreligious aspects of any culture, an idea that is rooted in the modern Western history of secularization. Regarding the Nahuas, it is pointless to separate religion from their general cosmo-

vision, philosophy, politics, economy, or health system. Every aspect of Nahua culture was deeply imbued with what we call *religion*.

3. Privatization: With the problem of privatization, the concept of *religion* takes voluntary belief, internal states, and the (irreducible) experience of the "sacred" as the core of *religion*, an approach rooted in the modern Western idea of the privatization of belief. Regarding the Nahuas, we can apply this approach only with great difficulty, since Nahua being-in-the-world instead emphasized collectively shared ways of living, aesthetic expression, and ritual practice.
4. Finally, linking *religion* substantially to the "sacred" or to "transcendence" does not help in interpreting Nahua culture, since the Nahuas apparently did not entertain the idea of a dualism of transcendence/immanence, divine/mundane, or sacred/profane.

In sum, these largely implicit associations with *religion* produce distorting results if applied to the ancient Nahuas, and we need to break free from them in our search for their sense of reality. In this study, it is not my intention to search for an academic definition and concept of *religion* that proves itself adequate for Nahua culture by either choosing from among the many ones already proposed or by designing one matching definition anew. Rather, I undertake an experiment meant to change the habitual thought patterns we typically use alongside the concept of *religion*. To do so, I aim at reaching a more abstract level by analyzing the Nahua sense of reality. Several aspects of this sense of reality have proven to be particularly relevant to its understanding: Nahua ontology, epistemology, and semiotics as well as their strong emphasis on pragmatics and aesthetics. Obviously, these categories are similarly shaped by European intellectual history as the concept of *religion* and are by no means value-neutral. Nonetheless, thus far they have been applied relatively rarely to Nahua culture. Changing perspective in this way might at least have a pedagogical value (see Schilbrack 2014b: 98–99) that would help us disconnect from some of the older projections—even if introducing new ones along the way.

Another far-reaching legacy of the Western concept of *religion* is its strong subjectivist, idealist, and antisomatist bias. The academic study of religion has been influenced by Platonic idealism, Christian introspection, Protestant emphasis on the inner conscience, and phenomenology's subjectivism (see Vásquez 2011). Accordingly, it has focused thus far on analyzing faith and religious experience, along with belief systems and intellectual theological discourses as expressed in "sacred scripture" and written texts. Within the last decade, a new movement within the academic study of religion has called for a *material turn* and an *aesthetic turn* and for rediscovering components of classical religion theories referring to the body and materiality (e.g., parts of the

works of Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, or Max Weber). The movement has begun to newly examine the role of the body in religion (Coakley 1997, Cave 2012, Krüger and Weibel 2015); study sensory and "sensational religion" (Promey 2014); analyze visual culture, including a critique of elitist approaches that ignore and disdain popular and everyday culture (Morgan 1998: xi–xv); and promote the *aesthetics of religion* as a new connective concept (Grieser and Johnston 2017a). It has also presented the first theoretical layouts for the field of Material Religion (Houtman and Meyer 2012c, Vásquez 2011).

As a researcher, I locate myself within these approaches toward *religion*, taking seriously the body as the place where we experience reality and life, and where we practice our way to live and interact with other people and the collective/society. Following the theories of cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Johnson 1990), I see emotions, feelings, thoughts, and abstract thinking not as separated from our body by an ontological gap but as building upon it and being in constant interaction with it. Moreover, neither emotion nor abstract thinking exist without the body. This approach, however, should not be misunderstood as a material reductionism relegating religious experience to brain functions, neurological circuits, the impact of genes, or the results of evolutionary biology. Human beings are complex organisms, and aspects seemingly different from each other, such as chemical processes in cells and abstract thinking, are merely distinctive, nonhierarchical layers of our reality. I believe that none of these aspects is reducible to the other; rather, they are interwoven in complex ways we are far from understanding.

Furthermore, I approach human being-in-the-world nonreductively, following Manuel A. Vásquez (2011). This means that I do not see academic theories, being limited in their own ways, as the ultimate method for understanding and explaining the world. Academic theories are one way to understand and explain the world—and one I naturally find appealing, otherwise I would not have pursued this study—but they are just one way among many. In addition, using a secular perspective as the frame for my academic study does not principally negate the potential existence of aspects of reality that religious practitioners claim to be true but that Western science does not. In this study, I aim at bracketing questions of truth in my attempts to understand the Nahua sense of reality. Consequently, I am not interested in evaluating whether, or to what degree, the ontology of the Nahuas matches reality or whether, and to what degree, their practices were efficient or beneficial. With this attitude, I am broadly following Ninian Smart's idea of methodological agnosticism (see Smart 1973), however, without arguing that religious phenomena are genuine and could not or should not be explained with reference to "nonreligious"

causes. In addition, I perceive human knowledge and understanding as always perspectival and situational and our experiences as full of “complexities, contradictions, paradoxes, relations of reciprocal determination, multi-causal dynamics, and, more generally, the indeterminacies in the ways in which various materialities interact to constitute us in the world” (Vásquez 2011: 324).

This is the epistemological and theoretical background of my approach to the ancient Nahuas sense of reality, with a particular focus on the workings of their writing system and semiotic theories. Having said that, there is a certain dilemma in applying the Aesthetics of Religion approach to historiography. Available sources on the ancient Nahuas primarily include archaeological remains and surviving written documents. Whereas the former tell us something about how the Nahuas localized themselves in the material world, our reconstructions of the practices surrounding the remains are often highly speculative. Written documents, on the other hand, naturally emphasize linguistic thoughts and belief systems. The only thing we can do—in case we are unable to work with descendants of the Nahuas—is to search for traces of a complex, multilayered, material, and sensory being-in-the-world in the surviving sources. Thus, to take on an Aesthetics of Religion approach is rather a matter of theoretical perspective and research objectives than a choice of methods.

4 Outlining the Chapters

This book aims at taking its readers on a journey in search of the ancient Nahua sense of reality, with particular regard to their writing system. For this purpose, we move from general aspects of their cosmovision to the specifics of their semiotics while critically reflecting common representations of Nahua culture and uncovering Eurocentric biases in previous academic interpretations.

Before the actual journey begins, I need to address questions of methodology covering postcolonial approaches to historiography, the challenges of studying the aesthetics of religion, and the journey’s objectives. This reflection will prepare us to enter the world of the ancient Nahuas. First, we will examine their general ways of living in cultural diversity and central aspects of their cosmovision, which imagines the human being as embedded in a dense net of cosmic relations. Based on this, we will attain a higher level of abstraction by exploring Nahua ontology, including notions of divinity and concepts of reality in a world they perceived as constantly in motion. After discussing Indigenous epistemology, we will move on to how the Nahuas interacted with this world in motion through a code of conduct, rituals, and aesthetic media, including the

medium of the *teixiptla*, a material or human representative of the deities. The insights gained in these chapters will help us to analyze Nahua semiotics in depth. First, we will interpret Nahua language theory regarding the relationship between the linguistic sign and nonlinguistic reality. After closely inspecting the foundations of the Nahua pictorial writing system, we can (re)construct the Indigenous semiotic theory regarding the writing system. Furthermore, we can develop an interpretation of Nahua pictography as an efficient system for communicating complex, nonlinguistic kinds of meaning and knowledge about reality, including embodied metaphors and body knowledge. The final chapters summarize the results of the study, draw methodological and theoretical conclusions, and present an outlook for future studies in this field.

CHAPTER 1

Methodology

This chapter presents this study's methodology and objectives and discusses postcolonial approaches to historiography and the challenges of studying the aesthetics of religion.

1 Doing Research in a Postcolonial World

The world carries a heavy burden with its colonial legacy. Even though we like to think otherwise, the academic world has been immensely shaped by Europe's colonialism and is deeply entangled in the world's political history. Since the moment the image of the West's supremacy was deconstructed as myth, it has been nearly impossible to maintain the illusion of academia's political and cultural neutrality, particularly not in a study dealing with the culture of a former colony.

1.1 *Revealing Patterns of Hegemony*

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the academic world has witnessed many changes regarding its research interests, epistemological positions, and sociopolitical orientations. One of the most influential movements, known as *postmodernism*, radicalized earlier expressions of epistemological skepticism. Postmodern thinkers challenged the *grand narratives* (Lyotard 1979) of Western historiography, doubted the Enlightenment's prospect of comprehensively explaining the world, and criticized the unbroken belief in the supremacy of Western science. This postmodern attitude met with the linguistic turn in philosophy and poststructural theories building on Michel Foucault (1966). The idea of a fixed, ultimate, "transcendental" meaning of language that objectively mirrors nonlinguistic reality was abandoned to reveal the situational and performative conditions for linguistic truth propositions in *language-games* (Wittgenstein 1953; see also Austin 1962, Searle 1969). Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (1967b) completely deconstructed the assumption that linguistic signs possess an inherent meaning and argued that the signs produced the societal reality they were thought to simply mirror.

These theories strongly influenced new approaches in literary studies and historiography, often conveniently gathered under the umbrella term of *postcolonialism*. In the late 1970s, a new generation of cosmopolitan literary critics in the US and UK started to analyze literature from former colonial countries

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and turned their attention toward the political, economic, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and literal domination and subordination of non-European countries in the context of European colonialism (see, e.g., Bhabha 1994). One of the key texts of postcolonial theory was the monograph *Orientalism* by Edward Said (1978). In this book, Said analyzed English and French historical travel narratives about the "Orient" and discovered a prevalent discourse that Said called *Orientalism*. This discourse relied on a stereotypical image of the East embodying the Other of the Western self-image and identified the East with being exotic, erotic, esoteric, mystical, and magical, as well as prerational, spontaneous, imitative-traditional, and superstitious. Following Said, this image of the Orient functioned as a legitimation for imperial hegemony, was exerted through ideology and representation, and was made manifest also in the (Western) academic world.

Postcolonial perspectives that analyzed the intellectual consequences of colonialism in academia emerged not only in literary departments but also in historiography. Thus, Ranajit Guha (1983) criticized South Asian historiography for being deeply shaped by British colonialist perspectives. Historians following Guha's view turned their attention to the "subaltern," that is, colonized people marginalized in the historiographical accounts written by the dominant group (see Guha 1988). Since the subaltern's subjectivity, agency, and actual living experiences were largely ignored in dominant historiographies, literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) wished to give the subaltern a voice. Eventually, Western historiography was attacked even more fundamentally for its Eurocentric foundations, most famously with Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to "provincialize Europe" (Chakrabarty 2000). In this context, the universal application of European periodization and the "myth of modernity" were heavily criticized, in particular the idea of modernity as an inevitable stage within a universal teleological unfolding of history characterized by rational disenchantment and the progressing scientific explanation of the world (see Dussel 1992, 1995; see also Eisenstadt 2003). Argentinian philosopher Walter Mignolo challenged the continuously positive connotations of modernity as a period of enlightenment by characterizing the colonization of America as the "darker side of the Renaissance" (Mignolo 2010) as well as the "darker side of Western modernity" (Mignolo 2011).

Although Spanish colonialism played a considerable role in the development of Europe's political, economic, and intellectual history, "Spanish/Latin America and Amerindian contributions to universal history" are largely silenced, along with their contributions to postcolonial theorizing (Mignolo 2010: xi). Accordingly, Mignolo condemned the idea that "postcolonial theory" typically refers to the English-speaking discourse about former British colonies

and ignores the many Latin American "decolonial" approaches (Mignolo 2000: xii; see also Coronil 2008: 401–405, Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008a: 13, Dussel 2008: 344). It comes as no surprise that many Latin American scholars are critical of French poststructuralism—being exported imperialistically and claiming global relevance in the field of academic thinking—and US postcolonialism, with the US still exerting forms of imperialism in Latin America (Mignolo 2000: xii, 173). Nevertheless, Latin American decolonial approaches share many arguments with their English-speaking counterparts as well as with European poststructuralism and postmodernism.

1.2 *Overcoming Epistemic Violence*

The postcolonial argument most relevant for this study concerns the issue of epistemic violence. Postcolonial thinkers such as Said, Guha, Spivak, Chakrabarty, and Mignolo brought to light that colonialism is also exercised in the field of academic knowledge. This "epistemic violence" (Spivak 1988: 281) is visible in the West's image of the (colonial) Other, which was universalized and implemented in the consciousness of the colonial subaltern alongside patterns of political, economic, and educational domination. Within this discourse, Indigenous forms of knowledge and signification are suppressed. The system that organizes "the distribution of epistemic, moral, and aesthetic resources in a way that both reflects and produces empire" (Martín Alcoff 2007: 83) has by no means died with the end of political colonialism but still lives on in today's global coloniality (Mignolo 2000: xii, Mignolo 2011: 8–9). The "coloniality of power" (Mignolo 2000: 17) is also exerted in Western science's persistent claim of supremacy (Rabasa 2011: 195), not only in the natural sciences but also in cultural studies attempting to map and explain the cultures of formerly colonized people. Skepticism regarding Western science's ability to comprehensively describe, analyze, and explain the world has emerged not only from postcolonialism but also from within the Western intellectual tradition itself. From the perspective of Latin American thinkers, these approaches fall short of realizing their "own spatial locality" (Martín Alcoff 2007: 89), because they never ask for the perspective of these non-European cultures (Mignolo 2010: 18; see also Rabasa 2008b). Consequently, Mignolo has increasingly turned his interest toward non-European, subalternized forms of knowledge and systems of representation that reach back into precolonial times and were influenced by the interaction with European-dominant systems after their colonization.

In this space of colonial difference, "border thinking" emerges, that is, a thinking, feeling, and being in between (Mignolo 2000: 84, 2010: xv–xvi). Mignolo's "border thinking" is reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" (Bhabha 1994), Gloria Anzaldúa's "borderlands" and "mestiza consciousness"

(Anzaldúa 1987), or the Nahua notion of *nepantla*.[1] However, Mignolo defined "border thinking" as a proper epistemology, a "border gnosis," a metadiscourse about the production of knowledge (Mignolo 2000: 11). This alternative to Western epistemology and hermeneutics allows us to interpret the world both rationally and emotionally and, what is more, even to *act* in the world (Mignolo 2011: xiii, 203). With this concept, Mignolo's position turns increasingly away from the Western idea of neutral academic intellectual thinking toward an active, affectionate, and committed engagement in the world.

This study is not the place to follow Mignolo on this path to active engagement. Even if we maintain the endeavor of an academic study based on rational intellectuality, we should learn some fundamental things from Mignolo. Most importantly, we should acknowledge the need to decolonize scholarship on the Nahuas by uncovering prevalent cases of epistemic violence. One important step in this direction is to meet the Nahuas at eye level, to take their sense of reality seriously, and to challenge the use of European categories for describing and analyzing their culture.

Many problematical European categories are prevalent in publications on the Aztecs, such as the oppositional pair of *religion* and *science* complemented by *philosophy*. Separating *myth* from *history*, the Aztecs are often denied a civilizatory status comparable to (modern) Europe because they did not use a rational, disenchanted historiography looking for "historical truth" by excluding "mythical" events (contradicting the laws of physics) or the acts of nonhuman agents such as "deities." Fortunately, this discursive pattern has become increasingly problematic in recent years. Nevertheless, American Indigenous and precolonial cultures are still quite commonly perceived as "people without history" (Wolf 2010). Moreover, they are often seen as homogeneous entities without any historical, ethnical, and cultural diversity and are denied the capability to improvise because of their assumed ritualistic traditionalism or to think rationally because of their lack of phonographic writing—all strong kinds of Occidentalist thinking.

Concepts such as *writing* and *art*, *poetry* and *literature*, *deities* and *sin* have been problematized far less thus far. Mexican scholar of Romance literature José Rabasa (2008a: 242) emphasized that Indigenous cultures had developed cultural achievements comparable to European writing, literature, philosophy, or science before their contact with Europe. To acknowledge this is an important step to overcoming epistemic violence. Therefore, Gordon Brotherston's

1 The Nahua concept of *nepantla* is used in early colonial Indigenous Mexican sources to describe the situation of cultural in between (Durán 1971: 410–411; see also Elzey 2001, Maffie 2007).

publication about precolonial American "literatures" *The Book of the Fourth World* (1992) was an immense advance. Similarly praiseworthy are León-Portilla's continuous struggles for the recognition of "Nahua literature," which established the reading of the *Cantares Mexicanos* as part of the Mexican school curriculum. In my opinion, we should go even further by challenging the use of a European category such as *literature* as a global civilizatory benchmark. This concept does not do justice by far to the complex Nahuas systems of verbal, written, and painted expression, communication, performance, and interaction with the cosmos. Moreover, searching (only) for *literature* and *books* perpetuates the European obsession with *texts* by seeing them as the most important, and maybe only valid, media to understanding (a) culture.

This is where this book wishes to take on and proceed, by discussing the appropriateness of concepts such as *religion*, *philosophy*, *literature*, and *writing* to understand ancient Nahua culture. Following Gruzinski's approach to exploring Indigenous *imaginaires* (1993: 284; see also 1988), I attempt to go beyond these concepts by abstracting to deeper levels of being-in-the-world and searching for the Nahua sense of reality. It will be left to future readers to evaluate whether this indeed presents hermeneutic progress or not.

1.3 *Questioning Objectivity*

There are two more epistemological issues relevant for this study: the attainability of objective knowledge and the possibility of understanding the (human) Other. The European history of science has been strongly influenced by a fundamental approach broadly labeled as *objectivism*. The many distinct positions within this strand share a more or less decisively proposed belief in objective truth referring to an ontological reality assumed to exist independent of human beings. The question following this assumption is whether human beings might have access to a God's-eye-view on this reality. Modern Western science generally assumes that its methodology counteracts the epistemological shortcomings of individuals and hence allows for the increasing approximation to objective epistemological truth. This assumption is based on the belief that the human capacity for logical reasoning and rationality mirrors the physical laws of the universe and, thus, ontological truth.[2]

Throughout the history of Western science, several countermovements have challenged these epistemological ideas. In the so-called Romantic period, for example, artists argued that empiricism runs short of explaining human expe-

2 In my broad summary of basic tenets of objectivism, I follow Aveni (1997: vii, 177–178; 2002: 272; 2008b: 234), Vásquez (2011: 124), and Lakoff and Johnson (2011: 214, Johnson 1990: x, xx–xxv).

rience and the powers of life. They favored subjective emotions and feelings over rational reasoning and regarded the arts as the most appropriate expression of fundamental truths.[3] This movement eventually influenced philosophical schools such as phenomenology and existentialism.[4] Although objectivist approaches to the sciences were popular in the twentieth century, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (e.g., 2006) or Hans-Georg Gadamer (e.g., 1960) proposed complex alternatives to objectivism, parallel to the emergence of the massively influential movements of poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Latin American postcolonial thinkers added a particular view to this debate by pointing to the historical and local relativity of objectivism. They criticized its claims of epistemological supremacy accompanied by an ignorance of other culture's ontologies and epistemologies. Mignolo argued that European knowledge is just as much a regional perspective on the world as any other; it only happened to ride on Europe's colonial power and thus became universalized (Mignolo 2000: 63). In contraposition, Mignolo argued for a "geopolitics of knowledge" that takes into consideration the scholar's provenance on his perspective (2011: 77–117; see also 123, 137, 203). In a further move, Mignolo criticized Western epistemology for its idea of disembodied rationality, which ignores the interrelation of thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and behavior, and which epistemologies of other world cultures do not necessarily share. As an example, Mignolo pointed to the *tlamatinime* and the *amautas*, the "wise men" of the Nahua and Inca cultures, who had realized that "knowledge starts in and from the heart, and that the mind categorically processes what the heart dictates" (2011: 203). Although Mignolo developed his arguments on a locational background fundamentally shaped by the history of colonialism, Western/European approaches such as social constructivism and embodiment theories share his idea of perspectival knowledge. Whereas some social constructivists primarily focused on linguistic constructions of reality, embodiment theorists pointed to the additional role of bodily experience in our constructions of reality. Foucault, for example, regarded the body as an object used for the inscription of social differentiation and, consequently, as a tool to dominate and exercise power (e.g., Foucault 1976). Johnson, in contrast, emphasized the materiality of the body and the ways in which its biological structures shape our perception of reality. Johnson and Lakoff argued that our bodily experiences

3 For a recent discussion of Romanticism, see Nassar (2014).

4 For introductions to phenomenology and existentialism, see Moran (2000) and Oaklander (1992).

deeply shape our feelings of being-in-the-world as well as our ways of thinking, our linguistically expressed concepts, and our capacity for logical reasoning:

> In the embodied mind, abstract reason is not separate from the sensorimotor system, but rather builds on it. Sensorimotor experience is schematized—as in image schemas (e.g., containers, paths, contact, balance, centrality) and motor schemas (grasping, pushing, pulling, moving) that have "logics" that are regular consequences of perception and action. Our more abstract concepts are developed via metaphorical extensions of these basic sensorimotor structures, and our abstract reasoning involves inferences that are basically structure-preserving projections of sensorimotor inferences. (Johnson 1999: 85)

In several studies (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 1999; Johnson 1990, 2007), Lakoff and Johnson heavily criticized Western science's idea of an objective, disembodied rationality producing universal knowledge. In their view, our conceptualization of the world is deeply shaped by our bodily perception, while the interpretation of our experiences is based on cultural meaning shared with our social environment (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 180, 227; Johnson 2007: 151, 33–51).

In conclusion, embodiment theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson judged knowledge to be perspectival, situational, and embodied. This theory of embodied realism, however, does not necessarily lead to skepticism or an anything-goes relativism. In my reading, Lakoff and Johnson did not claim that there is no (physical or social) reality and no ontological truth independent of the human being. Their analysis of *truth* instead focused on epistemological truth. Neither did they claim that perspectival knowledge is purely subjective, contingent, and arbitrary (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 5–6). Rather, they argued that our embodied understanding and abstract thinking has been developed in continuous interaction with the environment during the evolutionary process. Thus, the knowledge humanity has acquired in the millennia of its existence corresponds, at least sufficiently, to reality, judged from the fact that it has enabled human beings to survive in the world (Johnson 1990: 203, 208).

> Seen is this light, we can still preserve the important claim *that we can make true statements that correspond to states of affairs in the world....* Some statements will correspond to the world more accurately, for our purposes, than others.... But in every case, this "correspondence" will always be relative to our *understanding* of our world (or present situation) and of the words we use to describe it. (Johnson 1990: 203, emphasis in original)

In sum, Lakoff and Johnson believe in an embodied *realism*, in which knowledge is (more or less) in touch with reality. It is always perspectival and situational, but many parts of it are shared intersubjectively and even cross-culturally.

1.4 *Understanding the Mesoamerican Other*

One of the main intentions of this study is to understand the ancient Nahuas' perspective of reality. Is this endeavor even possible? Can we understand people who live in a cultural and historical context so different from our own? Do anthropological commonalities in thinking, feeling, and acting exist regardless of the cultural context, or are the differences so significant that understanding is impossible? These questions—including reflections on possible and eligible kinds of *understanding*[5]—have triggered some core debates in many academic disciplines and have also been troubling Mesoamericanists.

Many twentieth-century accounts of Aztec culture and religion used hermeneutical approaches to search for the cultural expression of archetypal symbols believed to be deeply embedded within the (Mesoamerican) psyche. The most direct adaptation of Carl Gustav Jung's idea of symbolic archetypes is probably found in C.A. Burland's *The Gods of Mexico* (1967). This and similar studies are inspired by a profound respect for Mesoamerican peoples, believing that we, as we are living today, might learn much from their kind of spirituality (see, e.g., P.T. Markman and R.H. Markman 1989). A comparable, even if less pronounced, motivation is found in later, Eliadean versions of symbol interpretation, which are still popular among contemporary scholars of Mesoamerican religion (see, e.g., Carrasco and Sessions 2007a). Approaches like these principally assume that human beings across all cultures must cope with the same essential psychological and philosophical issues in life.

An analogous intention seems to be driving León-Portilla's continuous efforts to acknowledge ancient Nahua culture as a highly advanced civilization primarily by emphasizing their similarity to European cultures. In León-Portilla's view, literature and philosophy are the most noble of all cultural achievements, and he consequently devoted much of his work to proving that the Aztec people cultivated both. In contrast to Mesoamericanists with a background in the study of religious symbols, León-Portilla was influenced by Catholic-humanist studies of antiquity and Greek philosophy through his teacher Father Ángel María Garibay Kintana (see Klor de Alva 1992: xix). In León-

5 For reflections on *understanding* in the study of religion, see, e.g., Wach (1926–1933), Kitagawa (1963), Wiebe (1999), Kollmar-Paulenz (2005), and Kirschenmann (2010); see also Dilthey (1959), Weber (1949), or Gadamer (1960).

Portilla's view, the Nahuas contemplated the same cardinal subjects as European philosophers: the "origin of the universe and of life, the mystery of God, the possibility of comprehending what is beyond the realm of experience, free will, life after death, and the meaning of education, history, and art" (León-Portilla 1963: viii; see also Payas 2004: 545–547). Ergo, León-Portilla considered ancient Nahua philosophy as similarly relevant for contemporary Mexico as ancient Greek philosophy is for contemporary Europe.

US cultural astronomer Anthony F. Aveni added a further perspective in the search for commonalities between European and Mesoamerican cultures, a perspective shaped by his background as a natural scientist. According to Aveni, human beings around the world need to orient themselves within the cosmos. Thus, every culture makes systematic observations about nature and the sky. In Aveni's experience, the results of these observations are amazingly similar across all cultures, while the interpretations of these observations are strikingly different, as are the ways in which nature is related to human life (Aveni 2002: 4–5).

Many Mesoamericanists are overcome by doubts whether any cross-cultural understanding is possible. In the 1980s, a younger generation of Mesoamericanists questioned several of León-Portilla's most fundamental theories, including his belief in the authentic expression of pre-Hispanic Nahua thought in the colonial sources. Scholars such as John Bierhorst, Louise M. Burkhart, and José Jorge Klor de Alva critically adapted lines of reasoning from studies of orality, the writing culture debate, literary criticism, and critical theory as well as from poststructuralism and challenged the earlier historiographical optimism. They drew particular attention to two problems: First, the pre-Hispanic Nahuas had a highly cherished rich oral tradition; the written postconquest sources, however, pass on only faint condensations of this tradition. Second, colonial texts such as the *Florentine Codex* are not so much authentic accounts of pre-Hispanic life as European interpretations of it, interpretations that reflect colonial patterns of hegemony (Bierhorst 1985b, Klor de Alva 1989, Burkhart 1989, Klor de Alva 1992).

This fundamental critique accentuated the repercussions of a five-centuries-long history of the colonial gaze, a gaze shaped by the appropriation and domination of Mesoamerican cultures and by a history of linguistic and cultural translations, mutual misunderstandings, and adaptations of cultural elements on both sides (see, e.g., Lockhart 1993a). The Spaniards, on the one side, were often shocked by the Natives otherness, particularly regarding cultural forms of expressions such as dancing. Nevertheless, they also attempted to communicate their ideas. The Natives, on the other side, had much less room for agency, since they were politically and economically severely defeated and

dominated. Art historian Thomas B. Cummins (1995: 152) wondered how communication between Europeans and Natives in the sixteenth century was possible at all considering the general climate of "deceit, mistrust, and lying." Over the centuries, however, communication improved, and the process of cultural interaction, adaptation, and syncretism became unstoppable (see, e.g., Gruzinski 1993).

As contemporary scholars, we might build on this history of interaction and learn from our ancestors' attempts to understand Indigenous cultures and ways of being, if we account for the asymmetric colonial power structures. Consequently, we should no longer regard colonial sources as authentic voices of the pre-Hispanic past, nor as contaminated by colonial influences, but as fascinating accounts of intercultural exchange processes (see Gruzinski 2002). Thus, we might be startled as colonial Native authors suddenly gaze back at us, similarly attempting to cope with cultural difference (Rabasa 2011). Any closer examination of the Natives' gazing back at us might teach us to challenge our own potential misconceptions of how these people lived and saw the world.

Having said that, taking poststructural and postcolonial theories seriously might quickly make us pessimistic about our academic ability to understand cultures we have not been raised in. Following Said's analysis of the Orientalist Other and subsequent theories, we can see only one thing in colonial sources: our own projections, the shadows and Others of our own culture, time period, and individual self. Cecelia Klein summarized:

> In rejecting the idea that the Renaissance's documentary sources—whether visual or textual—constitute a glass window looking out on Europe's "others," more and more authors on both sides of the Atlantic instead have moved to treat those sources more like a modern mirror, as an opaque surface capable only of reflecting back to us an image of ourselves. (Klein 1995: 245–246)

Many scholars feel that the only solution to this problem is to withdraw into ourselves, stop attempting to understand the Other, and focus instead on analyzing our own views of the Other. This is exactly what historian Stephen Greenblatt did with regard to the Americas in his extensive study *Marvelous Possessions* (Greenblatt 1991).

To avoid misunderstanding, I find studies of European images of the Americas not only crucial for academic reflexivity but also highly fascinating and an important part of the study of the European history of ideas. Nevertheless, I find that withdrawing solely into our own images to be a desperate manifestation of narcissism that disguises a form of Eurocentrism that is potentially

even more damaging than earlier European attempts to understand non-Europeans. Some of our ancestors at least *intended* to understand the people they came face-to-face with—even if they did so in a context of asymmetric power relations, with Europeans conquering, dominating, and exploiting the Other while also seeking to legitimize this behavior. The assumption that colonial sources *only* represent European projections of its Other backhandedly reintroduces colonial discourse by robbing the Natives of their agency (see Klein 1995: 263). Many Mexican colonial sources were both commissioned and written by Natives themselves or written by Natives while commissioned by Europeans, or at least presenting information given by Indigenous people even if written by Europeans. To misappropriate these direct Native influences by only emphasizing European contributions seems to me another act of colonialism, fueled by "self-serving, self-centered, and self-indulgent" navel-gazing (Wegman 2012: 45).

In my opinion, there has been enough postmodern self-flagellation. According to a postcolonial epistemology that acknowledges the perspectival character of knowledge, we cannot escape the fact that we are always interpreting the world from our own particular viewpoint. Having said that, I am still far more interested in *attempting* to understand the ancient Nahuas than in understanding solely myself and the European images of the Americas. This is not to say that it is easy. There surely will be unreflected moments of Othering in the process of trying to understand where Nahua being-in-the-world was different or similar to what I know about European being-in-the-world. Regarding the Nahua writing system, for example, there is the danger of Othering when I attempt to show how different it was to what Europeans generally consider as writing. Acknowledging the differences is an important step to overcoming older evaluations but runs the risk of projecting too much difference on it. Am I already Othering when I attempt to show that Nahua writing emphasized aesthetic, bodily, and emotional forms of meaning—in contrast to alphabetical writing emphasizing linguistically expressed reasoning? This crucial question inspires my entire study.

In the end, this study intends to adopts a position of dialogue with the voices contained in historical sources. My understanding of them is deeply shaped by my background; however, they nevertheless continue talking to me and sometimes deeply challenge my naturalized view of the world. It is at least my intention to listen "to other voices talking about experiences alien" to me (Mignolo 2010: 19). This study is a journey taken in the hope that at the end of it I might understand ancient Nahua culture better than I did before starting. Since this is an academic journey based on a certain concept of *science*, this understanding will mainly be happening on an intellectual level and neither

involve the search for spiritual inspiration nor active, practical engagement in the world of contemporary Nahuas.

2 Writing History

History does not exist objectively in the world but has a profoundly constructed character. History is not simply out there. Rather, we experience things differently, remember subjectively, imagine both individually and collectively, and form narratives embedded in hegemonic discourses. This section deals with the specific methodical problems of studying the ancient Nahua sense of reality.

2.1 *Finding Sources*

There are several types of sources about the ancient Nahuas: ethnohistorical accounts, archaeological remains and art-historical objects, ethnographical accounts, and academic interpretations of Nahua culture.

Ethnohistorical accounts are typically the most expressive sources since they contain written or painted remains of their authors' experiences. The Nahuas valued written documents and books highly as the foundation of cultural knowledge. Sadly, only a handful of manuscripts painted in pre-Hispanic style and some hundred documents from colonial times have survived to this day. Important scholarly surveys of the sources were presented by Donald Robertson and John B. Glass (1994, Cline 1972–1975, Glass 1975, Glass and Robertson 1975). Hitherto unknown colonial manuscripts or manuscripts with clear traces of pre-Hispanic style are sometimes discovered in local archives or surface from private ownership, such as the extraordinarily beautiful, early colonial *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* (see Carrasco and Sessions 2007a). Alarmingly, a considerable black market for antique objects and manuscripts exists, including many fakes and forgeries (see Kelker and Bruhns 2010).

The most relevant type of ethnohistorical sources are the pictorial manuscripts written in Indigenous style. In modern scholarship, the codices are generally named after their current place of depository, a famous European owner, the first European scholar working with it, or the place where they were found. To overcome this Eurocentric appropriation, Mixtec scholars Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez suggested renaming the codices according to their contents, protagonists, or place of origins and proposed names for the codices of the *Mixtec Group*, for some of the *Borgia Group*, and for the *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl* (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2004, 2007: xiii–xv, Jansen and Broekhoven 2008: 3). In the following, I use the names Jansen and Pérez

Jiménez gave in combination with their European names to facilitate understanding. Some alphabetical texts that appear to be transcriptions of oral interpretations of pictorial manuscripts also exist, such as the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (Garibay Kintana 1965b, Christensen 2018) and the *Histoyre du Mechique* (Meade and Jiménez Moreno 1961).

Writing in traditional pictorial style seems to have prevailed until the seventeenth century, while slowly adapting to the changed cultural environment. The colonial hybrid documents reflect the needs of the Indigenous population in their interaction with the Spanish; among them are the *Primordial Titles* (see, e.g., Gruzinski 1993: 98–99, 125–145; Lockhart, Sousa, and Wood 2007) and the *Relaciones Geográficas* (see Acuña 1984–1987, Mundy 1996, Pomar 1975).

In the early years after the conquest, the Franciscan missionaries opened colleges to train boys of the local nobility in the European scholastic tradition, which grew into an extraordinary forum for intercultural exchange and mutual inspiration. There, Nahuatl dictionaries and accounts of pre-Hispanic life, history, and culture were compiled (see R. Cortés 2008, Díaz Balsera 2005, McDonough 2014), particularly the *Primeros Memoriales* (Sahagún 1993, 1997), the *Códices Matritenses*, and the *Florentine Codex* by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and his team, including Martín Jacobita of Tlatelolco, Antonio Valeriano from Azcapotzalco, Alonso Vegerano from Cuauhtitlan, and Pedro de San Buenaventura from Cuauhtitlan. The *Cantares Mexicanos* and *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* manuscripts were possibly written by an acculturated Native from Tenochtitlan, maybe Antonio Valeriano (see Bierhorst 1985b: 9, Bierhorst 2009: 1). The alphabetical *Codex Chimalpopoca*, which includes the famous *Leyenda de los Soles*, was written in the second half of the sixteenth century (Bierhorst 1992a, 1992b). At the turn of the seventeenth century, Native authors such as Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1997), Hernando de Alvarado Tezozómoc (1994), and Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin (1997, 1998, 2006) wrote elaborate pre-Hispanic and colonial histories of their people in Nahuatl in Latin script. It was also during this time that the Native (or maybe Mestizo) Jesuit priest Antonio del Rincón (1595) wrote one of the first extensive Nahuatl grammars.

In addition, Spanish conquistadores and several missionaries wrote accounts of colonial events and the history and culture of the Mexican people (H. Cortés 2001, López de Gómara 1979, Díaz del Castillo 2008, Mendieta 1971, Zorita 1963, Torquemada 1976, Motolinía 1985, 1996, Tovar 2001, Durán 1971, 1994, and Acosta 2008). There are several early Nahuatl-Spanish dictionaries, grammars, and linguistic studies (Molina 1977, Olmos 1885, Olmos, León-Portilla, and Silva Galeana 2011, Carochi and Lockhart 2001).

In addition to ethnohistories, archaeological remains and art-historical objects are important sources (for excavations in Mexico City, see, e.g., Matos Moctezuma 1995, Matos Moctezuma 2002, López Luján 2005, Heyden 2002; see also Gándara 2002, 2003). Many of the presumably countless artifacts from pre-Hispanic Mexico were transported after the conquest and spread around the world, ending up in museums or private collections. In most of those cases, their exact provenance and cultural context is lost forever. Other artifacts, such as the delicate Nahua featherworks and textiles, did not withstand the destroying impact of time. Apparently, the Nahuas particularly cherished highly perishable objects such as flowers for their rituals, which are all lost to us.

In recent years, the number of ethnographical studies among contemporary Indigenous communities in Mexico has significantly increased.[6] Combined with ethnographies from earlier decades and centuries, these can be helpful for interpreting pre-Hispanic sources (see, e.g., Monaghan 2000, Martínez González 2011). Ethnographic information can provide crucial ideas for understanding otherwise enigmatic sections of pre-Hispanic pictorial manuscripts (see, e.g., Boone 2007: 159–169).

Forming hypotheses by analogy can be done for diverse cultural domains ranging from domestic technologies to botanical metaphors (Knab 1986), from concepts of time and person (Monaghan 1998) to particular religious ideas. Mesoamerican scholar Alfredo López Austin pointed to the existence of a "hard nucleus" (*núcleo duro*) within the Mesoamerican religious tradition consisting of cultural components "very resistant to historical change" (López Austin 1997: 4–5), particularly in the fundamentals of cosmovision, beliefs around agricultural fertility, forms of ritual behavior, and even basic structures of essential myths (see, e.g., López Austin 1988b: 27–28; see also Carrasco 2017). Similarly, several ethnographers of contemporary Nahuas have shown remarkable resemblances between pre-Hispanic and contemporary cosmovision, belief, and ritual practice (Baéz-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 2000, Florescano 2000, Taggart 2001, A.R. Sandstrom 2010). In a significant move inspired by postcolonial ethics, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez started to collaborate closely with contemporary Mixtecs to develop interpretations of pre-Hispanic sources. In recent years, descendants of Indigenous cultures have challenged some fundamental archaeological interpretations. While differences in research interests and historiographical methods exist (see, e.g., Joyce 2008), scholars have no right of authority over the interpretation of Indigenous peoples' past

6 See, in particular, A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom (1986), A.R. Sandstrom (1991), Gómez Martínez (2002), 't Hooft and Flores Farfán (2012b), A.R. Sandstrom (2017). For a more extensive list, see Martínez González (2011: 22–23).

and should be sensitive to the asymmetric power structures in which mainly non-Indigenous scholars are largely highly privileged and Indigenous people continue to be oppressed and marginalized. As a consequence of this ethical responsibility, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (who is Mixteca herself), their daughter Itandehui Jansen, and their scholarly team from Leiden University (the Netherlands) strive for intercultural dialogue in the academic interpretation of Mixtec codices and also campaign for the Mixtec cultural revival movement (M. Jansen 2008, I. Jansen 2008, Jansen and Broekhoven 2008, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011).

Finally, the last type of sources are the studies and interpretations of Nahua culture by scholars from the last couple of centuries. These sources are highly relevant for this study, because one of its objectives is to critically examine and reassess previous academic representations of Nahua religion and semiotics with regard to potential European misunderstandings and projections.

2.2 *(Re)Constructing Ancient Nahua Culture*

All stages of writing history involve acts of interpretation and construction, from witness perceptions of the original events and the creation of what later becomes a historical source to the historiographical processes of choosing subjects, implementing methods, developing interpretations, and creating representations. The particular historiographical challenges regarding the ancient Nahuas are the scarcity and subjectivity of the sources, the necessity of abstracting from individual sources and homogenizing their perspectives, and finally interpreting the sources.

2.2.1 Listening to a Few Faint Voices

Working with the surviving sources on the ancient Nahuas is like listening to the echoes of a few scattered and faint voices attempting to reach us from the past through the fog of colonialism. Contemporary scholars face two great challenges: first, the scarcity of source material and, second, their often strong subjectivity. The latter is particularly true for the diverse alphabetical colonial sources.

The extent of colonial influence on the sources written or informed by Natives has been hotly debated in Mesoamerican historiography since the late 1980s. The manuscripts Sahagún compiled, in particular, were critically scrutinized. Formerly believed to present "true pre-Hispanic testimonies" (León-Portilla 1992b: 315), they were now regarded as documents written in a context of asymmetric power relations between the colonizing inquirer and the colonized supplier. This context presumably led to many distortions based on the European nature of the questions, mutual misunderstandings, and social

desirability biases. The Natives also attempted to present their culture in a positive light according to European standards while simultaneously protecting some of their cherished cultural knowledge from the invaders (Klor de Alva 1988, Burkhart 1989). Furthermore, the Natives' own view of their pre-Hispanic past had also fundamentally changed after the experience of the conquest. This is particularly obvious in the colonial Native interpretations of the following three topics: the behavior of the last Mexica king, Motecuhzoma II, during the conquest, the (retrospect) recognition of omens foretelling the disastrous destruction of Mesoamerican civilizations, and the (potential) identification of Hernán Cortés with the returning god Quetzalcoatl.[7] The Native chroniclers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were even more strongly acculturated to the European scholastic tradition and reinterpreted and vindicated their pre-Hispanic ancestry through the new cultural lens (see Lee 2008: 19–45, Schroeder 2010c).

Similarly, sources written by the conquistadores and the missionaries are strongly shaped by their authors' respective motivations and by their European medieval or early modern world view (see Arnold 1999: 204, 224). We should not forget that the Spaniards in Mexico at that time were confronted with the immense problem of linguistic and cultural translation and probably did not often have the slightest clue of what was happening before their eyes (see Clendinnen 1990: 107–110). This also refers to the "simple" recount of Native narratives of pre-Hispanic historical accounts, since the Spaniards were largely unaware of the differences between European and Mesoamerican concepts of history and historiography. The Mexica used many cultural metaphors and images in their historical narratives and explained the cosmological significance of events through allegories with relevant myths. It is largely impossible to separate "factual" events from the "symbolic" images through which they were explained and understood. Within the Nahua conceptualization of time and history, both seem to be inextricably and essentially intertwined. Spaniards such as Diego Durán heavily Europeanized the accounts by omitting divine interventions or seemingly supernatural events and by either taking many of the metaphorical happenings at face value or ignoring them altogether (Umberger 2007; see also 2002).

The traditional pictorial histories, in contrast, closely convey Indigenous views of history and time. However, we admittedly have great difficulties in reading and understanding them. Based on the alphabetical glosses in colonial hybrid sources and the stories recounted in alphabetical sources, scholars have

7 For different positions about this identification, see Sahagún (1975: XII), Todorov (1984), Lockhart (1993b, 1994), Carrasco (2000).

been able to identify some of the events in Nahua pictorial annals. Scholars from Jansen and Pérez Jiménez's team and their Mixtec friends have achieved much in deciphering codices from the *Mixtec Group* by using a cleverly devised, sophisticated iconographical method (see Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011: 186–198; see also Oudijk 2011). Similarly, art historian Elizabeth H. Boone (2000, 2007) has done groundbreaking analyses of the several genres in pictorial sources across the different groups. Nevertheless, we are far from really understanding pictorial sources, let alone knowing much about the Indigenous practices of oral and performative interpretation.

Archaeological remains, properly interpreted, convey information about the Nahuas' material living conditions and the material manifestations of their cosmologies. However, these sources do not "talk" to us as the authors of texts do; they only contain traces of the behavior, emotions, and thoughts of their manufacturers and users. To learn something about the less tangible aspects of a culture, archaeologists often need to draw inferences from other sources, such as ethnohistorical or ethnographical accounts. The validity of the methods used for these interpretations is a subject of recurring debate not only within archaeology but also in popular and spiritual discourses.

Art-historical objects pose a similar problem. Some large stone statues from Tenochtitlan show strings of pictorial signs that can be read similarly to codices. These texts present dates; names; events, such as conquests of neighboring communities (Stone of Tizoc); cultural practices, such as the ritual dedication of temples (Dedication Stone of the Templo Mayor); or cosmological concepts, such as cycles of time (the Calendar Stone, or the Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada). Other statues show protagonists we know from myths recounted in alphabetical sources, such as the story about the fight between *Huitzilopochtli* and his sister *Coyolxauhqui* on the mountain *Coatepec* (on the Stone of Coyolxauhqui). Furthermore, there are recurring cultural motifs, such as snakes, sculls, flayed human skin, or the feathered serpent. Nevertheless, we know little about the historical, cultural, and performative context of these artifacts and even less about the emotional impact of specific works of art[8] on the ancient Nahuas. Some art historians from all stages of the history of the discipline have searched for universal criteria for interpreting historic and ethnic material objects and for evaluating their aesthetic value. Suggestions about universals of aesthetic judgment, as proposed by Kant (1987), are no longer supported by postmodernists, poststructuralists, and postcolonialists, who emphasize

8 In the following, I use the concept of *art* as an umbrella term for "human creative expression" (Apostolos-Cappadona 2017: section 1) in many different media, such as paintings, textiles, nonutilitarian objects, jewelry, or architecture.

the influence of cultural, social, and individual taste. In addition, it has been deemed difficult to understand the aesthetic meaning of material objects as their manufacturers and subsequent users perceived it.

2.2.2 Abstracting and Homogenizing

In short, the crucial problem is how to (re)construct something like a coherent "culture" while accounting for the perspectives of the individual sources. Reacting to this problem, many Mesoamerican scholars have recently shied away from the sometimes sweeping assessments of "the Aztec civilization" undertaken by earlier generations. Rather, recent scholarship has concentrated on analyzing individual sources or covering small-scale topics (e.g., Schroeder 2010c). Undeniably, the more we abstract from particular sources, the more we homogenize and generalize. The validity and cogency of interpretations, however, is always bound to their ability to remain truthful to the results of the analyses of particular sources.

López Austin was one of the first to explicitly acknowledge a typical problem that Mesoamericanists confront: the inconsistency, or even contrariness, of information presented across the different sources. At the heart of this problem lies our need to form a consistent and coherent image of one culture despite all variation and diversity. The idea of a culture's general homogenous and monolithic nature shaped many scholarly accounts of cultures and religions in the twentieth century and has correctly been criticized within the last decades (see, e.g., Keesing 1974, Keesing 1994, Goodenough 1994). It nevertheless still makes sense to speak of a culture as a whole, if we refer to shared technologies, characteristics of material culture, and a common world view and ideology. This image of a *culture* is an abstract notion that blends a myriad of individual behaviors and thoughts and refers to a shared knowledge reservoir that includes a collective history, an imagined future, and often a sense of identity (for this discussion, see, e.g., Anderson 1983; for Mesoamerica, see López Austin 1988b: 8–17, 407–420). This *culture* is a discourse field typically characterized by much diversity, fluidity, inconsistency, and a certain amount of contrariness, even on the individual level. Besides López Austin, Gruzinski (1993: 284) drew attention to this fact, particularly regarding the hot pot of colonial culture but also referring to pre-Hispanic culture. Many scholars have recently realized that the pre-Hispanic Aztec civilization was manifold and culturally complex. It was furthermore a society rapidly expanding, diversifying, and transforming, particularly during the last century before the Spanish conquest (Berdan 2014: 29).

Consequently, to present Nahua culture in a general sense, we need to homogenize individual, social, regional, and ethnic variations. By now, we know

that Sahagún's informants presented views not only from particular towns (such as Texcoco) but also predominantly from the nobility (Smith 2012: 19, 307). Since living conditions and world views varied noticeably between social classes and professions, the surviving sources tell us only part of the story. There seem to have been considerable differences in cultural concepts and ritual performances between the many localities, towns, regions, and ethnic groups. Personal cultural identity was bound more to the local *altepetl* (town) or even *calpulli* (town quarter) than to a shared Aztec civilization (Berdan 2014: 26). Local settlements in the Postclassic Period and within the so-called Aztec Empire interacted with one another in complex manners, and certainly large parts of the country shared some fundamental, and even some specific, cultural traits. Sweeping the corpus of sources in their large variety, we find many astonishing similarities bridging historical and regional differences. Since the triangulation of pictorial, archaeological, art-historical, and written sources produces so many recurring motifs, images, stories, and concepts, it appears legitimate to talk about one Nahua culture.

The complexity of religious behavior and ritual performances, however, poses a further and slightly different problem. The surviving accounts of the *veintena* festivals in and around Tenochtitlan show that the Nahuas spent much effort, time, and resources on large-scale, multimedia ritual events, ones that activated an immense reservoir of cultural symbols and embodiments. Highly skilled and rigorously trained priests coordinated the ritual contributions from many local groups and participants. Some priests were apparently responsible for the extraordinary project management on which the complete organization of these events relied (Clendinnen 1991: 241, 258). Considering the large number of people involved, each with their own visions, attitudes, and performances, I doubt whether there was at least one person who had a complete overview and conscious understanding of all the distinctive details of these performances. Moreover, there were multimedia performances resting on and stimulating knowledge residing in the body, the senses, and the emotions in addition to the intellect (see Arnold 1999: 204, Clendinnen 1991: 236–263, Tomlinson 1996). Scholars, in contrast, almost exclusively attempt to (re)construct these performances according to intellectual rules of logical reasoning and thus miss many of their essential characteristics.

2.2.3 (Re)Constructing and Interpreting

In historiographical work, homogenizing and generalizing is followed by (re)constructing and interpreting. Following postmodern and postcolonial historiographical insights, we should probably speak of *con*structing rather than of *re*constructing and recognize this process as a highly interpretative (or even projective) act.

The first instance where this becomes obvious is the process of translation. Nahuatl is a language capable of profound subtleness, rich imagery, and high sophistication, reaching dizzying heights in the several genres of elegant speech. Its complex strings of expressed concepts are often extremely difficult to understand for non-Nahuatl speakers, let alone translating them into European languages. In some cases, the interpretation of a complete section hinges on the translation of a single word. Translation decisions might cumulate and lead to extremely diverging interpretations of particular texts and, moreover, to astonishingly different accounts of Nahua religion and philosophy, as is the case with Bierhorst's translation and interpretation of the *Cantares Mexicanos* in contrast to León-Portilla's (see Lockhart 1991a: 123–129). Furthermore, aspects such as the tonality of the spoken word and accompanying gestures, dance, performance, and music are generally lost, although highly relevant for any deeper understanding.

The second instance demonstrating the problematic nature of interpretation is the character of the pictorial sources, which are notoriously difficult to interpret consistently (see Boone 2007: 62). The reason for this is not only our inadequate ability to decipher them but their very nature of being poly- and multivalent. They deliberately offer many points of departure for extremely different readings and applications to current situations. In several cases, even the genre to which a section of a codex might belong eludes us. For example, one section of the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl* (folios 29–46, Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1993) has been interpreted disparately either as the recording of a legendary myth, as an astronomical chart, as a narrative cosmology, as the description of a historical ritual performance at a particular place, or, finally, as a ritual prescript (Boone 2007: 171–174). Sometimes, even single glyphic images might elude our understanding. Take, for example, the large anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images dominating the pages of the calendar *trecenas* (weeks of thirteen days) in the *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl*. These images have been interpreted as the "patron deities" of each *trecena*, ever since the first Spaniards translated particular Nahuatl concepts with the European notion of "deities" and since Sahagún compared similar images with the deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon. Analogously, every image or statue that exhibits certain nonrealistic, mixed-breed features is typically interpreted as representing deities. Only rarely is it questioned whether this interpretation as "deities" indeed captures the Nahua world view.

Third, Nahua rituals are notoriously difficult to interpret—leaving aside for a moment the entire debate in ritual studies about the "meaning" of rituals. Some scholars of Mesoamerican religion used hermeneutic methods, resulting in interpretations I find unconvincing because they sometimes depart too

significantly from the original (sparse) information provided in the respective sources they are based upon. For example, Guilhem Olivier (2002) worked with accounts about the *veintena Toxcatl* in book two of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1981: 11). We know that in this ritual, a young man acted as the representative of the god *Tezcatlipoca* and was obliged to play the flute on his journey through the crowds until he climbed the steps of a temple, broke his (or several) flute(s), and was sacrificed when reaching the top. However, the sources do not give us a direct explanation of any meanings associated with the ritual. Olivier freely interpreted this ritual as a reenactment of the myth about the origin of music, merely because of the existence of the flute(s). In a different book, Olivier (2003) mentioned an archaeological find at Alta Vista (a place from the Classic Period) of a young man's bones and a broken flute lying close to an obsidian mirror. According to his interpretation of the findings, (1) the young men was sacrificed, (2) the flute was broken ritually, and (3) the obsidian mirror refers to an early belief in Tezcatlipoca (because Tezcatlipoca is associated in the Postclassic with the obsidian mirror). Because the *veintena Toxcatl*, uses the same three elements—a young men embodying Tezcatlipoca breaks (a) flute(s) and is sacrificed—Olivier then concludes that at Alta Vista the same myth about Tezcatlipoca and music was reenacted as in the *veintena Toxcatl*, many centuries before the Aztec civilization (Olivier 2003: 200). Even accounting for historical change, a similar ritual could have taken place at Alta Vista, but having said that, it could also mean something completely different.

Finally, scholars have not only attempted to *interpret* Nahua culture, that is, to understand its internal logic, but also to causally *explain* it. In some of these explanatory models, only one factor is believed to determine the principles of a complete culture. The school of New Archaeology, for example, attempted to explain "the epiphenomenal elements of cultural life (including state formation, warfare, religion, etc.)" (Arnold 1999: 8) in Mesoamerica by referring (exclusively) to the respective environmental conditions. As illuminating as this approach is, its "ecological determinism" (Arnold 1999: 9) runs short of accounting for the existent cultural diversity in Mesoamerica and for the complexity of human behavior in general. Analogously, Marvin Harris (1977) and Michael Harner (1977) explained Aztec human sacrifice (including cannibalism) as a simple response to protein deficiency. Some scholars of religion, in contrast, explained human sacrifice (exclusively) as the enactment of a religious vision in which the balance of the cosmos must be ensured by sacrificing human energy (Caso 1958, Carrasco 1995). Thus, symbolic approaches explain behavior by reference not to biology and the natural environment but to ideology and religion. Different explanatory approaches lead to sometimes diametrically opposed interpretations of complete cultures. Problematically,

the motivations for human beings to act as they do are far too complex and multifactorial for a single explanation to work. Accordingly, we should refrain from single explanations of complete cultures and not play off ideological motivations to believe and act against political ones, or social causes against natural ones for societies to evolve (see Hassig 2001, López Austin 1988b: 8–17, 407–420). Finally, the intention of this study is to understand and explain the internal logic of Nahua culture rather than to present external explanations.

To conclude, as soon as we attempt to understand sources, generalize information gathered from various materials, and attempt to construct some underlying characteristics of a culture believed to have been shared by several individuals and groups, we enter the world of interpretation (and projection). The resulting descriptions and theories are increasingly abstract and probably different from what any individual of the respective culture would have thought because we are interpreting on the grounds of our own knowledge and the knowledge of all the scholars who worked before us on a similar subject. While it is my intention to stay close and truthful to the primary sources, I will also use my scholarly predecessors' interpretations and sometimes reach highly speculative ground. The aim is to find an interpretation that accounts for the seeming incomprehensibilities, incongruities, and contradictions within and across the sources and to explain the information contained within the material in a better way than earlier interpretations could as well as to base this interpretation on criteria such as empirical adequacy, logical consistency, generality, fecundity, and explanatory power (see Maffie 2014: 9). Therein, I follow James Maffie's view: "Although there is admittedly no direct empirical evidence for our interpretative claims about Aztec metaphysics … there is nevertheless … indirect evidence for deciding between better and worse interpretations relative to the foregoing criteria of theory choice" (Maffie 2014: 11).

3 Clarifying Perspectives and Objectives

In this chapter on methodology, thus far, we have discussed epistemological issues raised by postcolonial theory and methodological issues regarding the process of writing Nahua history. Now, I would like to clarify my theoretical perspectives and formulate the study's objectives. Since my strongest disciplinary roots are in the study of religion, the debates and theoretical discussions in this discourse field form the backbone of my perspective. The study of religion has been dominated by a strong textual approach. Therefore, I first provide a short overview on the historical reasons and peculiarities of this preoccupation with texts. Complementing the short presentation of the movements of

Visual Religion, Material Religion, and the Aesthetics of Religion in the introduction, this section discusses the dominant theoretical positions from this field. One of this study's main objectives relates to the concept of *scripture*. After briefly outlining traditional concepts of scripture in the study of religion, I argue for changing this perspective based on the Aesthetics of Religion so as to include and analyze material and bodily aspects of religious text practices and Indigenous semiotic theories. This paves the way for a final clarification of this study's objectives, ending with a brief discussion about the problems of interdisciplinary work and a summary of this study's methodology.

3.1 *The Textual Approach in the Study of Religion*

The study of religion has been dominated by a strong textual approach, in particular, the Dutch, Scandinavian, and German traditions. This applies first to the strong predilection for the exegesis of written or at least verbal sources—at best in the form of "sacred scriptures" or the "theologies of the Niebuhrs, Barths, and Tillichs of the world" (Vásquez 2011: 1)—and second to the preponderance of textual theoretical concepts of *religion*. Practice, materiality, and the body, in contrast, have played only a minor role in this discipline. The discipline has even incorporated an antagonism between religion and things, which resonates "with a set of related oppositions that privilege spirit over matter, belief above ritual, content above form, mind above body, and inward contemplation above 'mere' outward action" (Houtman and Meyer 2012a: 1).

This bias has several interwoven roots in the European history of religion and in the later history of the academic study of religion. One of these roots is the formation of several philologies in the eighteenth century paired with the emergence of historicism in the nineteenth century within a context of (late colonial) interest in the histories and knowledge systems of ancient and non-European civilizations (Krüger 2012: 167). The translations of the Zend-Avesta and the Upanishads by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, along with Jean-François Champollion's deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, can be considered one of the cornerstones of the academic study of religion (Kippenberg 1997). These philological approaches culminated in Friedrich Max Müller's idea to collect the canonic religious writings of the world's most relevant (Asian) civilizations and make them available to scholars and the public in the printed *Sacred Books of the East* (Müller 1879–1910). In these formative years of the discipline, many scholars in archaeology, classical and ancient studies, or anthropology also used nontextual sources. Some of the classical theories of religion—for example, the ones William Robertson Smith, Arnold van Gennep, or Émile Durkheim established—already acknowledged the role of ritual, practice, and the body (see Vásquez 2011: 231–257). However, it was the focus on

belief—as in Edward Burnett Tylor's famous definition of *religion* as "belief in Spiritual Beings" (Tylor 1871: 383)—that most shaped the discipline.

Early scholars of religion working in Protestant theology departments strongly encouraged this trend. Protestantism had fundamentally changed the European history of ideas with its reference to the Biblical scriptures as the sole foundation for religious authority (see Kort 2017). Stimulated and nursed by the invention of the printing press and by the spreading European literacy, texts became the hallmarks of Western educational ideals and authoritative containers of cultural knowledge (Febvre and Martin 1958, Eisenstein 1979, McLuhan 2002). At the same time, Protestantism drew on ideas of Paulinian theology and emphasized the interiority and privacy of the individual's religious consciousness. Alongside a complex reception history that included Augustine, Descartes, Luther, and Schleiermacher (Vásquez 2011: 29), the idea of religion as a private affair strongly shaped modern notions of *religion*. In a similar way, the phenomenology of religion—one of the most important schools within the study of religion—reactivated European idealism and subjectivism, combining them with (neo-)Platonian essentialism, Kant's internalism, and the search for the timeless truths of religion (Vásquez 2011: 8, 87–88). In the changing context of multicultural societies from the 1950s on, scholars such as Smart or W. C. Smith drew on this tradition and defined belief and faith as religion's core. These ideas were universalized in the construct of the so-called world religions (Vásquez 2011: 105–107). The main sources for analyzing these "world religions" were seen in their "sacred scriptures" (Coward 1988, 2000, Peters 2007, Price 2010, Bowker 2012; for a critique, see Masuzawa 2005).

There have been several critiques of these approaches as well as countermovements to these kinds of "crypto-theological" approaches. As in Gavin Flood's *Beyond Phenomenology* (1999), the critiques were often inspired by the linguistic turn and several strands of social constructivism. They deconstructed the prevailing essentialism in theories of religion and drew attention to the social, political, and historical contexts of religious phenomena and to the power relations working in religious discourses. These complete redrafts of *religion* showed a strong emphasis on textuality and on processes of signification. All kinds of practices, including body practices, were analyzed as forms of discourse (Vásquez 2011: 123–147). Some social constructivists even stated that "there is nothing outside the text," according to a famous quote from Derrida (1974: 163; see also Vásquez 2011: 13).[9] This perspective coincided with theories

9 There is some disagreement as to whether Derrida's theory was really that radically textualized. Derrida himself wished to have the French original of the phrase "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" understood as "there is nothing outside context" (Derrida 1988: 136). Nevertheless, there

of *religion* such as the one proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973), who understood culture as a text to be read. Thus, texts were not only the main sources scholars of religion used, but anthropologists of religion conceptualized practice and culture as symbol systems analogous to a text to be deciphered and interpreted by the scholar.

Influenced by these trends, the study of religion became predominantly concerned not only with "sacred scripture" but with "symbols, beliefs, narratives and cosmologies" (Vásquez 2011: 15) and with the "meaning" of it all. The many different forms of this "suffocating textualism" (Vásquez 2011: 15) in the contemporary study of religion are shaped by distinctive disciplinary affiliations, be it the contiguousness to Biblical studies and theology in the United States, the background in antique studies and philologies in the German history of religion, or the inspiration of French postmodern discourse theory. They all share a predominance of textual approaches, sources, and theories.

3.2 *Studying Visual Religion, Material Religion, and the Aesthetics of Religion*

The current academic movements of Visual Religion, Material Religion, and the Aesthetics of Religion intend to overcome this confinement to texts by opening up to sensory and body experience, materiality, and the use of media. I myself became interested in these subjects during my graduate studies. The efficacy of music in religious rituals had always fascinated me. Accordingly, I wrote my PhD thesis about religion and music in contemporary spirituality in Glastonbury, England (Laack 2011). During that time, a small group of scholars of religion in Germany and Switzerland started to rediscover the role of aesthetics in religion, inspired by a 1988 article in the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (*Handbook of Critical Terms in the Study of Religion*, Cancik, Gladigow, and Laubscher 1988). This article (Cancik and Mohr 1988) argued for the study of *Religionsästhetik* (Aesthetics of Religion) as a new subdiscipline of *Religionswissenschaft*. The journal *Visible Religion*, started by Hans G. Kippenberg, L. P. van den Bosch, L. Leertouwer, and H. A. Witte, survived only a short while (Kippenberg et al. 1982–1990; see also Uehlinger 2006). In the following years, a brief essay written by Daniel Münster (2001) and a handful of further studies were published in this research field in Germany (Mohr 2000, Lanwerd 2002, 2003, Koch 2004, Prohl 2006, Wilke 2008, Wilke and Moebus 2011, Mohn 2012). In 2007, a working group affiliated with the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Religionswissenschaft* (German Association for the Study of

is no denying that approaches like his or the one by Judith Butler (see Vásquez 2011: 143–147, 225–229) have a strong textual bias, even if they did not want to reduce everything to it.

Religion) was founded and has met regularly since then. The association's joint publications up to now include a special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Europe* (4/1, 2011) on "Museality as a Critical Term for the Aesthetics of Religion" and an edited volume on imagination, aesthetics, and religion (Wilke and Traut 2015).

In 2013, the group went international with a conference at Groningen University and published the proceedings in the edited volume *Aesthetics of Religion. A Connective Concept* (Grieser and Johnston 2017a). The group is currently in the process of publishing *The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Cultural and Cognitive Aesthetics of Religion* (Koch and Wilkens 2019). The Aesthetics of Religion approach draws on the Aristotelean notion of *aisthêsis*, referring to knowledge based on sensory perception, rather than on the dominant Platonic tradition that relates "the sensory to the experience of beauty" (Grieser and Johnston 2017b: 9). It also draws on the ideas of German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who argues for *aesthetics* as a science of sensory cognition (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*) (Grieser and Johnston 2017b: 9). While the term *aesthetics of religion* refers to the academic theoretical approach, *religious aesthetics* is used to designate the "cultural habits of perception" developed within religious traditions and their repertoire of practices, codes, and products creating meaning from sensory impressions (Grieser 2017: section 2). As such, each religious tradition forms a distinctive ensemble of aesthetic forms and styles, for example, in the use of colors, movements, clothing, architecture, or visual arts. Alexandra Grieser argued for understanding the *aesthetics of religion* as a connective concept that relates several academic disciplines and their epistemological cultures and that includes historical, sensory, and interpretative approaches for analyzing "how religion becomes culturally and historically 'effective' beyond categories of doctrines, confession, and belief" (Grieser 2017: section 3). In this concept, sensation, perception, and materiality are linked with the process of meaning-making (or *semiosis*) by emphasizing "the interrelation between bodily practice and cultural systems of interpretation" (Grieser 2017: section 3). In Grieser's words, meaning-making is

> determined by the biological, evolution-based sensory apparatus of a human being *as well as* by the (material) features of the reality perceived, *and* by the cultural institutions that organize, regulate, and restrict social formations, for example, interpretative systems, media, technologies, and cultural techniques such as reading, writing, or cooking, and the institutions which teach, judge, and determine what and how we think, feel, or eat. (Grieser 2017: section 4.1, emphasis in original)

In addition to this Aesthetics of Religion approach, Swiss scholars promoted the study of visual religion (Uehlinger 2000; Beinhauer-Köhler, Pezzoli-Olgiati, and Valentin 2010; Pezzoli-Olgiati and Rowland 2011) and the interrelations between media and religious traditions (Peter Bräunlein 2004b, 2016, Krüger 2012). In the Netherlands, Birgit Meyer chaired a group working on the use of media in religions globally (Meyer 2009a). In recent years, Meyer was one of the strongest European advocators of Material Religion as a new research field (Meyer 2008, Houtman and Meyer 2012c).

In the United States, the research field has developed independently from Europe, and only recently have cross-Atlantic collaborations grown. David Morgan was one of the first to systematically research visual religion without any aesthetic judgment. With a background in art history, he turned his scholarly attention away from the traditional iconographic style analyses of objects of *fine arts* to visual culture, researching the cultural history of popular culture and practices and the everyday use of visual images as they contribute to the "social construction of reality" (Morgan 1998: xv, 17):

> Rather than confining one's attention to works of art and the history of style, one might investigate the social functions of images, their role in ritual and ceremony, their constellation of viewers with respect to positions of status, gender, or race. And, where possible, one should situate an image within its history of reception, refusing to see it as a fixed, aesthetically permanent entity, but seeing it instead as a social phenomenon defined by an ongoing history of thought and practice. This is the study of visual culture, which has much to offer the study of religion. (Morgan 2005: 21)

Following this approach, Morgan studied the popular and everyday use of visual religious media primarily within the field of US, mainly Christian, religiosity and theorized "visual piety," the "sacred gaze," and the "embodied eye" (Morgan 1998, 2005, 2012). He was soon joined by a younger generation of scholars interested in popular culture as used by religious practitioners around the world and its social and political contexts. Similar to Morgan, these scholars devised the new interdisciplinary Visual Religion research field, wishing to include "established disciplines like art history, graphic design, cultural anthropology, and sociology and newer fields of study like gender studies and ethnic studies, among others" (Plate 2002a: 8) .

The field of visual religion soon expanded to material religion in general by referring to all types of materiality and mediality in the context of religion. In 2003, the academic journal *Material Religion* was founded and presents one of

the most relevant international collaborations in the field to this day (see Meyer et al. 2010). On this background, the Yale Initiative for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion (MAVCOR) started its first project cycle in 2008, inspired to research "the senses and sensory controversies in material religious practice."[10] This large network of scholars promotes interdisciplinary conversation and research projects on all kinds of topics referring to sensory cultures of religions as well as to visual and material practices and their economies and politics within a context of secularization theories. The rich volume *Sensational Religion*, edited by Sally M. Promey (2014), brilliantly captures the research progress of some of this group's scholars.

In 2011, Vásquez published his groundbreaking materialist theory of religion, *More Than Belief*. In this monograph, Vásquez provided both a profound critique of religious study's textualism and a dense, genealogical analysis of alternative materialist approaches and theories in the history of the discipline. Solidly based on this contextual foundation, Vásquez finally proposed his own ideas on how to integrate historical theories along with current approaches—for example, those from cognitive sciences—into the study of religion. In doing so, he developed a strong frame for a new, materialist theory of religion.

According to the perspective of several scholars in the field of Material Religion, this label seems to be an umbrella term. As such, it covers many aspects of materiality in the sense of material objects, artifacts, and objects of art, including the practices around them; performance, rituals, and the use of space; and the role of the body and its many senses in religions, in general and in particular. It finally also includes religious aesthetics understood as religious sense hierarchies and tools to stimulate or deprive certain senses (Morgan 2010b, 2010a, Prohl 2012). In that usage, Visual Religion is the most studied subfield of Material Religion, with similar fields such as Acoustic Religion or Auditory Religion still to be founded. In general, the Material Religion and Aesthetics of Religion approaches share the same research interests but view them from different angles. While Material Religion's initial focus was on matter and materiality, including practices around material forms, the Aesthetics of Religion took off from sensory cognition to study "the materiality of bodies, things, and processes of religious practice" and "the processes by which 'matter' is modified, perceived, and made meaningful in religious ways" (Grieser 2017: section 4.1).

One of the main theoretical approaches in the field Material Religion understands the concept of *media* in a broad manner. Modern technological

10 "About," Center for the Study of Material & Visual Cultures of Religion, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://mavcor.yale.edu/about>.

mass media (such as television, the internet, etc.) are included along with everything people use to convey a certain message, to mediate between several fields of human experience, or to "bridge the gap separating the levels" of "humans and some spiritual, divine, or transcendental force" (Meyer et al. 2010: 210). Hence, materiality is given an essential role in religions: to mediate and materialize what is otherwise nontangible and transcendent (Meyer 2009b: 11, Houtman and Meyer 2012a: 7). This move is thought to break free from former concepts of *religion*, still dominating the discipline, in which some form of transcendency is regarded as the "irreducible core" of religion, with materiality, consequently, only "*added* to a religion" (Meyer et al. 2010: 209, emphasis in original). In contrast, attention is drawn to the fundamentally corporeal nature of human experience and cultural behavior, which includes the need to make the transcendent tangible. "In this understanding, media ... are intrinsic to religion" (Meyer et al. 2010: 210; see also Houtman and Meyer 2012b: xv, 7).

This interpretation is certainly a valid theory for many religions, particularly from cultures heavily shaped by Christianity. It accomplishes much on the way to disengaging religious study's antisomatism and antimaterialism. Nevertheless, it still regards "transcendence" or some kind of "beyond" as a category relevant for any universal definition of *religion*, even though this "transcendence" is now seen in its interdependency with materiality. Dick Houtman is aware of the fact that this understanding of Material Religion is "indebted to Protestant theology and its notion of God as wholly Other, and thus smuggling a typically Christian understanding in our inquiries" (Houtman and Meyer 2012a: 4).

As a consequence, it is by no means taken for granted that this concept of *religion* based on the correlation of transcendence and immanence is adequate for interpreting non-European, non-Western culture's conceptualization of the world, truth, or the role of the senses in understanding the essence or nature of reality. Rather, it appears to be a retrograde step compared to the substantial critique voiced against the Western/European, Christian, and Protestant shapings of the concept of *religion*. Houtman and Meyer's approach is based on the theory that human beings need to make transcendence corporeal. In my opinion, this argument is not the prerequisite for changing our scholarly perspective from the textual to the aesthetic, medial, sensorial, and bodily aspects of religion. Any critically reflected, discursive understanding of *religion* that does not refer to transcendence in its substantial definition can equally take these aspects into account.

With regard to the Nahuas, the research question based on Houtman and Meyer's approach would be: How is transcendence aesthetically and bodily mediated in Nahua religion? However, I rather argue for a discursive

understanding of *religion* leading to the following research questions: Does the Nahua sense of reality, as it is embodied and aesthetically experienced, include any concept of *transcendence*? And if it does not, what concept of *reality* did they imagine to experience sensorially and aesthetically? In the end, the answers to these questions and the results of the investigation of the ancient Nahua culture will help to expand and improve the existing theories of materiality and aesthetics in the study of religion.

3.3 *Studying Scripture*

This study takes its main theoretical approach from the field of the Aesthetics of Religion. Even though it is concerned with scripture, it does so in a way that departs from and challenges traditional concepts of *scripture*. To clarify this approach, some traditional definitions of the concept of *scripture* are reviewed first.

3.3.1 Traditional Concepts of *Scripture*

Because the term *scripture*, in the sense of "text(s) revered by a religious tradition as sacred and authoritative" (Graham 2017: abstract), plays such an important role in Christianity, its epistemological nature has been reflected upon and its role for theology and religious lay practice has been greatly discussed within the European history of religion. Within this sophisticated discourse, a core idea appears to have shaped modern notions of alphabetical texts. This idea regards the (holy) book as an authoritative container for religious knowledge presenting absolute and final truth. Accordingly, the act of reading its letters and words is one of the prime methods for achieving wisdom and religious illumination (see Mignolo 1994b: 253–255). This idea also shaped the concept of *scripture* as it evolved in the study of religion. Thus, Müller's project *Sacred Books of the East* was inspired by the colonial "discovery" of the rich religious knowledge traditions of foreign cultures. Projecting the European idea of the *holy book* onto these cultures, publishing their sacred scripture was considered a prime way for Europeans to learn about the rich wisdom of the world's religions. Subsequently, the idea of scripture as the core of the world's religions was exported back to the colonies, where it was adopted. Consequently, (invented) traditions such as "Hinduism" became strongly scripturalized (Sugirtharajah 2008: 62–63). Müller also formulated the comparative category of "book religions"—modeled after the Islamic idea of religions of the book (see Krüger 2012: 204). Under this category he counted Judaism, Christianity, and Islam but also Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, and Taoism as presenting the "aristocracy" of all religions (Müller 1874: 95).

In the emerging study of religion in central Europe, the concept of *scripture* was given a dominant position. It was taken up by early Dutch historians of

religion, such as Chantepie de la Saussaye (1887), and promoted by scholars from the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* around the turn of the century. It was adapted into the phenomenology of religion and received a certain kind of popularity in the middle of the twentieth century (see, e.g., Mensching 1937, Bertholet 1949, Lanczkowski 1956). Finally, it inspired German scholars of religion such as Gustav Mensching, Friedrich Heiler, and Carsten Colpe to develop a typology of religions according to the religion's (assumed) intrinsic nature. The category of *book religions*, formed this time after Christianity with the revealed word of God at its heart, received a central place in this typology (Krüger 2012: 193–200). The recent approach to scripture ("Heilige Schriften") by Daniela C. Luft (2014), discussed for the context of the collaborative research project on material text cultures ("Materiale Textkulturen") at Heidelberg University, largely follows this general perspective.

The exact definition and delimitation of *scripture* has been debated from the beginning (Krüger 2012: 196–198). The core of the category is the perceived "sacrality" of a text, thus referring to the "Bibles" of the world, that is, the sacred, authoritative texts of the respective religions. Is this sacrality an ontological quality, as phenomenologists believed? Are there universal criteria for the scholar to define the degree of "sacrality" of a text? Or should the scholar depend on what is considered to be a "sacred" text in the respective (religious) traditions? Should commentaries and theological treatises be included in the category of *scripture*? Or should *all* religious texts be included, even those written by lay people?

In Germany, the category of *scripture* is commonly used in introductory books to the history of the study of religion (see, e.g., Tworuschka 2000, Bultmann, März, and Makrides 2004, Tworuschka 2003; see also Kablitz and Markschies 2013), largely without reflecting its roots in phenomenology or in the theological schemes of the *Allgemeine Religionsgeschichte* (General History of Religion) approach. The only problem typically discussed in these introductory books is which texts to include in presenting the "scriptures" of the "world religions." This decision was left largely to the experts of the particular tradition who wrote the respective chapters (see Krüger 2012: 195–196).

One of the most recent attempts to "specify" the concept of *scripture* and to "sensitize to its context in media history" was presented by historian of religions Jörg Rüpke (2007: 44, translations mine). He also referred to the many inconsistencies regarding whether to include only canonized texts into the category or also religious texts such as commentaries. He furthermore realized that almost every religion uses some kind of text, a fact that, in his view, renders the category *book religions* obsolete (Rüpke 2007: 46). In conclusion, Rüpke suggested maintaining the concept of *scripture* but dismissing its exact

definition. He furthermore proposed discussing how "religion is changed by the implementation of writing" (Rüpke 2007: 48). Regarding this theoretical topic, he subsequently restated arguments from the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (see Krüger 2012: 201) and from the later orality–literacy debate. He did so, however, without giving either theoretical references to these approaches or primary evidence from the history of religion to corroborate his theories. According to Rüpke, religions using scripture have more success in proselytizing and in transmitting their ideas over longer stretches of time. Furthermore, religions using scripture are the only religions that provide the conditions for (1) the development of intellectual complexity and reflexivity, (2) the emergence of religious critique and heretical sects, and (3) the rise of religion as a differentiated system within society (Rüpke 2007: 46–50). In sum, the concept of *scripture* in Rüpke's model is not only bound to alphabetical writing but also promotes the supremacy of "book religions" on the basis of theological and philosophical ideas that have been developed for the context of ancient Greece.

Oliver Krüger (2012: 202–203) rightly criticizes Rüpke's ideas as untenable, outdated, long disproven, and without evidence in the history of religion. Krüger concluded his critique (2012: 190) by showing that the concept of *scripture* itself is no value-free *terminus technicus* for the historiography of media usage in religions but a concept with extremely strong cultural and religious connotations. Therefore, he proposed discontinuing the use of the category for theorizing and instead analyzing the processes of canonization and reception regarding particular texts both in religions and in the study of religion (Krüger 2012: 206).

In the United States, the concept of *scripture* was used differently than in Germany. One of the most relevant scholars discussing it was Wilfred Cantwell Smith.[11] Smith departed from the idea of the inherent sacrality of a text and focused on the decisions of religious communities to mark particular texts as sacred and authoritative. In contrast to the former phenomenological, philological, and hermeneutical interests in the *contents* of texts and their interpretation, he was rather interested in the *function(s)* of texts in the real lives of religious people (W.C. Smith 1993). Thus, he opened the category of *scripture* to aspects of practice and the emotional attachment to texts by individuals and groups, although his general perspective on religion remained firmly phenomenological.[12] Consequently, Barbara Holdrege (1996: 4–6) argued for paying even more attention to practice and to scrutinizing the respective, strongly dif-

11 Along the same lines, see also Levering (1989).

12 My thanks to Andreas Grünschloß for emphasizing this aspect.

ferentiated cultural definitions and concepts of *scripture* in different traditions. In my opinion, she accomplished this task superbly in her study comparing the concepts of *scripture* and interpretative and ritual practices regarding the Veda and the Torah (Holdrege 1996).

W. C. Smith was also criticized for homogenizing "world religions," focusing on dominant groups within them, not taking marginal voices into account, dismissing power dynamics, and tending to be "apolitical and intellectually mystifying" (Wimbush 2008a: 11). To counteract this bias, Vincent L. Wimbush founded the *Institute for Signifying Scriptures* at Claremont Graduate University. In a move similar to W. C. Smith, Wimbush first criticized conventional Biblical studies for their overemphasis on content-related exegesis and their search for the one, true, fixed interpretation while underdeploying the practices and politics around texts (Wimbush 2008a: 1, 5). Biblical studies "were decidedly and arrogantly culturally and intellectually monochromatic," he argued (Wimbush 2008a: 10), and were "bleaching" the Bible, that is, promoting the idea of the Bible as being "culture-neutral in origins, meanings, and import" (Wimbush 2008a: 11). On the other hand, vernacular interpretations and those done by marginal, subaltern groups and by "peoples of color" have been thus far ignored and oppressed (Wimbush 2008a: 12). As a result, Wimbush's research institute wished to draw attention to these interpretations and practices regarding scripture.

Influenced by the Harvard Divinity School's approach to comparative religion, Wimbush nevertheless took *scripture* as a cross-culturally applicable category. In his view, *scriptures* are writings that have become authoritative in their respective tradition, perform a centering function within them, construct meaning, and are constituted by important material and interpretative text practices (see Wimbush 2008b: 67). He included into the text practices "the signs, material products, ritual practices and performances, expressivities, orientations, ethics, and politics associated with the phenomenon of the invention and uses of 'scriptures'" (Wimbush 2008a: 3). Based on this theory, Wimbush further expanded his research field to include the "signifying" practices often used by the subalterns. He believes that "signifying"—for example, in the form of a jazz musician's improvisation—has the same function as the dominant text practices around scripture, since it constructs meaning and serves as a centering force in groups and traditions (Wimbush 2008a: 13–14). Consequently, Wimbush subsequently used the function he had attributed to scripture as the *tertium comparationis* for the studies in his project.

In sum, Wimbush scrutinized the category of *scripture*, noticed the many text practices surrounding it, criticized white American scholarship for its monopoly on exegesis, turned his attention to the subaltern and their text

practices, and started to study signifying processes, that is, alternative ways to construct religious meaning. Accordingly, he drew attention to social and material text practices and simultaneously expanded the category of *scripture* by including signifying processes that are in some way related to the notion of "sacrality." He intended to provide "critical comparative theorizing about the phenomenon 'scriptures' [based] on the experiences of historically dominated (usually dark) peoples of the world" (Wimbush 2008a: 13).

3.3.2 Changing Perspective: Material Text Practices

Wimbush, in addition to his postcolonial impetus, also drew attention to the social and material practices surrounding religious texts, aspects that scholarship has thus far mainly ignored. One result of the European religious history of the concept of *scripture* is the scholarly focus on text contents independent of their contexts. This focus might be a reflection of "the religious assertion that certain scripts are independent of everyday realities because they are revelations direct from God" and believed to float "above and apart from human particularities" (Gundaker 2008: 157). The second result of this history is that typically only texts in alphabetical writing qualify as *scripture*. This approach implicitly carries with it ideas about the advanced evolutionary status of alphabetical writing based on its assumed capability for stimulating abstract thought, intellectual reflection, and rationality. Since the Reformation, textual interpretation has increasingly been linked to cognitive evolvement and the advancement of civilizations toward modernity, whereas rituals and material practices have been associated with backward illiteracy, superstition, and the belief in magic (see Gundaker 2008: 155–157). Along these lines, nonalphabetical scripts as well as images have thus far been largely excluded from religious scholarship. This exclusion is rooted in a long European history of "conceptual prejudice" against the image "nurtured by Platonists and Jewish, Christian or Islamic theologians alike, according to which true knowledge is acquired through *logos*, i.e., word and discourse, but not through images" (Uehlinger 2015: 389). Subsequently, the deep suspicion against images grew into a dichotomy of image and (alphabetical) text, linking the image with the archaic, alogical, irrational, and magical (Peter Bräunlein 2004a: 202). The reason why text practices, the materiality of texts, nonalphabetical scripts, and also images are largely ignored in scholarship might be rooted in these developments within the European history of religions.[13]

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13 A further reason might be linked to the fact that the social capital of scholars (at least in the humanities) is heavily based on their expertise in textual interpretation. Consequently, scholars shy away from deconstructing their own social capital (Watts 2013a: 417).

Material text practices are not only found in non-Western religions but also within Christianity itself. Throughout the history of Christianity and both within popular practice and official ceremony, the Bible has not only been used for its semantic interpretation but has also been worshiped as the materialization of the divine word and considered as a portable physical object invoking and mediating divine presence. The practice of book veneration in the Western Church might have even been a substitute for the veneration of icons after the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries (Miller Parmenter 2013: 63–66).

Practices related to the materiality of the book have generally been ignored in more recent scholarship, along with the visuality of writing. According to Brent Plate's discussion of the visual effects of typesetting and calligraphy (Plate 2013), readers do not merely read the semantic meaning of signs, which abstractly refer to the signified; they are also affected by the visual appearance of the writing, for example, on an emotional level. Hybrids between signs and images challenge traditional concepts of *scripture* even more because they rarely convey linguistically legible texts. These types of iconic script-images have been used, for example, in Byzantine epigrams, Assyrian temple inscriptions, initial letters in Carolinian sacramentals, and in Hebrew initials for *God* in thirteenth-century Ashkenazi books, as the speakers of the 2012 interdisciplinary symposium *Sign and Design: Script as Image in a Cross-Cultural Perspective (300–1600 CE)* at Dumbarton Oaks showed.[14]

Western scholarship on these issues is still in its infancy. William A. Graham was one of the first to point to the acoustic dimensions of texts. He realized that in some religions the memorization, recitation, and acoustic performances of texts are given much more importance than textual semantics. In his study, Graham (1987) identified a transformation from aural reception, oral recitation, and memorization to textual interpretation that had taken place in Christianity at the time of the Reformation. James W. Watts (2013: 10–13), however, doubted that the first three had ever become extinct and criticized Graham's strong text–orality dualism, along with Graham's reservations regarding popular text practices and his implicit evolutionary frame. Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus (2011), in their impressive aesthetic cultural history of Sanskrit Hinduism, counteracted Graham's pejorative undertones in the presentation of oral text practices. The two scholars thoroughly analyzed the history of the cosmological interpretation and perception of sound within this religious

14 See "Script as Image at Dumbarton Oaks," Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection 2017, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.doaks.org/newsletter/script-as-image-at-dumbarton-oaks>.

tradition, considering both official rites and popular worship in daily life settings.

Recently, Watts pointed to the many public controversies regarding the "physical display and manipulation of scriptures," such as the desecration of copies of the Qur'an at the prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (Watts 2013d: 9). These events show the symbolic power of books, with books used "as props in ritual performances" (Watts 2013c: 1). They cannot be explained by either traditional semantic approaches to texts or Graham's theoretical category of oral recitation. Dorina Miller Parmenter and Watts, with their theoretical interest triggered, initialized the *Iconic Books Project*, which compiled a database of case reports, organized a series of conferences on this topic, and published articles regarding analytical case studies and theoretical results in the journal *Postscripts* (vol. 2.2–3, 2006, and vol. 6, 2010) and in the book *Iconic Books and Texts* (Watts 2013b).

Based on a comparison of these case studies, Watts developed a theoretical approach that distinguished three dimensions of text practices: (1) semantic, (2) performative, and (3) iconic (Watts 2013d: 14–16). The semantic dimension refers to scholars' typical focus, that is, cognitive reading, interpreting, and commenting of the text contents. The performative dimension covers the performance of the text's words in readings, music, or recitation, along with the performance of the text's contents in dramatizations, tableaus, or movies. The third, iconic dimension refers to the materiality of texts, their ritual manipulation, their artistic representation, and to all cases in which books serve as icons or symbols for their contents, abstract ideas related to their contents, or collective identities. In the iconic dimension, people relate to texts through their senses and bodies. There was some discussion among the scholars in the project about what to name this third category, because all potential terms carried some sort of cultural association or pejorative connotation (Watts 2013c: 2). Finally, *iconic* seemed the least harmful because it referred both to the Christian controversy of *icons* and to the modern use of the word *icon* as an object that enjoys some kind of veneration and that radiates emotive power (Stam 2013: 48). This compromise on the term *iconic* was accepted because the dimension model of text practices did not intend to offer a neat catalog for categorizing cases but was primarily for indicating the diversity of text practices and for initiating theoretical discussion about them (Watts 2013c: 2, 14).

Highly relevant for the study of religion is whether secular and religious text practices differ from one another. In Watts's view, both secular and religious contexts provide cases of every dimension of text practice. Nevertheless, mainly religious contexts stimulate highly ritualized practices of all *three* dimensions regarding the same text. Based on this observation, Watts defined the concept of *scripture* anew:

> Scriptures are books or writings whose use in all three dimensions has been ritualized. Semantic interpretation is ritualized by commentary and preaching. Reading and dramatization both become ritual performances. The book's physical form is decorated, manipulated in public and private rituals, and highlighted in artistic representations. In each case, special attention is given to otherwise routine acts of reading. Thus religious traditions maintain the status of their scriptures by ritualizing normal features of books and other writings. (Watts 2013d: 18–19)

In Watts's view, *scripture* is not inherently or by attribute "sacred" and, as such, qualitatively different to other texts. Rather, its difference depends "on the *degree* to which a particular book or writing is ritualized as text *and* as performance *and* as icon" (Watts 2013d: 19, emphasis in original). Religious traditions "draw attention to each of the three dimensions, giving spiritual importance to what is otherwise trivial" (Watts 2013d: 18).

In conclusion, scholars such as Graham, Wilke, Moebus, Watts, Miller Parmenter, and the other scholars from the *Iconic Books Project* shifted the preoccupation with semantics in the study of religion to oral and material religious text practices. This step opened the way to considering and distinguishing many different forms of text practices within religious traditions as well as studying the emic concepts of *scripture* in different cultural traditions. Furthermore, it helps us to break free from pejorative, evolutionary scales of media usage in which the semantic reading and exegesis of alphabetical texts is considered to be the endpoint of human (rational) evolvement. Only after this move can we become seriously aware of nonalphabetical writing systems and further forms of visual communication and to perceive them as relevant sources for the study of religion.

3.4 *Clarifying Objectives*

The methodological and theoretical perspectives of the Aesthetics of Religion and of material text practices serve as the backbone of my study. Its research questions can be grouped into three fields: the study of Nahua religion, the study of the emic Nahua concept of *scripture*, and the study of the interrelationships between the Nahua religious understanding of reality and their concept of *scripture*.

3.4.1 Studying Nahua Religion

Although religion was of some interest for earlier Mesoamericanists (e.g., Soustelle 1940, Caso 1940, Caso 1953, Séjourné 1956, Séjourné 1962, Brundage 1979), it has not been the prime objective in more recent Mesoamerican studies, and only a few scholars trained in the discipline of the study of religion

have specialized in Mesoamerica (e.g., Hultkrantz 1979, Lanczkowski 1989, Jones 1995, Arnold 1999, Graulich 1997, Olivier 2003, Carrasco 2000, 2014). Consequently, one of this study's main objectives is to newly examine Mesoamerican religions using a perspective inspired by more recent methodological and theoretical developments in the study of religion. This examination includes a critical inventory and reassessment of previous academic analyses and representations of Nahua religion in constant dialogue with the available primary sources.

Of major interest in this endeavor are Indigenous concepts of transcendence and immanence as well as the place of immateriality or materiality in Indigenous conceptualizations and representations of divinity. Did the ancient Nahuas use concepts comparable to "the sacred" or "the divine"? What was the role of human beings in their cosmos? What kind of responsibilities and how much agency in influencing cosmic forces did they believe they have? How did they conceptualize time and history? How did they perceive reality? Did they recognize any "ultimate reality"? Did they believe human beings were capable of grasping this (ultimate) reality and, if yes, under which conditions? Did they trust the senses and the body for understanding the underlying workings of reality?

3.4.2 Studying the Nahua Concept of *Scripture*

Nahua writing and visual communication has received new scholarly attention in the last decades, resulting in major breakthroughs regarding deciphering signs and understanding visual grammar and composition (see Boone and Mignolo 1994, Boone 2000, Boone 2007). This study takes a slightly different perspective by stepping away from the immediate reading of particular sources to investigating their text practices and concept of *scripture*. What form of recorded visual communication and representation did the Nahuas use, and what type of text practices? Following Watts's dimensions, did they use semantic, performative, *and* iconic text practices? Did one of these (or two) play a more important role than the other(s)? Were these text practices ritualized? How much, and in which way, were the bodily senses involved? Were there significant differences to cultures with alphabetical writing? What is their emic concept of *scripture*?

In contrast to Wimbush's approach to *scripture*, it is not my intention to single out from among the totality of Nahua texts those that were being attributed "sacrality" or that functioned similar to (Christian) *scripture*, that is, that showed special centering forces for the Nahua religious tradition. Nor am I interested in searching Nahua signification alternatives, that is, means for the construction of meaning that show the same function as *scripture* within

Christianity and could be considered, for example, as the cultural oral equivalent to *scripture*. Rather, I am asking *what* function texts and recorded visual communication were given in Nahua culture. Thus, I do not take the "sacrality" of particular texts as the *tertium comparationis*. Rather, I raise the question whether the Nahuas attributed "sacrality" to texts at all. My intention is to (re-) construct the Indigenous concept of *writing* in relation to reality.

3.4.3 Studying the Nahua Sense of Reality as Expressed in Their Concept of *Scripture*

My investigation of Nahua concepts of *writing* is on a relatively abstract level with regard to their sense of reality, which includes their cosmovision, ontology, epistemology, philosophy, and religion. How did the Nahuas relate writing to reality? What role did they give manuscripts, paper, writing, and themselves as human beings in the unceasing flow of cosmological forces? What happened in the act of painting and writing? Did they have concepts of ("sacred"?) scribal creativity? What role did they give the bodily senses in their epistemology and in their beliefs about how to understand reality and how to express these insights in *writing*? What did they think about the proper method for interpreting their writings? What types of hermeneutics and semiotics did they have? In what way are "religious" views of the cosmos interrelated with their concepts of *scripture*, *hermeneutics*, and *semiotics*?

Because the primary sources do not directly deal with these questions, the abstraction level of the (re)construction will be quite high. The envisaged theory will consist of two parts: (1) an interpretation and (re)construction of the Nahua concepts of *scripture* and *semiotics* reached through an abstraction that is based on their practices and theoretical reflections and (2) an interpretation and explanation of these concepts and practices based on contemporary academic insights and theories regarding the role of the body and its senses for thinking, producing knowledge, and communicating through forms of visual expression.

3.5 *Facing Problems of Interdisciplinarity*

This study's perspective is fundamentally interdisciplinary, with its main roots in the studies of religion and Mesoamerica. Both disciplines are fields of research rather than neatly framed academic disciplines. They refer to a certain topic (*religion*) or cultural area (*Mesoamerica*) and are already interdisciplinary by their very nature. In my search for answers to the named research questions, I read every study I could obtain that was related to the subject, regardless of its author's disciplinary background—be it the study of religion, Mesoamerican studies, archaeology, art history, Mexican or Romance history

and literature, anthropology, visual culture, material culture, semiotics, or philosophy, to name but a few. The problem with such a procedure is that the result is rather eclectic. Each of these disciplines is, by itself, dominated by a hegemonic discourse. Despite talk to the contrary, academic scholars are typically envious guards of the erected borders of their research fields, defending their historically selected core methodologies and restricting admission into the ranks of their particular guilds. If a study wishes to be favorably acknowledged, or noticed at all, it needs to prove mastery of standard knowledge and disciplinary methodical competences. In addition to standard knowledge and methods, each discipline has certain styles and levels of discourse, theoretical reference points, famous scholars whose names are expected to be dropped, and particular questions it considers interesting (or not). Meeting the demands of all these discourses is simply impossible—at least in today's world, with its exploding quantity of academic studies. The simple solution for this study would have been to remain within one disciplinary discourse. However, this would also have been the least stimulating process. Therefore, I have decided to beard the lion in his den and follow my academic instincts in confronting the expectations of the various disciplines.

As a result, I eclectically chose whatever study, insight, or theory seemed relevant for finding answers to my research questions. The many decisions about which trail to follow, however, were not made arbitrarily but in a constantly monitored and reflected way. This book is the result of a long, four-year journey and presents the conclusions I have reached along the way. Many of its theoretical subjects have certainly been dealt with in a much more comprehensive way in their respective disciplines. Following these trails again in the future will definitely lead to theoretical refinement and sophistication. It has never been my aspiration to become an acknowledged expert in the many disciplinary debates I will be touching on here. My intention and inspiration, rather, has been to open up new fields of dialogue between disciplines and thus to broaden the way for future transdisciplinary work. This opening up of dialogue refers most of all to two fields of research: the study of religion and the study of Mesoamerica. For one, this study brings Mesoamerican religions back into the study of religion and attempts to improve the discipline's theories by testing them in reference to this religious tradition. For the other, the theoretical perspective from the study of religion and its reflexivity regarding its core concepts is applied to Mesoamerican religions—and to Nahua religion and culture, in particular—in the hope that this will help us better understand this tradition.

4 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed some epistemological and methodological challenges for doing research and writing history in a postcolonial world and presented the theoretical background and objectives of this study. It is time for a summary of the results.

One of the major problems of Western science is its continuing narcissist conceitedness based on the idea that it provides the best methodology for understanding and explaining the world. As such, Western science continues to exercise much epistemic violence—all the more so in studies of non-Western cultures that attempt to explain and evaluate these cultures with categories that had been developed for and within the Western history of ideas. Movements such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory challenged Western science's belief in objective, transcendental knowledge. Consequently, Latin American postcolonial theorists such as Mignolo drew attention to subaltern epistemologies. Since Nahua epistemologies and ways of being-in-the-world were brutally oppressed in the course of colonization, they can be regarded as subaltern (nevertheless with dominant and marginalized groups and perspectives within Nahua society itself). Mignolo proposed the concept of *gnosis* as an alternative to Western *epistemology*, that is, a form of knowledge that includes practical, experiential, and bodily aspects.

This study follows Mignolo in believing that Western science is just one of many ways to acquire knowledge about the world and that religious and spiritual traditions offer equally sophisticated paths. Accordingly, the path of Western science, based on the human faculties of rationality and logical reasoning, is "merely" a highly particular explanatory model of the world. A highly successful model, it is true, and a model I find so fascinating that this study follows the academic path of abstract intellectual engagement. My intention is to overcome some of the previous materializations of epistemic violence *within* this tradition. This project involves, for one thing, taking the Nahua sense of reality seriously and, for another thing, challenging Western categories such as *religion*, *philosophy*, *literature*, or *writing* in their usefulness for understanding Nahua culture. It also involves challenging common images of Nahua *religion* based on a five-hundred-year colonial gaze. My endeavor to do so is not driven by any "will to master." Rather, I am attempting to engage in a dialogue with the historical sources while not being too preoccupied with myself. Naturally, the resulting interpretation will always be shaped by my own perspective and just *one* way among many other possible ones to interpret the primary and secondary sources. While I attempt to make my interpretation consistent and convincing, I am not suggesting that it is objectively true.

Mignolo developed the approaches of the geopolitics of knowledge and of pluritopic hermeneutics, criticizing, along with social constructivists and embodiment theorists such as Lakoff and Johnson, the idea of a disembodied, transcendental rationality. He stated that, in terms of epistemology, human beings as individuals have access to only situational and perspectival knowledge. Following this opinion, we cannot escape our culturally and socially formed perspective. Nevertheless, we have the ability to listen to other people's perspectives, to look for commonalities and differences, and to let ourselves be transformed in the process. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez take this approach seriously. Not only do they work with descendants of the Mixtec people for finding interpretations of ancient Mixtec pictorial manuscripts, they also participate in Mixtec rituals, open themselves to being moved and transformed by the power of these rituals, and write about their emotional, bodily, and holistic experiences (see Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: 37–44). While I admire this resolute consistency, I admit that this is not my way. For one thing, there are not enough methodological tools for dealing academically with these experiences, in my opinion. Furthermore, my academic interest in the Nahuas is primarily intellectual (thus far) and not motivated by finding solutions for living a better life.

In sum, writing history in a postcolonial way after historiography's crisis of representation and attempting to understand the bygone culture of the pre-Hispanic Nahuas is no easy endeavor. We can draw on several types of sources: ethnohistorical accounts (including pictorial manuscripts, colonial hybrids painted by Natives, colonial alphabetical accounts written by Natives, alphabetical accounts written by Spaniards, and linguistic studies), archaeological remains and art-historical objects, ethnographic accounts, and, finally, academic studies and interpretations that have been proposed throughout the history of Mesoamerican studies. Put shortly, our general problem is how to (re)construct something like a coherent *culture* while staying truthful to the individual sources and taking into consideration that each of them presents a particular, subjective perspective on things. This process involves the translation (where applicable), contextualization, and interpretation of the individual sources, be they painted, written, modeled, or left as remains in the earth. Next, we need to abstract and homogenize individual, social, ethnic, and regional diversity and then generalize in order to (re)construct the cultural characteristics that underlie the myriad of everyday practices and individual beliefs. Finally, the more we attempt to interpret and explain, the firmer we shape the result with our own perspective on the world. Lastly, single-factor explanations of cultures and human motivations to act in a certain way oversimplify the complexity and diversity of human life.

This study's theoretical perspective stems mainly from the study of religion. This discipline has been dominated by an intense textual approach, which is deeply ingrained within the European and US history of religions. This refers to a preoccupation with textual sources, *scripture*, and *book religions* as well as to a predominance of theories treating religions as symbol systems and *texts*. The recent movement of Visual Religion, Material Religion, and the Aesthetics of Religion, both in Europe and in the United States, intends to overcome this confinement by opening up to religious practices, bodily forms of experience, the use of media, and materiality. The most relevant theories in the field of Material Religion conceptualize *religion* as the medialization and materialization of something "beyond." In contrast, this study is based on a discursive understanding of *religion* that searches for Nahua sensorially and aesthetically experienced concepts and senses of reality. In doing so, this study's objectives consist of an inventory and reassessment of previous academic representations of Nahua religion and an analysis of the Nahua concept of *scripture*, of their semiotic concepts and their semantic, performative, and iconic text practices. The aim is to discern the interrelations between Nahua *religion* and their *writing system* and to learn something about their sense of reality as expressed in their semiotics. Finally, I intend to interpret this emic semiotics with the help of contemporary academic theories. Since this study is designed to be interdisciplinary at its core, it also faces the typical interdisciplinary problems, mainly the impossibility of doing justice to the sophistication that some of the debates have reached within their home disciplines, debates that receive only a cursory touch here. The intention of this study is to open up interdisciplinary dialogue, primarily between the study of religion and Mesoamerican studies, and to provide a springboard for further discussions.

CHAPTER 2

Living in Cultural Diversity

This chapter briefly outlines basic aspects of the history, living conditions, and society of the people living in the Central Mexican Highlands in the centuries before the Spanish colonization. In conclusion, it discusses the level of diversity within the Nahua tradition and the resulting consequences on the scope of this study.

1 Drawing on History

The Nahuas built their culture solidly on historical Mesoamerican foundations by cultivating characteristic Mesoamerican cultural traits and drawing on earlier civilizations for political legitimacy. The designation *Mesoamerica* refers to a particular cultural area that includes, from north to south, the southern two-thirds of Mexico; Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador; the southwestern part of Honduras; and the western parts of Nicaragua and Costa Rica. It spans in time from the initial human occupation of the American continent[1] through to the European colonization in the sixteenth century—or even to present times, as some scholars denote (see Carrasco 2001). Mesoamerican lands show a large diversity of environmental zones, from wet, tropical rain forests to fertile plateaus and windswept, dry mountain ranges. Human groups adjusted to these differing environments and developed specific material and symbolic cultures by drawing on the lands. As a consequence, Mesoamerica has been host to a broad cultural diversity patterned by historical continuity and change. Complex civilizations rose early, making Mesoamerica one of the world's seven cultural areas with primary urban generation (Carrasco 2001: 213). Mesoamerican peoples developed tremendous cultural creativity, including the famous Olmecs and Zapotecs of the Formative Period (2000 BCE–250 CE), the Maya and Teotihuacanos in the Classic Period (250–900 CE), and the Toltecs and Aztecs in the Postclassic Period (900–1521 CE).[2]

1 Scholars are divided on the question when the American continent was populated; the conservative theory had long been that the first people came fifteen thousand years ago, but newer theories assume it might have been as far back as fifty thousand years ago (see Mann 2011: 18–23).

2 For a discussion of Mesoamerican chronology and periodization, see Mendoza (2001) and McCafferty and Carrasco (2001).

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In the cultural memory of the later Nahuas, the city of Teotihuacan features prominently as a source of spiritual inspiration and political legitimation. Teotihuacan—known to us by this Nahua name meaning "place of the gods"—was believed to be the place where the current era of the Fifth Sun had originated and the fundaments of law and government had been created (Berdan 2014: 35, Sahagún 1978: III, 1, 1953: VII, 3–7).[3] At the time of the Aztec Empire, Teotihuacan had been abandoned for several centuries, save for a small group of people living close to the ruins. At its cultural height from 150 through 700 CE, however, Teotihuacan had been an important cultural center and was one of the largest cities in Mesoamerica, with a population estimated at greater than a hundred thousand (McCafferty and Carrasco 2001: 245). Following a massive urban renewal program in the second and third centuries CE, the city was formally structured around a geometrical grid, featuring large structures, such as the Avenue of the Dead and the Pyramid of the Sun, one of the largest pyramids in Mesoamerica. Some cultural memory of the grandeur of Teotihuacan was preserved despite its later decline, and the Mexica revered this society highly. They went on pilgrimages to the ruins, recovered cultural artifacts, and copied the artistic style of its architecture and material objects in their own crafts and arts (Umberger 1987). They also designed their own city, Tenochtitlan, according to the same basic city layout as the one they had found in the ruins of Teotihuacan (M.E. Smith 2008).

The Postclassic Period brought severe and sweeping sociocultural transformations to Mesoamerica. Among these was major population growth as a result of microclimate changes and enhancements in intensive agricultural techniques (M.E. Smith 2001: 254). City-states expanded exponentially and started to interact with one another through alliances and intermarriage on the one hand and through aggressive military campaigns on the other hand. The objective of these campaigns was typically to force conquered towns to pay taxes. The tribute system, in combination with long-term trade by professional merchants, ensured a wide distribution of material goods across Mesoamerica. Along the trade routes, artistic styles spread widely, leading to the internationalization of a pictorial symbol set and the standardization of religious motifs (M.E. Smith 2001: 255). In the Early Postclassic (950–1150 CE), the Toltec city of Tula in the Central Highlands grew into an important regional center. The Toltecs were to become the second major source of cultural

3 If not indicated otherwise, references to the *Florentine Codex* refer to its Nahuatl text and its translation into English by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. The Spanish text written by Sahagún differs significantly from the Nahuatl text; in many cases, it provides only brief summaries of the Nahuatl original and omits some information completely.

inspiration and political legitimation for the later Aztec Empire (Berdan 2014: 33–36). Since Toltec descent was regarded as imperative, later Mexica rulers typically married women from a Toltec lineage (Berdan 2014: 41). After Tula fell around 1175, several city-states in the Central Highlands competed for dominance. At this time, the first Nahuatl-speaking groups began to migrate from the northern deserts into the Central Highlands. According to ethnohistorical sources,[4] Nahuatl-speaking groups left their lacustrine home, Aztlan, and arrived in the Central Highlands in the twelfth century. Settling in the new environment, the Nahua groups acquired a new identity by linking their nomadic Chichimec ancestry to the Toltec civilization of the Central Highlands. In Native sources such as the *Mapa Quinantzin* (Mohar Betancourt 2004), the Chichimecs are typically depicted as wild people living in caves, wearing animal skins as clothing, hunting with bows and arrows, and being fierce warriors. With their settlement in the Basin of Mexico, these Chichimec migrants gradually acquired traits of Mesoamerican civilization and thus what they perceived as a distinguished, civilized, and cultivated way of life.

The following centuries witnessed rapid demographic expansion, with growing city-states sharing central traits of material culture, lifestyle, and religion. Around 1325 CE, the ethnic subgroup of the Mexica founded the cities of Tenochtitlan and the neighboring Tlatelolco on a swampy island in Lake Texcoco. The Mexica, based on their skills as warriors and diplomats, increasingly expanded their political and economic influence in the Basin of Mexico. In 1428, they founded a new and strong military confederation, the *excan tlatoloyan* (tribunal of three places), commonly called the Triple Alliance in English, together with their Texcoco and Tlacopan neighbors. In the next century, the Mexica came to dominate the alliance, and Tenochtitlan grew into a "vibrant, energetic, wealthy" center of power, with its nobles beginning to "enjoy fancy and expensive lifestyles," and religious ceremonies becoming "more and more flamboyant" (Berdan 2014: 41). The empire expanded into large parts of Mesoamerica, and its rulers consolidated their political and religious ideology as "people of the Sun" (Caso 1953) destined to rule Mesoamerica. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the dominance of Tenochtitlan over its two allies, Texcoco and Tlacopan, was firmly established, with the city ruling an empire that stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico before the Spaniards eventually turned this flourishing civilization to dust. Culturally, the Nahuas had intensified and expanded the foundations of earlier Mesoamerican

4 The most important colonial alphabetical prose sources include Alvarado Tezozómoc (1994), Durán (1994), Torquemada (1976), and the *Codex Chimalpopoca* (Bierhorst 1992a, 1992b). For the standard study of Aztec history, see Davies (1973).

traditions, those of the Toltecs and Teotihuacanos, in particular, but also developed their own unique perspective on the cosmos.

2 Living in the Central Highlands

The living conditions in the Central Highlands[5] were shaped by its fertile landscape, which was subject to many natural disasters, as recounted in sources such as the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (Quiñones Keber 1995) and the *Codex en Cruz* (Dibble 1981). The inhabitants developed intensive agricultural techniques and formed the land into a cultural landscape characterized by terraced fields, irrigation constructions, and chinampas, on which they cultivated all kinds of edible plants. Complemented by wild plants, algae, small animals, and insects, this formed a varied diet (see Long-Solís 2001, S.D. Coe 1994).

The Central Highlands were densely populated with different kinds of settlements, which were generally organized modularly with individual households around a central patio and several social units, called *calpultin* (pl. of *calpulli*, "town quarter," organized according to professions), around the ceremonial center of each *altepetl* (town). Tenochtitlan was the largest town in the Central Highlands; it was an impressive imperial city arranged around a large ceremonial center (see Sahagún 1558–1585, folio 269r) and designed after astronomical principles that copied the architecture of Teotihuacan.[6]

The people of the Central Highlands produced a large variety of refined utilitarian goods (pottery, textiles, tools, weapons, musical instruments), which were manufactured in many households. Professional, largely hereditary artisans created sophisticated luxury goods (highly decorated textiles, adornments, jewelry, books, sculptures). Descriptions of the metropolitan Tlatelolco market give us a good impression of the large variety of handicrafts, which inspired much awe in the Spanish conquistadores because of their sophistication and beauty (F. Cortés 1908: 257–259, Díaz del Castillo 2008: 173–175, Sahagún 1979b: VIII, 67–69, 1961: X, 25–41, 63–94; see also the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer/Tezcatlipoca* known as the *Tonalamatl of the Pochtecas*). The rising interest of the nobility in material beauty and their need for luxury goods and exotic materials (such as quetzal feathers) stimulated long-distance trade

5 For excellent up-to-date summaries of our knowledge about the living conditions and basic aspects of the Aztec civilization, see Michael E. Smith (2012), Berdan (2014), and Nichols and Rodríguez-Alegría (2017).

6 For contrasting interpretations of the cosmological symbolism, see Carrasco (2014) and Michael E. Smith (2005). For interpretations of the excavations of the temple district, see Matos Moctezuma (1988) and López Luján (2005).

across Mesoamerica. Over the years, a thriving, dynamic, and complex trade economy was created with increasing commercialization (see Blanton 1996, Blanton and Hodge 1996). The market of Tenochtitlan's twin city, Tlatelolco, grew to be the largest in Mesoamerica. The *pochteca* (pl. of *pochtecatl*), one of the merchant groups, accumulated great wealth and played an important role in Nahua society (see Sahagún 1959: IX).

Politically, the many *altepeme* (pl. of *altepetl*) of the Triple Alliance remained independent but were subject to paying tributes and taxes.[7] Each *altepetl* was headed by the principle *tlatoani*, the king and representative of the patron deity. In the Tenochtitlan of the late fifteenth century, the *huey tlatoani* (big speaker), who represented the celestial male authority, was advised by his close adjunct, the *cihuacoatl* (snake woman), who represented the female and terrestrial part of the cosmos. This concept of sacred duality was also represented in lower level governmental positions, for example, with two supreme military generals and two head priests dedicated to the sun and rain gods (López Austin 2001: 70). The *tlatoani* and his *cihuacoatl* were assisted by a royal council and bureaucrats, who carried out the diverse military, religious, administrative, and jurisdictional tasks.

With regard to collective identity, Nahua individuals identified primarily with their *altepetl*, the city-state with its founding legend, patron deity, ruling dynasty, and political autonomy. The *altepeme* in the Basin of Mexico in the Late Postclassic regularly interacted both peacefully and antagonistically within a strongly fluctuating political context. Even under the imperial control of the Triple Alliance, they remained largely independent politically and maintained their distinctive identities, legal systems, and spatial boundaries. The Alliance expanded mainly through military conquest. Correspondingly, militaristic symbolism played a prominent role in Nahua society, particularly from the middle of the fifteenth century, and warfare was one of its root metaphors (see López Austin 2001: 69–71).

Life in the *altepetl* was highly structured, with strict social stratification between nobles and commoners and moderate social mobility for warriors, merchants, and luxury artisans. A clear division of labor existed between farmers, servants, slaves, manufacturers, artisans, and politicians. A large group of intellectuals, primarily funded by the palaces, worked as astronomers and divination specialists, historians, scribes, composers, and orators, along with musicians, dancers, and entertainers. The city-states financed the notably high

7 For a discussion of whether the Triple Alliance classifies as an *empire*, see M.E. Smith (2012: 164), Berdan (2014: 140), and Hassig (1985). For general studies of the political system, see Berdan (1996a) and Michael E. Smith (2008).

number of religious specialists, which included specialized priests for the many deities and priestly assistants. The *calpulli* schools employed teachers, and individual families turned to physicians, midwifes, astrologers, and shamans for health, well-being, and planning advice (Berdan 2014: 89; see also Sahagún 1961: X).

People's options in life were determined by their social status, wealth, occupation, and the living conditions of their respective families. The young were educated rigorously both at home and in two types of schools—the *calmecac* and the *telpochcalli*—and every member of society was expected to live according to strict codes of conduct (see Berdan and Anawalt 1992: folios 56v–61r; Durán 1971: 289–295, Sahagún 1979b: VIII, 71–74, 1978: III, 51–67; see also Calnek 1988). Both nobles and commoners were taught how to sing, dance, and play musical instruments, apparently in the *cuicacalli* (house of song), in order to participate in the many public and private religious ceremonies (Dodds Pennock 2008: 72–88). Gender roles were an important part of Nahua personal identity. In many publications, they are superficially described as forming a public/male–private/female polarity. However, the Indigenous understanding was rather a model of balancing complementary forces (see Kellogg 1997, Burkhart 1997; see also Clendinnen 1991: 167–171, 206–209). Gender identity was also considered flexible and unstable, and had to be reinforced through ritual activities to maintain the cosmic balance (Burkhart 2001, Klein 2001b).

3 Living in Religious Diversity

The people in the complex society of the Late Postclassic in the Central Mexican Highlands used multiple and diverse aspects for defining each individual's social identity. Correspondingly, there was also much diversity in culture and ways of living. The following sections are devoted to the question of whether Nahua cosmovision and ritual practice was similarly diverse and manifold.

3.1 *One Mesoamerican Religion or Many?*

How many religious characteristics did people living at different times and in different regions of Mesoamerica share? Should we speak of diverse Mesoamerican religions or just one religion changing over time? Was Nahua religion unique or did the Nahuas share much of their cosmovision and sense of reality with other peoples in Mesoamerica? These questions have been running through Mesoamerican studies since the beginning. One milestone in this discussion was Paul Kirchhoff's (1943) proposition to acknowledge *Mesoamerica*

as an area sharing specific cultural characteristics throughout its history. These cultural traits include the cultivation of maize, maguey, and cocoa; chinampa agriculture; obsidian tools and weapons; military jaguar and eagle orders; long-distance merchants; ball courts and pyramid temples; hieroglyphic writing; the ritual use of paper and rubber; certain forms of human sacrifice and auto-sacrifice; specific deities, such as the rain god, *Tlaloc*; and the use of a calendar system that intertwines the solar year with a ritual calendar of 260 days to form a combined cycle of fifty-two years. Whereas Kirchhoff (1960: 1) had intended his proposition as the starting point for discussion and further examination, successive scholars accepted it widely, even if acknowledging the historical diversity within Mesoamerica and the complexity of cultural interactions (see, e.g., Carrasco, Jones, and Sessions 2000).

López Austin expanded Kirchhoff's idea in his model of the Mesoamerican *núcleo duro*. Inspired by Fernand Braudel's concept of *long durée*, López Austin (1993: 300, 1997: 5) detected a continuity to this day of cultural concepts and practices throughout Mesoamerican history. This "Mesoamerican religious tradition" was strongly ruptured by the European conquest, which separated pre-Hispanic "Mesoamerican religion" from "Colonial religion." The latter merged Indigenous with European traits to form unique new characteristics, which reflect the thoroughly transformed cultural and social environment (López Austin 1993: 20). According to López Austin, the prevailing characteristics of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religion include the religious legitimation of rulers and rulership; the "aggrandizement of state worship"; the existence of intellectually leading priesthoods controlling important branches of knowledge; the use of highly advanced systems of calendars, astronomy, writing, and numerics; and, finally, the performance of human sacrifices, particularly in times of military expansion (López Austin 2004a: 120–121). Many of these traits were lost in the transition to colonial religion, particularly those concerning official and institutionalized religion. Notwithstanding this massive change, fundamental characteristics of popular worship and cosmovision related to the body, along with types of agriculture and daily labor and forms of immediate social relations, persisted (López Austin 2004a: 121). This *núcleo duro* can be found in contemporary popular Indigenous religion, above all in the concepts surrounding the planting of maize, which form a sort of "archetype of the plant cycle" (López Austin 1997: 11; see also Carrasco 2017: 53–54). In López Austin's view, these core concepts of cosmovision and religious practices are the principle factor of Mesoamerican unity and span political and cultural boundaries.

Clearly, we are talking here about similarities seen from a large cultural and historical distance. López Austin's *Mesoamerican religion* is a highly abstract construct that is related to particular cultures much in the way the grammar of

a language is related to particular speech acts (see López Austin 1997: 9–10). This cultural grammar is (re)constructed by scholars and typically not expressed by the respective people themselves. For the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican people, *Mesoamerica* was no reference point for any form of identity. A common identity emerged only after the conquest and in dissociation from the Europeans, first in the reference *nican titlaca* (we people here) and, since the seventeenth century, with the adapted European reference "Indios" (Schroeder 2010a: 116, Lockhart 1993a: 377–378, 1993b).

Some scholars emphasize the unity of Mesoamerican religion strongly enough to name it a "world religion" (Pharo 2007: 31). John Monaghan (2000) (re)constructed and systematized a (unified) "theology and history" of Mesoamerican religions in his contribution to the *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*. Approaches like these help to identify the many similarities in Mesoamerican religions and to characterize them in contrast to religious traditions from other areas of the world. However, they are in danger of neglecting the striking local and historical particularities and differences. Hence, an overdone focus on similarities might lead to excessively sweeping interpretations of mythical motifs based on data about a similar motif used in a different time and region of Mesoamerica. While the resulting interpretations may be appealing, we simply have no idea whether the cultural associations regarding any motif were indeed similar or not. Consequently, we have no idea whether these interpretations are adequate or not.

In conclusion, some scholars write of one pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religion (or even American religion) in the singular and emphasize the similarities, shared characteristics, and many cultural interactions within this area to counteract the image of localized prehistoric societies with the image of a large civilization. While this is an important move, we should not forget the historical particularities within this general cultural area, along with the myriad of (potential) regional variations and individual interpretations of similar traits.

The Nahuas built strongly on the Mesoamerican tradition, blending their particular Chichimec history with the centuries-old cultural heritage of cultures in the Basin of Mexico. They were aware of the history of past polities within their new homeland and established links to this heritage for their own political legitimation. They not only married into Toltec lineages but also reused, recast, copied, and reinterpreted cultural artifacts from Teotihuacan and Tula (Umberger 1987). In their religion, the Nahuas combined typical Mesoamerican concepts and practices with their own and unique perspectives on life and on the cosmos based on their particular historic experiences (López Austin 2008b: 26–27). All in all, it was more a matter of intensification than

innovation; they strengthened the social hierarchy and bureaucracy, developed a complex system of politics, and specialized and sophisticated the arts. They also diversified and deepened their religion to implement complex, large-scale, impressive, and sensorially overwhelming ceremonies. In short, they "augmented an expanding Mesoamerican world already in motion" by interweaving "broad regions and diverse peoples into a dynamic, interaction Mesoamerican world system" (Berdan 2014: 44, see also Clendinnen 1991: 288).

3.2 *One Postclassic Central Mexican Religion or Many?*

Having analyzed differences and particularities within the Mesoamerican religious tradition, we now turn to the particular period and region of Late Postclassic Central Mexico. During this time, this region was a mosaic of polities, languages, and cultures. Several markers were used for the formation of collective identity, among them the *altepetl*, linguistic commonalities, marriage alliances, and shared religious practices, which were prioritized flexibly according to situation (Berdan 2014: 45). The differing ethnic backgrounds were acknowledged in linguistic expressions, hairstyles, and clothing, and even character stereotypes regarding specific ethnicities were voiced. These stereotypes, however, were "infrequently mobilized as a primary motivator in people's lives and therefore had few serious consequences" (Berdan 2014: 44).[8]

From the outsider's perspective, art historians categorized this complex field of interwoven communities by comparing art styles, motifs, and abstract contents. As a result, they showed that people in Postclassic Central Mexico shared a standard international symbol set of religious motifs, with the Feathered Serpent the most prominent motif. Most importantly, the characteristics of the Aztec and the Mixteca-Puebla Styles were widely distributed. During the last centuries before colonization, the art styles were increasingly standardized, a fact that is typically interpreted as an increasing homogenization of the religious traditions. At the end of the Late Postclassic, a substantial religious unity existed regarding cosmological principles, deity attributes, specific rituals, the organization of the priesthood, and concepts and practices of divination according to the ritual calendar. Apparently, this religious unity transcended political boundaries within and beyond Central Mexico and was distributed along the vivid market network and intensive elite interaction (M.E. Smith 2001: 254–256; see also Pohl 2004: 374–397). In addition, Boone (2003: 207, 2007: 230) found many shared themes in large numbers of Indigenous pictorial sources: specific mythologies including narratives of cave

8 For excellent studies on Nahua ethnicity, see Berdan et al. (2008); for pre-Hispanic Aztec ethnic identity, in particular, see Umberger (2008) and Berdan (2008).

origins, the iconography of royal power including royal regalia and installation rituals, the divination system based on the shared calendar along with ways of conceptualizing history. Since these similarities are striking, it appears legitimate to speak of a common style and symbol set in the regions of Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxcalla, and the Basin of Mexico (Boone and M.E. Smith 2003: 186–192).

The Mixtecs were nevertheless of different ethnicity than the Nahuas and had a different history, cultural background, and political organization. Their kingdoms had been established during the Middle Postclassic in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca and they had a thriving culture with highly trained arts and crafts specialists and a sophisticated writing system. In close cultural interaction with their neighbors in the Puebla region, including Nahuatl-speaking groups, the emerging Mixteca-Puebla Style and its symbol set spread so widely as to be called "Postclassic International Style" or "Mixteca-Puebla horizon style" (M.E. Smith 2001: 251, 253; see also Escalante Gonzalbo 2010: 36–42). Many of the surviving divinatory codices are painted in this style, while their exact provenience is debated (Boone 2007: 211, 231–232). Although specific substyles exist, the surviving divinatory codices are strikingly similar in style and in content and share the same fundamental divination system:

> The Aztec and Borgia Group traditions use the same iconographic conventions; they recognize the same gods and mantic forces (with some variation), and they consistently link them to the same units of time.... The correspondences among the manuscripts are so many and so exact that it can be said that a single divinatory system operated widely across central and southern Mexico. (Boone 2007: 232)

In sum, fundamental religious concepts, such as the divinatory system, patterns of the cosmogony, or the religious legitimation of rulership, were shared across the different ethnicities and languages in Central Mexico in the Postclassic Period. There was, nevertheless, much diversity and local variation, particularly regarding specific narratives, genealogies, histories, and destinies of local polities as well as specific theological and philosophical perspectives according to local priest schools. Colonial narrative sources tend to smooth over these differences and synthesize local variation into one coherent story. This is particularly true for historical events and politics and can be seen paradigmatically in the narratives of the Spanish conquest written by the Tenochca and Tlatelolca, which differ considerably from each other (see, e.g., Terraciano 2010). This is nevertheless also true for details in the religious system, for example, in the local performances relating to the monthly *veintena* ceremonies or in the veneration of particular deities (see DiCesare 2008: 4).

This study about the Nahuas primarily uses sources from the Basin of Mexico. In addition, pictorial sources from the Mixtec Group and the Borgia Group have also been used because they share the same religious fundamentals, as well as colonial hybrids such as the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* (which stems from the broader Puebla/Tlaxcalla region inhabited by Eastern Nahuas and the Mixtec-related Pinomes; see Wake 2007). This strategy corresponds to the study's intention not to dissect local details but to learn about the Nahuas ontology and semiotics on a more abstract level—a cultural foundation so elemental that the different groups in Central Mexico most probably shared it.

3.3 *One Nahua Religion or Many?*

After having diversified our images, first, of Mesoamerican and, second, of Postclassic Central Mexican religious traditions, we now turn our attention to an even smaller field—Nahua religious tradition(s). Is it legitimate to speak of one Nahua religion or do we need to draw even more distinctions?

Taking all the available sources about the ancient Nahuas into account, striking indeterminacies, inconsistencies, and, in some cases, even contradictions exist in the historiographical accounts, religious narratives, and descriptions of Nahua culture and religion. Scholars most commonly explain these discrepancies with local or regional differences in tradition and historical perspective, for example, between the towns of Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, or Texcoco. Others proposed explanations related to the dynamics of religious history: Jacques Soustelle (1962) suggested that the Aztecs synthesized diverse historical traditions with only partial success, while Michel Graulich (1997) attributed the inconsistencies to incomplete attempts by the imperial rulers to centralize Aztec religion (see also M.E. Smith 2012: 201, 325). Many scholars, however, point to an internal stratification of Aztec religion, particularly between popular worship and elite philosophy as well as between the separate "schools" of spiritual philosophy and mystic militarism. Before I present my conclusion on diversity within religious traditions, I will briefly discuss these arguments of internal stratification.

3.3.1 Popular Religion and Intellectuals

The available sources contain little information about potential differences in religious thought and practice between ordinary people and religious experts or intellectuals in Nahua society; few scholars have turned their attention to these differences thus far. While the sources typically reflect the religion of the social elite, less information exists about the religious life of commoners. Several archaeologists found material remains of an apparently rich and sophisticated ritual life at commoners' households in different pre-Hispanic

Mesoamerican cultures, including late Postclassic Morelos (Gonlin and Lohse 2007). Boone (2003: 207) and Eloise Quiñones Keber (2002b: 13) are convinced that all members of Aztec society used divination, including the lowest of commoners. In addition, everyone participated in the large *veintena* ceremonies (Quiñones Keber 2002b: 12). While the participants of these ceremonies definitely had disparate roles with varying involvement, the "most compelling and defining experiences" (Clendinnen 1991: 45), and thus the fundamental vision of the world, were shared across the "dramatic" social divisions of Aztec society, as Inga Clendinnen suggested (1991: 68, see also 68–73). Catherine R. DiCesare and Michael E. Smith pointed out that household rituals such as sweeping were regarded as a prime function for the general maintaining of the cosmos. Sweeping was done not only by priests and priest assistants but also by women across all social classes (DiCesare 2008: 78–81, 96–97, Michael E. Smith 2012: 134, 240).

Most probably, these are only some of the aspects shared in the basic cosmovision and ritual system in Nahua society. Having said that, evidence suggests that much religious diversity also existed, depending on location, social status, occupation, family, gender, and, most likely, on individual perspective and situation. While contemporary scholars typically paint a differentiated picture of these differences, traditional scholarship often projected much more generalized and inflexible models onto the Nahuas, models that generally attribute particular conceptions of the divine to specific social classes. Thus, Alfonso Caso (1953) broadly distinguished between popular religion, priestly religion, and the world view of philosophers. He assumed that the Aztec *populus* had practiced polytheism and the philosophers had believed in monotheism, while priests had emphasized the political mission of the Aztecs as the people of the Sun. León-Portilla, in his later elaboration of this idea, implicitly introduced a variant of a common evolutionist theory from the history of religion into Nahua studies. According to this theory, the primitive popular religion focused on the worship of a "multitude of 'gods,'" which represented nature phenomena and deified ancestors (León-Portilla 1963: 99). In addition, the populus "unquestionably accepted the myths as valid cosmogonic explanations" (León-Portilla 1963: 25). In León-Portilla's view, Nahua priests represented the second, the "magico-religious stage" of intellectual evolution, and only the *tlamatinime* (wise men) entered "the realm of the philosophical" (León-Portilla 1963: 116). The latter had naturally evolved to a stage beyond magic, polytheism, and religion by comprehending "the origin of all things and the mysterious nature of an invisible and intangible creator" (León-Portilla 1963: 99). In contrast to the priest bound in faith to the "precepts of his religion," the wise man had rationally analyzed the "ancient concepts inherent" in the religious myths

(León-Portilla 1963: 25). He had finally understood that the many deities and their titles were merely expressions of the one supreme, divine principle underlying all nature (León-Portilla 1963: 18, 1992c: 187). In sum, León-Portilla projected evolutionary theories influenced by ancient Greek studies onto Aztec culture in order to explain the inconsistencies found in the historical descriptions of Nahua conceptions of deities.

Waiving the question of Nahua theisms until later, I wish to discuss whether something like *philosophy* might have existed in Nahua culture. León-Portilla understood *philosophy* as the rational challenge to religious knowledge made by "men who began to look skeptically upon the myths and to attempt to rationalize them by formulating questions in abstract and universal terms about man and the world" (León-Portilla 1963: 4). These were questions about life after death, the nature of truth, or whether man has been given free will (León-Portilla 1963: 115). León-Portilla is convinced that a fully fledged philosophical school existed among the Nahuas and that its ideas had been condensed in some parts of the historical sources. Consequently, he set out to reconstruct the teachings of this school from the evidence apparently scattered across the sources (León-Portilla 1992c: 163–168).

According to Maffie, contemporary Anglo-American and European academic philosophers commonly define *philosophy* as an implicit world view, ideology, or cosmovision that underlies all cultures in the world. Not every culture, though, explicitly possesses *philosophers*, that is, people "self-consciously and critically reflecting upon and speculating about the nature, structure, and constitution of reality" (Maffie 2014: 4). Explicit philosophy is often believed to be the "sole invention and possession of Western culture" (Maffie 2014: 4). As such, it plays a "vital role in the modern West's conception of itself and of the non-Western Other," with philosophy regarded as "the pinnacle of humanity's intellectual and rational achievement" (Maffie 2014: 6). It is this idea of European exclusivism that León-Portilla attempts to overcome by recurrently pointing to the existence of Nahua philosophy; he should be praised highly for that. Nevertheless, León-Portilla's attempt to prove the equality of Aztec civilization with ancient European civilizations went too far by also projecting Greek concepts and historical developments onto the Nahuas, the theory of an evolution from primitive polytheism to monotheistic philosophy, the model of philosophical schools, and the philosophical idea of a supreme divine principle underlying all nature.

Disregarding León-Portilla's theories for a time, there is clear evidence in the historical sources for a rich intellectual tradition among the Nahuas. In his detailed analysis of sources and linguistics, Maffie (2014: 8) proved that Nahua culture was based on complex fundamental metaphysics, that is, on a

"systematic and coherent understanding of how things in the broadest possible sense hang together." He also showed that some Nahuas engaged in self-consciously reflective and critical endeavors. These endeavors were, however, different from European philosophies. They were rather a "way-seeking enterprise while Euro-American philosophers overwhelmingly conceive philosophy as a truth-seeking enterprise" (Maffie 2014: 19). Furthermore, Maffie argued, the Nahuas did not separate *philosophy* from *religion*, a fact that should nevertheless not disqualify their endeavors as philosophical (Maffie 2014: 7). Monaghan (2000: 25) similarly dismissed common impressions that "Mesoamerican people lack an intellectual understanding of their religion," even though he acknowledged that "faith and practice" are often intertwined. Colonial sources clearly show that Mesoamerican people at least "have produced the most recognizably theological works in the sixteenth century, during their initial encounter with Christianity" (Monaghan 2000: 25).

In conclusion, there is clear evidence for intellectual thinking in the Nahua world—be it *theological*, *philosophical*, or what we would call *scientific*. There was sufficient economic wealth in Nahua society to sustain people who spent much or all of their time with thinking. We know of many astronomers, astrologers, orators, poets, scribes, book interpreters, historians, and teachers, who were financed by the palaces and the *calpultin*. We also know that most of the young people, at least in the larger cities, received formal education in the *telpochcalli* and *calmecac* schools. What we do not know, for all that, is whether and how much ordinary society members' general vision of the world differed from the perspective of the thoroughly trained intellectual elite.

3.3.2 Spiritual Philosophy and Mystic Militarism

León-Portilla not only argued for the existence of a philosophical school in the Nahua world but also contrasted it with the Aztec "mystic militarism" of the official state cult. This idea of two opposing world views within Nahua culture (which had also been applied to Mesoamerican history in general, contrasting Classic with Postclassic cultures) has been reproduced in many representations of the Aztecs ever since. It had initially been voiced by Laurette Séjourné (1957), who had seen Aztec militarism as a cultural degeneration that stood in striking contrast to an older spiritual path rooted in the ancient worship of Quetzalcoatl among the Teotihuacanos and the Toltecs. According to Séjourné, this spiritual tradition had advocated a search for inner perfection comparable to the world's famous mystery religions. León-Portilla eventually made this idea, as passed on by Caso, the backbone of his dualist model that contrasted mystic militarism with spiritual philosophy. In León-Portilla's view, a pacifistic school of philosophers, based in the town of Texcoco, had contemplated the

ephemerality of life and believed in a supreme divine principle. The militaristic priests and politicians of Tenochtitlan, in contrast, had advocated a sanguinary ideology that promoted the necessity of war and human sacrifice for maintaining the cosmos (León-Portilla 1963: 122, 177; see also León-Portilla 1971a):

> The Aztecs oriented themselves toward the path of mystic imperialism. Convinced that in order to avoid the final cataclysm it was necessary to fortify the sun, they undertook for themselves the mission of furnishing it with the vital energy found only in the precious liquid which keeps man alive. Sacrifice and ceremonial warfare, which was the principle manner of obtaining victims for the sacrificial rites, were their central activities and the very core of their personal, social, military, religious, and national life. This mystical vision of the cult of Huitzilopochtli transformed the Aztecs into great warriors, into "the people of the Sun." This was the attitude taken by the Aztecs in the face of the impending final disaster, which was to bring the Fifth Sun to an end. (León-Portilla 1963: 61)

León-Portilla suggested that this imperialist state cult had been introduced in the second half of the fifteenth century by Tlacaelel, the adviser to several Tenochca *tlatoani*. According to this interpretation, Tlacaelel was responsible for centralizing Aztec religion and transforming it into a state cult as well as for enlarging the temple of Huitzilopochtli and for establishing the "flower wars" as a means to take captives for human sacrifices. It had also been Tlacaelel who had started to use the myth of the divine supremacy of the Mexica to justify Tenochtitlan's imperial expansion (León-Portilla 1963: 103–104, 158–165, 1992c: 104).

According to León-Portilla, not everyone in the Triple Alliance followed this militaristic, imperialist cult of Huitzilopochtli. Opposing Tenochtitlan, the philosophers of Texcoco strongly opposed human sacrifice by referring to the ancient pacifistic cult of Quetzalcoatl. These philosophers, so León-Portilla asserts, had transmitted their wisdom not only in the genre of *huehuetlatolli*, the ancient songs of the wise (León-Portilla 1980a: 6) but also in the *Cantares Mexicanos* (León-Portilla 2011b: 227–231). The "dialogue of flower and song" (León-Portilla 1980a: 53) in the *Cantares*, in particular, contains the "personal expressions of the ideas and feelings of the sages," and "their thoughts, deep experiences, and intuition" (León-Portilla 1980a: 6). Accordingly, León-Portilla painstakingly attempted to prove that the songs had been written by thirteen (or fifteen) individually named poet-sages. The most accomplished and wisest of them all had been Texcoco king Nezahualcoyotl, who had written the most

poetically beautiful songs about the ephemerality of life (León-Portilla 1992a, León-Portilla 1972).

León-Portilla's portrayal of the peaceful and wise philosopher-poets of Texcoco undeniably offers a way for humanistic scholars to praise ancient Aztec culture despite the brutality of its human sacrifices. I believe that this is one of the most powerful reasons why this interpretation has spread so widely in the scholarly and popular image of the Aztecs. Notwithstanding this, it has not gone without scholarly criticism. Jongsoo Lee presented the most decisive critique in his study, *The Allure of Nezahualcoyotl* (2008). In popular imagination, King Nezahualcoyotl (who reigned in Texcoco from 1431 through 1472) is one of the best-known figures of pre-Hispanic Mexico and a symbol for all positive aspects of the Aztec civilization. He is typically regarded as a shining conqueror who ruled a powerful empire as well as an efficient governor who established a fair legal system. He is seen as both a patron of the arts and as a poet himself as well as a sage and religious skeptic who challenged human sacrifice and bloodthirsty Mexica religion; he intuited a supreme, transcendent, peaceful, one God and anticipated the destruction of the Nahua world by the Spaniards (Lee 2008: 1). Lee set out to deconstruct this highly popular image. By contextualizing and re-reading the alphabetical colonial sources and interpreting the surviving pictorial sources, he proved that early colonial Texcoco descendants had invented this image and reinterpreted Nahua culture—Texcoco culture in particular—from the perspective of European and Christian interpretative frames. Let me present some of the details of Lee's argument.

Methodically, Lee analyzed several historical narratives: (1) colonial alphabetical sources on Nezahualcoyotl and the following reception history, (2) pictorial sources on the history of Texcoco, (3) the form and content of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, and (4) the religious interaction between Tenochtitlan and Texcoco at the time of Nezahualcoyotl's installation as king and during his rulership. As a result, Lee proved that the popular image of Nezahualcoyotl has a long tradition. It is a product of the interpretations of the first Christian missionaries reading Nahua sources and of Texcoco informants and writers interested in presenting Texcoco as the most culturally advanced pre-Hispanic town. The image was formed by Indigenous chroniclers such as Ixtlilxochitl, who were fully acculturated to the European, Christian scholastic tradition and who intended to preserve a favorable memory of their Texcoco heritage. It was encouraged by a large list of Creole nationalists, who referred to pre-Hispanic history to construct a national Mexican identity. It was finally promoted by twentieth-century scholars such as Garibay and León-Portilla, who attempted to raise awareness for the intellectual richness of Nahua culture. All of them worked against the image of the inferiority of pre-Hispanic cultures by com-

paring them favorably with European intellectual history (Lee 2008: 2–14, 17–37).

Searching for a less distorted view of Texcoco's historical role in the Basin of Mexico, Lee analyzed the surviving pre-Hispanic pictorial sources with several results. First, it is true that *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl* is named as the founder of Texcoco beside the Chichimec *Xolotl*. This, however, does not imply that Texcoco was the custodian of an ancient cult of Quetzalcoatl but only that the Acolhua legitimized their rulers by referring to their Toltec ancestry. Second, Texcoco did not play a major political role in the Basin of Mexico before its alliance with Tenochtitlan. Third, there is little evidence that Nezahualcoyotl rebuilt Texcoco as a culturally advanced, peaceful, and artistic community. In contrast, he was not only installed by Mexica rulers but also heavily influenced by their politics, culture, and religion, and consequently quite similar to the Mexica (Lee 2008: 37–95). According to the pictorial sources, Nezahualcoyotl was rather a great practitioner of Nahua religion, and after Tenochtitlan defeated Texcoco, Tenochtitlan priests were sent to Texcoco to rebuild its temple and priesthood (Lee 2008: 201). Nezahualcoyotl built the new temple in the style of the Mexica and it served both Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Under Nezahualcoyotl's reign, close relationships to the Mexica were maintained, human sacrifices were conducted, and the *veintenas* were performed in the same way as in Tenochtitlan. "Thus, the Texcoca religion under Nezahualcoyotl was the result of a Mexicanization that assimilated the civil and religious organizations of Tenochtitlan" (Lee 2008: 209; see also 96–127, 191–228).

Lee then deconstructed the *Cantares Mexicanos* as the expression of a Texcoco philosophical school. He first followed Bierhorst's rebuttal of León-Portilla's interpretation that the songs were actually composed by individual authors, with Nezahualcoyotl prominent among them. Lee then showed that the songs do not voice an alternative to Mexica religion, as León-Portilla had stated. Rather, they contain many references to the belief that the sun needs to be nourished with human sacrifices, along with expressions of a war-focused cosmology into which the theme of ephemerality fits tightly (Lee 2008: 129–189). All in all, Lee convincingly showed that the image of Texcoco as the place where Nezahualcoyotl led a school of peaceful philosophers who believed in the one, true God as the supreme divine principle underlying all nature cannot be proven from the historical sources.

It is true that some aspects of Nahua cosmovision as painted in the sources seem to be contradictory, at least to contemporary Europeanized eyes. It is difficult for us to understand how the impression of a cosmic hunger for blood and the brutal practice of human sacrifice on the one hand might run together with beautiful and poetically refined expressions of feelings of ephemerality

and the deep reflections about the nature of reality on the other hand. Considering the scarcity of source information that might help to explain this diversity in Nahua cosmovision, we will probably never know whether these two world views were merely different aspects of a single cosmovision or whether they were expressions of opposing schools of thought.

4 Conclusion: Diversity within the Nahua Tradition

Summing up the discussion about the extent of religious diversity, we can say that Mesoamerican religions throughout history are related through a common stock of ideas and practices and a basic form of cosmovision. In the Central Mexican Postclassic, even more cultural traits were shared, among them a common writing style, a religious symbol set, divinatory interpretations, and forms of rituals. Regarding the Nahuas, I discussed potential religious differences between popular worship and intellectuals and between philosophical speculations and official state cult. It is time to find a conclusion regarding the diversity of religious thoughts and practices within Nahua culture.

In our work as Nahua historians, we are faced with two fundamental challenges: first, the available sources reflect only particular perspectives on pre-Hispanic history and religious lore and practices; second, the information across sources and within individual sources is often inconsistent or even contradictory. Many of these sources express the dominant or official world view of several local elites. The dominant group within a society is typically interested in either maintaining the status quo or changing it in its favor, and it has more power to do so than other social groups (López Austin 1988b: 409). We know that, in this manner, several Nahua kings changed legislation, issued moral codes, and centralized state religion. We do not know, however, how much power these kings actually had to influence their subjects' world view. Nahua society was highly stratified, with different social groups maintaining power over their own political organization, schooling, codes of social conduct, and ritual performances. We know that young people were educated in schools, but we do not know how uniform this education was across different *calpultin* and *altepeme*. Neither do we know much about life in *altepeme* other than Tenochtitlan and Texcoco, and even less about people living at the fringes of their respective *altepetl* or at the periphery of the Aztec Empire (see, e.g., Hassig 2001: 124). Most probably, considerable religious diversity existed, which depended on ethnic identity, *altepetl* affiliation, social status, profession, family, age, gender, individual character, and context and situation.

For colonial times, Gruzinski noted immense cultural dynamics at work. The Indigenous people showed much creativity in adapting to the new situation and to incorporating aspects of the European and Christian world view into their own. Based on this impression, Gruzinski challenged not only our views on the colonial process of Hispanization and our images of pre-Hispanic cultures

> but also the coherence that we generally attribute to societies and the cultural structures that we intend to reconstruct. Several times I have had a sense that the indeterminacy, the coexistence of contradictory traits, the absence of references or their eradication, the decontextualization of features, in a general way the discontinuous were, up to a certain point, favourable to the birth of new cultural organizations. I would have wished to look further along this road and to shake up habits of thoughts that tend to distinguish or delineate entities as more closed, logical and coherent than they actually were. Moreover, I fell into this intellectual habit every time I forgot that prehispanic societies were certainly less uniform than the writings of the Spanish chroniclers or the accounts of their indigenous informants allow us to understand. (Gruzinski 1993: 284)

Rabasa (2011) pointed in a similar way to the creativity of cultural contact in the first colonial decades between the Spanish missionaries and the local Indigenous people. He argued that individual people, with their unique ways of dealing with the colonial situation, look back at us through the colonial sources. If this individual creativity is apparent for colonial times, why should we think that the people living in pre-Hispanic Mexico had no individual agency to interpret the world around them and to act accordingly? There is simply no (prejudice-free) reason to think that pre-Hispanic Nahua culture was *not* heterogeneous and diverse.

López Austin implemented this thought as early as 1988 in his book *The Human Body and Ideology* (1988a) as well as in later publications. This move runs parallel to a general change of paradigm in the humanities, social sciences, and, later, in the study of religion. Scholars increasingly began to challenge earlier essentializing and homogenizing constructions of collective identities such as ethnicities or religions. They discovered the constructed character of imagined communities (Anderson 1983) and invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), which are continuously formed in daily discursive and bodily acts of negotiation and identity formation (Foucault 1866, 1976, Bourdieu 1977, Connerton 1989). In doing so, scholars also turned their attention to the large diversity of world views and practices within any tradition up to the level

of the individual and the contextual and situational. López Austin argued in a similar way, although he does not refer explicitly to any approach from other disciplines. López Austin (1997: 9) clearly stated that "social differences, contradictions, tensions, and asymmetries produce different concepts of the world within the same society." Even though individuals are products of society, "thought is produced in the individual," forming a unique world view (López Austin 1988b: 12). Individuals orient themselves within the larger world view of their culture and act within this system to meet their needs and wishes. In many cases, this is done quite consciously: If one shares the belief of one's culture that deities are relevant agents, one will most probably act accordingly. In this process, individuals switch between different knowledge systems of particular cultural fields and actively search for appropriate solutions to their problems. At the same time, not every need is conscious, and the many disciplines that study the behavior of human beings attempt to distinguish these needs (one need, e.g., is maintaining social status).

Consequently, particular behavior, such as religious sacrifice, can be explained in many different ways, for example, ideologically (it was thought to keep the cosmos from collapsing) or politically (it provoked fear in conquered peoples and helped to dominate them) (López Austin 1988b: 411–412). In this, no individual knows every knowledge system available in her or his culture. Furthermore, individuals do not require their world view to be absolutely coherent, neatly arranged, and universal. Nor do they always rationally reflect on their reasons for acting as they do. Despite these differences, something like a culturally shared world view does exist in the form of ideological systems of social fields, of comprehensive world views of particular social groups, or of an ideology of one culture. In López Austin's view, this shared world view is formed and exchanged primarily in communication in "practical, daily relationships" and "attains high levels of congruency and rationality, despite the fact that its producers may or may not have been conscious of their participation in its creation" (López Austin 1997: 9).

In conclusion, Nahua culture, along with religion, is something that is abstracted from the world views of single individuals, who constantly interact with one another, negotiate appropriate behavior, and construct cultural knowledge. Since the Nahua society was rather large and locally and socially diversified, we should assume that many different variants of this knowledge system existed, albeit remaining variants of the same system. This system is not only diversified and fuzzy at the edges but also constructed by the respective person attempting to describe it. In consequence, the historian who attempts to reconstruct Nahua culture works on this abstract level and relies on its relative congruency. The result of this reconstruction is a relatively coherent

description of Nahua culture "blended by time, one that may be attributed, very abstractly, to the Nahua people" (López Austin 1988b: 2, see also 407–408). Reflecting the strong influence of the Tenochtitlan social elite on many of the available sources about the Nahuas, this study is based substantially on their perspective of the world. Nevertheless, the sources also contain many references to activities shared across all sections of society as well as to cosmological root concepts "firmly anchored in non-elite views about the nature and way of things" (Maffie 2014: 2). Consequently, this study sets out to (re)construct only a general sense of reality in Nahua society and an implicit Indigenous semiotic theory basically underlying all activities without necessarily being shared consciously by all members of the society.

CHAPTER 3

Living in Relation: Being Human in Tenochtitlan

After discussing aspects of cultural diversity in the Late Postclassic Central Mexican Highlands, we can now look at the Nahua perspective about what it meant to be living in that time at that place. We start by tracing traditional myths about the creation of the cosmos and the human world of the Central Highlands before painting a picture of how (the Nahuas believed that) the cosmic dynamics unfold in space and time. On this basis, we examine how the Nahuas felt themselves manifoldly embedded in cosmic and social relations and analyze the resulting guidelines that the Nahuas developed for living a good, healthy, and morally upright life in balance with the cosmic and social environment. These aspects are core parts of the Nahua sense of reality and provide the foundation for any deeper analyses in the following chapters.

1 How the World Came to Be

Several constitutive cosmogonic myths have been passed on to us from the pre-Hispanic Nahuas.[1] The following brief recount of the basic events focuses primarily on sources from Tenochtitlan and does not consider literary, performative, ritual, political, or further dimensions.

1.1 *The Original Cosmos*

Whereas many cosmogonic accounts begin with the story of the Five Suns, the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* recounts an earlier stage of creation (see also Nicholson 1971: 397). In the beginning, there was a divine, self-creative, and complementary couple, *Tonacacihuatl* (Lady of Our Flesh/Sustenance) and *Tonacatecuhtli* (Lord of Our Sustenance), who dwelled in the thirteenth layer of the skies. At some point in their existence, they engendered four sons: Red Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), Black Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), and Blue *Omitecuhtli* (Bone Lord, whom the Mexica called Huitzilopochtli, "Hummingbird's Left"). After six hundred years, Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli were commissioned to initiate creation and so

1 For an excellent presentation of the different creation myths in one synthesizing narrative, see the 1966 Patricia Amlin film, which animates images from the *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl* and the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*.

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they created fire, the primordial half-sun, and the primeval ancestors of the humans (*macehualtin*), the couple *Cipactonal* and *Oxomoco*. The two were assigned basic chores, Cipactonal to spin and weave and Oxomoco to till the soil. Cipactonal was also taught how to use maize kernels for divination and healing. Simultaneously, Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli introduced the count of days and engendered several further deities and their dwellings: *Mictlantecuhtli* and *Mictecacihuatl* (Lord and Lady of the Dead) in *Mictlan* (the underworld of the dead) and Tlaloc (the god of rain) and his spouse *Chalchiuhtlicue* (Green Stones Her Skirt, the goddess of fresh water) in the waters. Eventually, the *cipactli* (alligator) *Tlaltecuhtli* was created and placed in the water to form the earth. After these creations, the first human couple gave birth to a son and he married a maiden created from the hairs of the goddess *Xochiquetzal* (Flower-Feather).

The most characteristic feature of this myth is that it is no cosmogony, at least not in the sense of ex nihilo. There are no beginnings, only continuings.[2] The original cosmos with the thirteenth layer of the skies and the primordial divine couple, also called *Omecihuatl* (commonly translated as "Two Lady") and *Ometecuhtli* (Two Lord), had always existed. *Ometeotl* (the paired couple) is self-creative in itself. Common scholarly interpretations of this primordial stage of the world's existence describe this time-place as peaceful, transcendent, and eternal, that is, without time. This beyond-otherworld (*allá-entonces*) is the "time of the divine leisure" (*el tiempo del ocio divino*) (López Austin 2008b: 25, translation mine). Nevertheless, the narrative also allows a different reading. According to Maffie's interpretation, the primordial stage was characterized by movement, motion-change, activity, and even by struggle, because the primordial divine couple was a complementary pair of two partners with energetic movement between them. Complementary pairs were presented in Nahua culture as continuous back-and-forth motions between two poles. From such a motion between Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli, creation was eventually initiated; from the struggle between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, the five sun-ages were later created and destroyed (Maffie 2014: 432–436). Taking this cultural concept of energetic movement between the two partners of a complementary pair into consideration, the interpretation of the primordial stage of the world as eternal and unchanging seems to be a European projection.

2 For a comprehensive discussion of this, see Maffie (2014: 433–436, 446–448).

1.2 *The Five Suns*

The legend of the Five Suns is the most famous myth of the ancient Nahuas, brought to public awareness through its depiction on the massive Calendar Stone. It is told in many of the sources, including the *Leyenda de los Soles* and the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (both part of the *Codex Chimalpopoca*, Bierhorst 1992a, 1992b), the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, the *Histoyre du Mechique*, and the *Codex Vaticanus A 3738/Ríos* (Anders and Jansen 1996).[3] The accounts differ in many of their details and in the sequence of the eras but agree on the same basic structure of the tale.

According to the Tenochtitlan variants of the myth, there was a sequence of five cosmic eras, each with distinctive characteristics. While the first four were destroyed by different cataclysms, the fifth era is the contemporary one, that is, the one the ancient Nahuas lived in. The first four eras were created alternatingly by Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. They were defined by different elements (earth, wind, fire, and water) and ruled by different suns and deities (Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and Chalchiuhtlicue). They were also inhabited by different kinds of human precursors, who ate different types of food. Depending on the sources, the human population was either destroyed completely at the end of each era or transformed into monkeys, turkeys, butterflies, and fish. Each of the eras was named with a calendar date that pointed toward the catastrophe ending the era: *Nahui Ocelotl* (4-Jaguar), *Nahui Ehecatl* (4-Wind), *Nahui Quiahuitl* (4-Rain), and *Nahui Atl* (4-Water). Each era lasted a specific number of years in multiples of fifty-two.[4]

After the destruction of the fourth sun, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca joined forces to create a new sun from the shattered universe, the Fifth Sun, called *Nahui Olin* (4-Movement) and ruled by *Tonatiuh*. According to the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca afterwards transformed themselves into trees to separate sky from earth. This happened in the year *Ce Tochtli* (1-Rabbit) and initiated the first fifty-two-year cycle. In the *Histoyre du Mechique*, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca transformed themselves into serpents and created the sky and earth by splitting the earth monster Tlaltecuhtli in half. Afterward, the other gods attempted to console the split earth by creating the world from her body parts—mountains from her nose, wells and springs from her eyes, and trees and flowers from her hair.

3 For an account of colonial sources, see Elzey (1976: 114–115).

4 See Bierhorst (1992a: 87–88, 90, 1992b: 142–147) and Christensen (2018: chapters 3–6). See also the *Codex Vaticanus A 3738/Ríos*, folios 006r, 006v, and 007r.

However, Tlaltecuhtli continued to cry aloud at night and refused to bear fruit if she could not be fed with human blood and human hearts.[5]

All through the creation, destruction, and re-creation of the five eras, the cosmos (made up of the sky and the underworld) remained unchanged, just as (the movement of) the calendar. The only things that change are the nature of the sun, the earthly plane, and the nature of the earth's inhabitants, including their food. Therefore, the eras commonly called the "Five Suns" are neither cosmic ages nor earth ages but rather Sun-Earth Eras (Maffie 2014: 219–220).

1.3 *The Creation of Humankind*

In the Fifth Era, humankind was created even before a new sun was created. According to the *Leyenda de los Soles*, Quetzalcoatl was sent to the underworld, Mictlan, to obtain human bones and ashes from the human generations of the previous eras. Mictlantecuhtli, however, refused to give Quetzalcoatl the bones and demanded that he pass an unpassable test: to play music from a solid conch shell. The clever Quetzalcoatl, however, asked for help from the worms and bees, who pierced the shell and created a flute. Since Quetzalcoatl was then able to play music, the angry Mictlantecuhtli had no choice but to let him take the bones. Nevertheless, Mictlantecuhtli, in an attempt to recover the bones from Quetzalcoatl, chased him through the underworld. Although Quetzalcoatl dropped the bones at one point while falling into a pit that Mictlantecuhtli's spirit helpers had dug to intercept him, he was finally able to leave the underworld with the broken pieces of bones. He delivered them to the gods assembled in *Tamoanchan* (House of Birth), where *Cihuacoatl* started grinding them into dust. Quetzalcoatl, soon followed by the other gods, dropped blood from his penis on the bone dust to form a dough from which the first human beings of the Fifth Era were born a couple of days later.

Thereupon, the gods needed to find food for the newly created human beings. On this search, Quetzalcoatl met a red ant carrying a kernel of corn, and so he transformed himself into a black ant and followed the red ant to *Tonacatepetl* (Sustenance Mountain), which was filled with maize. Quetzalcoatl took a sample of the corn to the other gods, who chose it as food for the human beings. When Quetzalcoatl attempted to carry Tonacatepetl to the human beings, he failed, and it was left to the god *Nanahuatl* (Sick with Pustules) and to *tlaloque* (Tlaloc's assistants) of various colors to steal the food from the mountain.

5 See Jonghe (1905: 25–26, 28–29).

1.4 *The Creation of the Sun and the Moon*

All these events occurred in darkness. In the year *Matlactli Omei Acatl* (13-Reed), the gods assembled at Teotihuacan to create a new sun. Two of the gods were selected to throw themselves into a bonfire to transform themselves into the sun and moon: the rich and handsome *Tecciztecatl* for the sun and the poor, ugly Nanahuatl for the moon. The coward Tecciztecatl, however, lost his courage and hesitated to jump, only to be superseded by the courageous Nanahuatl. After Nanahuatl's jump, Tecciztecatl finally took heart and managed to jump as well. Two suns were now standing in the sky. They shone similarly bright until one of the other gods flung a rabbit into Tecciztecatl's face and thus made him into the moon. The sun, nevertheless, stood still in the sky without moving. Only after the gods sacrificed their own blood was the sun nourished for its path through the skies at day and the underworlds at night. This autosacrifice by the gods set an example for the human beings, who from that time on were required to nourish the sun with their own blood. In a different account of the legend, the wind god *Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl* is the one who made the sun move with his blowing. Finally, the gods gathered all their mantles, jewels, and snake and jaguar skins and formed them into sacred bundles (*tlaquimilolli*) bearing the gods' names and gave them to the human people.[6]

The Fifth Era was defined by the movement (*olin*) of its sun Tonatiuh through the sky. Tonatiuh provided the earth and its inhabitants with warmth and solar energy (the *tonalli*). He also ordered the world into cardinal directions and provided a center. If it stopped moving, the world would lose its center and thus all stability and balance. The centering quality of the sun distinguished the Fifth Sun-Earth Era from its four predecessors. While the first four eras were dominated by either Quetzalcoatl's or Tezcatlipoca's powers and characterized by one of the four basic elements each, the Fifth Era, in contrast, was defined by the influence of both deities and contained all four elements at the same time. The forces of all four elements and the cardinal directions were believed to be in constant motion, like the sun. This is why the Fifth Era was called Nahui Olin, with movement and motion-change as its defining characteristic. The Fifth Sun was also the first to have created a center as a point of balance between the complementary pairs. The existence of this stabilizing factor, nevertheless, was considered a "mixed blessing" (Maffie 2014: 224). While it made the fifth world full and complete, it also made it overripe, like an apple about to fall to the ground. Because the general movement, and thus the continuation of the cycle of generation and degeneration, was part of its very

6 For the story of Ehecatl blowing the sun into movement, see Sahagún (1953: VII, 3–8). For the sacred bundles, see Jonghe (1905: 32–33).

existence, the destiny of the Fifth Era was to fall into decay at some point and to be finally destroyed by cataclysmic earthquakes. The human beings living in this era, aware of this coming end, tried to postpone it and engaged in constant ritual intervention by feeding both the sun and earth and by continuously attempting to stabilize the complementary forces into balance (Maffie 2014: 213–214, 223–225, 439–442).

2 How the Human World Came to Be

Having presented the most elemental myths about the creation of the cosmos, I now turn to the creation of the world that was known most intimately to the Nahuas: the origins of the Nahua groups and their settlement in the Central Highlands, from the migration from Aztlan to the founding of Tenochtitlan. Seen from the perspective of modern Western historiography, these narratives merge mythical with historical events.

2.1 *The Migration from Aztlan*

The migration of the Mexica from their (semi-)mythical homeplace, Aztlan, is recorded in several pictorial manuscripts, most famously the *Codex Boturini* (Rubin, Lejarazu, and Arroyo 1991), and in alphabetical accounts of several colonial chroniclers, such as Durán (1994) or Tezozómoc (1975). According to this legend, the ancestors of the Mexica had dwelled on a lake island called Aztlan (Place of Whiteness or Place of the Herons). In the year *Ce Tecpatl* (1-Flint), a year auspicious for departures, they left the island and met their god Huitzilopochtli in a cave on the mainland. There, at *Colhuacan* (Curved Mountain), they joined eight other tribes (*calpultin*) and went on the journey together, with one person carrying Huitzilopochtli's sacred bundle. Eventually, at one of their resting places, the travelers witnessed how the trunk of a cypress tree split in two. They took that as a bad omen and asked Huitzilopochtli for advice. The deity instructed the Mexica to separate from the other tribes and to continue their wanderings alone. Some time later, Huitzilopochtli told them to call themselves the *Mexica* from then onward, and he gave them a bow and arrow and a game bag. In his guise as an eagle, Huitzilopochtli also taught his subjects how to sacrifice and make war. After these events, the Mexica wandered for many years, stopping to stay at several places for a couple of years. Among these places were Tollan and Chapultepec (Grasshopper Mountain). When they finally arrived at Lake Texcoco, they celebrated the New Fire Ceremony for the first time in their history.

The narrative, as Durán (1994: 12–41) told it, also includes such details as internal intrigues, including the fight between Huitzilopochtli and his shaman sister, *Malinalxochitl,* and conflicts with the people living in the places where the Mexica had stayed during their journey. In this narrative, Huitzilopochtli is an important agent; he continually spoke with the Mexica, was angered by their behavior, stirred unrest and conflict, and ordered them to continue their travels, promising a land of plenty as their final destination.

The Aztlan migration myth played an important role in the Mexica identity. Durán (1994: 112–122) tells us how the later ruler Motecuhzoma I attempted to rediscover Aztlan, imagined as the place of generous food supplies, lovely scenery, song and dance, and general delight. Motecuhzoma I consulted his adviser, Tlacaelel, and his court historian, Cuauhcoatl, in this matter. The two men told him that the knowledge of Aztlan's whereabouts had been lost and that ordinary people could no longer find and return to it. Following their advice, Motecuhzoma I sent out a group of sixty "wizards," "sorcerers," and "magicians" (Durán 1994: 214) laden with gifts to find Aztlan. The shamans, after some fruitless searching, eventually transformed into their animal alter egos and in this disguise finally found Aztlan. There, after transforming back into their human forms, they met Huitzilopochtli's mother, the goddess *Coatlicue* (Serpent Skirt), who invited them to climb the hilltop where she lived. The shamans, however, had difficulties climbing and realized, to their astonishment, that this was not the case for the Aztlan people, who walked lightly and did not die. This difference was attributed to the Aztlan people's simple and frugal way of living in comparison to the Mexica's luxury diet and pampered lifestyle. Coatlicue and her people were just as astounded that the first emigrants from Aztlan had died a long time ago. At the end of the story, the shamans received gifts from Coatlicue, returned to Motecuhzoma I in the normal world, and told him all about their experiences. To this day, the myth of Aztlan has not lost its power in the popular imagination, most importantly in the modern Chicano/a movement (see Carrasco 2019).

2.2 *The Birth of Ethnic Groups at Chicomoztoc*

Several variants of the migration myth identify Aztlan with *Chicomoztoc*, the "Place of Seven Caves" (e.g., Durán 1994: 12–13, 22) located alternatively on the island Aztlan or on the mainland at Colhuacan. The narrative begins with the Aztecs originally dwelling in seven caves, from where they were born into the world (see Figure 1). Each cave hosted a specific ethnic group, and one after another each left Chicomoztoc following the intervention of their respective tutelary god, with the Mexica being the last. The myth of Chicomoztoc is widespread in Central Mexico, much more than the myth of the migration from

Aztlan. Many pictorial sources depict the Place of Seven Caves, most beautifully the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (folio 5r, Leibsohn 2009: plate 1, page 107). In this manuscript, it is the Chichimec groups who live in the seven caves. These Chichimecs were visited by the Toltecs, who asked them for help as allied warriors in a battle to control the pilgrimage site, *Cholula*. This event is also depicted in the beautiful *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*, which shows how the Chichimecs left Chicomoztoc after negotiations with the Toltecs. The left side of the map shows their long journey, in which they needed to pass many obstacles to get to Cholula. After a successful war at Cholula, the Toltecs gave the Chichimecs a place to settle, which was the founding of Cuauhtinchan, as seen on the right side of the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*.

2.3 *The Birth of Huitzilopochtli*

The story of the birth of Huitzilopochtli is told in several accounts. On the course of their travels, the Mexica reached a place called Coatepec (Hill of the Serpent). According to the legend, as told by Sahagún (1978: 1–5), a devout woman called Coatlicue lived at Coatepec. One day, while she was sweeping the temple, she found a ball of feathers and placed it at her waist. Thus, she became pregnant with Huitzilopochtli. Her four hundred sons and her daughter, Coyolxauhqui (Adorned with Small Bells), were angry about her shameful pregnancy and decided to kill mother and child as soon as the child was born. Hearing about this plan, Coatlicue became sad and cried. The child in her womb, nevertheless, comforted her. When Huitzilopochtli was later informed by one of the brothers that his siblings had already dressed for war, he decided to be born dressed in full military array, including his weapon, the fire serpent *Xiuhcoatl*. In the following fight, Huitzilopochtli first killed his sister, Coyolxauhqui, cut her into pieces, and threw her shattered body down the hill. Then he killed most of his brothers and came out of the fight victorious. After this event, the Mexica devoutly honored Huitzilopochtli.

This legend played an important role in Mexica mythology and served as an allegory and behavioral model in fighting situations and defeat. Hence, the Mexica reenacted it when the Spaniards attempted to conquer the empire. They ritually killed Spanish soldiers (standing for the four hundred brothers) on top of the Templo Mayor (associated with Coatepec) and threw their body parts down the pyramid (see Carrasco and Sessions 1998: 92, Clendinnen 1991: 199). The massive Stone of Coyolxauhqui, which was discovered during construction works near the Zocalo (Plaza de la Constitucion) in Mexico City in 1978, magnificently depicts the dismembered body parts of Coyolxauhqui and had most probably lain at the base of the stairs of the Templo Mayor during pre-Hispanic times. Some scholars interpret the original story as a solar myth,

in which the sun (Huitzilopochtli) defeats the moon (Coyolxauhqui) and the stars (the four hundred brothers) at dawn (Carrasco 2012: 74).

2.4 *The Founding of Tenochtitlan*

At some point in their travels, the Mexica settled at a barren place belonging to the *altepetl* of Culhuacan. Despite the location being snake-infested and infertile, the Mexica managed to flourish. Eventually, the Culhua king Achitometl acknowledged them as good subjects. Based on this, they asked for the king's favorite daughter to be married to their god Huitzilopochtli; the king agreed, believing in a great future for his daughter. The Mexica, however, sacrificed the princess to their god and flayed her. When her father, who was invited to the ceremonies, saw his daughter killed, he angrily started to chase the Mexica from their home. The Mexica fled into the swamps surrounding Lake Texcoco and wandered through them for weeks. One day, one of the priests received a prophecy from Huitzilopochtli in his dream. According to this, the Mexica would soon find their promised land of plenty marked by an eagle sitting atop a tall nopal cactus with a serpent in its peak. And indeed, the Mexica soon saw Huitzilopochtli's sign on an island in Lake Texcoco. There, they settled and founded Tenochtitlan, the "Place of the Stony Nopal Cactus." This happened in the year *Ome Calli* (2-House), probably 1325 AD (see Durán 1994: 35–44).

The most famous pre-Hispanic pictorial depiction of this legend about the founding of Tenochtitlan is the first folio of the *Codex Mendoza*, which shows Tenochtitlan divided into four quarters, with the eagle on top of the cactus in the middle holding a snake in its beak (Berdan and Anawalt 1997: folio 1r). Mexico also chose this image for its new national flag during the Mexican War of Independence.

3 How the Cosmic Dynamics Unfold

Transcending the narratives of the traditional Nahua myths, we now examine more abstractly how the cosmic dynamics of the Fifth Era were believed to have unfolded. Time and space were deeply intertwined rather than two distinct entities. This idea of interdependency, reflected in the horizon astronomy the Nahuas practiced (Read 1998: 64), is expressed in several Nahuatl linguistic constructions. The verbal suffix *-yan*, for example, is used for both locative and temporal indications (Launey and Mackay 2011: 248). The idea of interdependency is depicted most clearly in the cosmogram of the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer/Tezcatlipoca* (see Figure 2; Anders, Jansen, and Pérez Jiménez 1994: plate 1), where time and space were blended with the year and day

signs of the calendar running through the four cardinal directions. As Maffie poignantly summarized: "All places are timed, and all times are places. Time literally takes places and place literally takes time" (2014: 422). Metaphysically, time and space were not separate from each other and merely presented two distinctive aspects of the same cosmic motion. For reasons of simplicity for contemporary Western readers, I first describe both aspects separately before going back to the dynamics unfolding between the two.

3.1 *The Spatial Structure of the Cosmos*

The Nahuas did not imagine space as an abstract entity or neutral frame of reference, like a container in which events happen. Rather, space was experienced as concrete and specific with distinct quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Therefore, it is more appropriate to write of *place* than of *space*. Place was perceived as timed and interrelated not only with the sun and the cosmos in general but also with the inhabitants of the cosmos, that is, with human beings, animals, plants, mountains, or waters. Place was experienced as a living being with its own personality and agency. The Nahuas interacted primarily with its persona of the Valley of Mexico, their place of home (Maffie 2014: 421).

Interaction with *Tlalocan* (in this case understood as a specific personification of this landscape) took place primarily through ritual activities at specific locations that were experienced as significant focal points of spatial energy or, in other words, as points where communication with Tlaloc was felt to be more effective than at other points (Arnold 1999: 2). Human life depended on sustenance from the sacred mountain. The Nahuas imagined themselves not at the end but in the middle of the cosmic food chain and seamless cycle of energies. A large stone relief recently found at the Templo Mayor shows Tlaltecuhtli with a teeth-studded mouth in the center of her face and more mouths gaping at each of its joints.[7] This was an "eating landscape" (Arnold 1999: 3), dependent on human beings feeding it with their blood, hearts, and bodies. In a relationship considered reciprocal, the Nahuas provided this nourishment to the earth to ensure their own nourishment in return (Arnold 1999: 7). This locative and intimately bodily relation to the land stood in stark contrast to the European utopian ideology of space that the first Franciscan missionaries brought to Mexico. This European ideology emphasized salvation from the earthly,

7 See "Se cumplen 10 años del descubrimiento del monolito de la diosa Tlaltecuhtli," Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.inah.gob.mx/es/boletines/5623-se-cumplen-10-anos-del-descubrimiento-del-monolito-de-la-diosa-tlaltecuhtli>.

material existence with the immaterial soul searching rest in the transcendent realm of heaven (Arnold 1999: 20, 218, 239). With the increasing colonial Europeanization, the pre-Hispanic relationship to land was fundamentally changed, transforming land through cartography and geography into an abstraction separate from its human inhabitants (Arnold 1999: 203).

Cosmologically, the Nahuas experienced the surface of the earth (*tlalticpac*) on which they lived as one layer of many in a complex structured universe. The alligator Tlaltecuhtli was surrounded by the celestial ocean that extended vertically up to the sky (Sahagún 1963: XI, 247, Nicholson 1971: 403, 406). Tlalticpac is depicted pictorially most often as a four-leaved flower with a precious green stone in the center (López Austin 1988b: 58). The differently named four segments corresponded with the cardinal directions and were associated with different colors and objects (Sahagún 1953: VII, 21).[8] The outer edges of the petals were flanked with trees, on which some depictions show birds perched (see Figure 3; e.g., Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1993: folios 49–53, 72, Anders and Jansen 1993: folios 17–18; see also Nicholson 1971: 403, López Austin 1988b: 62). In the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl* and the *Codex Vaticanus 3773 B/Tonalpouhqui* (Anders and Jansen 1993), four figures support the lowest sky at each cardinal point. This horizontal image of the earthly plane was one of the most basic orientational frames for the Nahuas. The image of a center and the periphery played an important role in everyday life (Burkhart 1989: 67, 86).

The earthly plane was embedded in a structure of vertical layers ordering the cosmos into a series of nine underworlds and thirteen (alternatively, nine) celestial planes (López Austin 1988b: 56). Each of the planes has a distinct color and was inhabited by particular divine beings. The names (and numbers) of the planes and their attributes vary greatly across the sources, leaving us with largely confusing data (López Austin 1988b: 56). In descriptions of Aztec cosmogony (see Nicholson 1971: Table 2, López Austin 1988b: 54–55), the tables visualizing the levels and their attributes are most commonly based on the depiction and glosses of the *Codex Vaticanus A 3738/Ríos* (Anders and Jansen 1996: folio 001v). Additional information is given in the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1978: III, 41–49) and in the *Historia de las Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (Christensen 2018: chap. 2). Sahagún described the nine underworlds as stations for the soul to pass through on its way to eternal rest in the lowest of the underworlds (Sahagún 1978: III, 41–46). This description, however, might show a Christian influence similar to the common colonial association of the garden-like underworld of Tamoanchan with the Christian paradise (Burkhart

8 For a table of directions, colors, tree species, bird/animal species, sky bearers, and year and day signs, see Nicholson (1971: Table 1, page 405).

1992: 89). European influences might also be responsible for the representation of the cosmic layers in the *Codex Vaticanus A 3738/Ríos*; at least its seventeenth-century Italian commentary looks conspicuously like Dante's cosmology in his *Divine Comedy* (see Read 2002: 153–154).

Although the image of several vertical cosmic layers is pre-Hispanic, their association with value judgments is a European projection. In European thinking, a vertical scale is typically associated with a hierarchy, and altitude corresponds with quality. Accordingly, it is imagined that the higher the layer the better, the more perfect, or the more real it is. On the contrary, the Nahua sources have no reference to a hierarchical ordering of the layers. Molina, in his Nahuatl dictionary, uses the classifier *tlamantli* for counting the layers of the heavens ("cielos") (see Molina 1880: I, 119). Tlamantli is typically used for counting things of the same material that can be piled upon one another, like bowls, plates, or cloth. Hence, Maffie (2014: 30, 506–507) suggested interpreting the cosmic layers rather as folds of a blanket gathered over each other and thus representing different folds of the same metaphysical substance.

3.2 *The Temporal Structure of the Cosmos*

Analogous to place, the Nahuas did not conceptualize time as abstract and homogeneous but as concrete, material, spaced, and heterogeneous. Time was visualized as bundles carried on the backs of porters coming and going. Each of these burdens presented a specific type of energy with a distinct type of character, qualitatively different from the others. Despite the substantialist image of the carried bundles of time, we should think of Nahua time as a relationship between materially spaced events rather than as a substance or an entity (Maffie 2014: 452–459). Thus, time was a pattern in the unfolding of cosmic energy comparable to a biorhythm that unfolds from within an organism and is responsible for different processes in the organism (Maffie 2014: 419–421).

The system the Nahuas used to understand this biorhythm had deep roots in Mesoamerican history. It was based on the combination of two different calendars, the 260-day ritual year *tonalpohualli* and the *xihuitl*, equivalent to the solar year. Combined with each other, these two calendars formed a Calendar Round of fifty-two years, the *xiuhmolpilli*. The most comprehensive Nahua source on this calendar system is the *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl* (Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1991). It shows different units of the *tonalpohualli*, two sets of year signs of the *xiuhmolpilli*, and different festivals associated with the *xihuitl*.

The *tonalpohualli* is a repeating pattern of 260-day bundles. Its basic structure was formed by the combination of thirteen numbers, depicted as a series of dots, with twenty distinctive day signs, such as *calli* (house), *tochtli* (rabbit),

acatl (reed) or *tecpatl* (flint). We do not know the metaphysical meaning of the different day signs, but it seems reasonable to assume that their selection was not arbitrary (Maffie 2014: 425). Just like the day signs, each of the numbers presented a distinct quality based on a complex numerology (Maffie 2014: 215–219). In the *tonalpohualli*, the numbers ran twenty times through the sequence one through thirteen to form 260 days. Each number in the sequence was combined with a different day sign running through its own sequence of twenty signs. This makes, for example, *Ce Cipactli* (1-Earth Alligator), *Ome Ehecatl* (2-Wind), *Yei Calli* (3-House), and so forth, until *Matlactli Omei Acatl* (13-Reed) continuing with *Ce Ocelotl* (1-Jaguar) until *Chicome Xochitl* (7-Flower), after which the numbers ran forth while the day sign sequence began anew. After 260 days, all combinations of numbers and day signs had been covered once, and the cycle began anew with *Ce Cipactli*. Each sequence of thirteen days is grouped in a week, usually called *trecena* (thirteen) in Spanish. Each of the twenty *trecencas* had a distinctive quality defined by the influence of divine patrons. Alongside the sequences of numbers and day signs within one *trecena* ran three further sequences of signs: thirteen Lords of the Day and thirteen volatiles (twelve bird species plus one butterfly), which were both tied to the numbers, as well as nine so-called Lords of the Night.[9] Alphabetical glosses named the Lords of the Day and Night with the names of deities. The calendric role of these additional sequences, particularly of the Nine Lords of the Night, is poorly understood. Maybe they were related to the (nine) layers of the sky and the underworld, as Henry B. Nicholson (1971: 407–408) suggested.

In sum, each day possessed a unique quality defined by the combination of several other qualities: one day number, one day sign, one Lord of the Day, one Lord of the Night, and one volatile, furthermore one *trecena*. In addition, each day was also influenced by its position within the *xihuitl*: by the solar month, the position of the day within the solar month, and the sign–number combination of the year within the fifty-two-year Calendar Round. Each day's distinctive quality and energy was thought to permeate everything that existed in the cosmos, including the earth, plants, human beings, and deities. However, it was not a "mechanical, push-and-pull, cause-and-effect relationship of the sort modern Westerners commonly associate with astrology" (Maffie 2014: 428). Rather, it worked like a biorhythm within the organism of the cosmos itself. This biorhythm was depicted graphically in the *tonalamatl* (book of the days). This almanac expressed the cultural knowledge about the complex interrelationships between the different qualities in a visually perceivable way. It

9 For a critique of the interpretation of these deities as Lords of the Night, see Köhler (2009: 140–152).

allowed the *tonalpouhque* (singular, *tonalpouhqui*), the specialized diviners, to interpret and calculate the energy flows so that they could recommend particular days for particular activities (see Boone 2007: 65).

The *xihuitl*, the solar year, presented a second pattern of energy movement in the cosmos. It was used for historiography, coordinating public ceremonies, and organizing political events, such as tribute payments. The *xihuitl* was segmented into eighteen *metztli* (month, no plural) of twenty days each, called *veintenas* (from the Spanish *veinte*, meaning twenty). At the end of the year, an additional month of five days was inserted, the *nemontemi* (waste, it becomes full in vain) (Durán 1971: 395, 469–470, Hassig 2001: 15). These five days presented grave danger for human beings and thus had strict conduct guidelines (see Clendinnen 1991: 190–191). Many descriptions of the *xihuitl* calendar characterize it as the "secular cycle," because its days were, in contrast to the *tonalpohualli*, not associated with divine influences (Hassig 2001: 13). However, this name is misleading, because every solar month was dedicated to a specific deity and elaborate ceremonies (the *veintenas*) were performed in each month for the respective deity. Each year was named by the number/day sign-combination of either the first or the last day of each month; the sources are ambiguous in this matter. Because of arithmetic reasons, only four day signs appeared as "year bearers": *calli*, *tochtli*, *acatl*, and *tecpatl*. The combination of thirteen numbers and four day signs generated fifty-two distinct year names (Hassig 2001: 32). The completion of a fifty-two-year cycle, which combined the *tonalpohualli* with the *xihuitl*, was called the *xiuhmolpilli* (binding of the years). Because the end of the Fifth Era was believed to occur at the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, the Nahuas performed the elaborate New Fire Ceremony at that time to help with the birth of a new cycle (Durán 1994: 445–446, Hassig 2001: 16–18, Maffie 2014: 431, Carrasco 2014: 105–109).

There are several details of the Nahua calendar system that we do not know or understand because of contradictions in the sources. In addition to the open question of the year bearer, we do not know which month was the first in a year and whether the calendar was synchronized across several *altepeme* or even across larger regions. Furthermore, we do not know at which point the day began (sunrise? midday?) and how the hours of the day were counted (Hassig 2001: 31–35). The largest problem, however, is whether the Nahuas used a leap year to compensate for the difference between the 365 days of their *xihuitl* and the actual length of the solar year of approximately 365.25 days. The early chroniclers discussed this question, and no answer has been found thus far. This is a main problem because the *veintena* festivals are typically interpreted as referring to agricultural cycles. If the Nahuas did not use leap years, the calendar would have gone widely out of sync with the actual seasons.

Another scholarly debate revolves around whether the Nahua time concept should be interpreted as cyclical or linear. The calendar system was primarily cyclical, with both the *tonalpohualli* and the *xihuitl* running in circles. The count of the years in Nahua historiography, however, followed a linear concept that, nevertheless, seems to be inconsistent with European understandings of time lines. For example, several colonial sources depict events from pre-Hispanic and colonial times as having occurred simultaneously (Wake and Stokes 1997). As another example, some pre-Hispanic Nahua sculpture (such as the Dedication Stone of the Templo Mayor) juxtaposed several historical events that occurred in years with the same year bearer date but within different fifty-two-year cycles (Umberger 1981: 11, Navarrete 2011: 188). Does this mean that the Nahuas did not distinguish between these years and believed in a cyclical movement of time? The early chroniclers focused strongly on the description of the calendar cycles and little on linear historiography. Did they do so because the cyclical time concept was more important in Nahua culture? Or was this an influence of the Spanish missionaries, who were more interested in the two cyclical calendars, with their associated ritual practices, merely because these were more relevant for their missionary endeavors? While the linear political time frame was quickly replaced in Mexico by the European calendar after the conquest, the practice of the yearly ritual cycle survived much longer (Hassig 2001: 153, 160–163). Scholarly interpretations of the Aztec concept of time typically emphasize their deeply ingrained belief in the cyclical nature of sacred time shaping all behavior. Hassig, however, counteracted these images by pointing out that the Nahuas also had a rich tradition of manipulating their ideology for political reasons. One of the most prominent of these manipulations with reference to the calendar was the shift of the New Fire Ceremony, and thus of the beginning of a new fifty-two-year cycle, from *Ce Acatl* to *Ome Acatl*, probably in 1506 or 1507, because of several complex political reasons (Hassig 2001: 35–47, 63–69, 70–109).

As a result, Hassig portrayed the Nahuas as people with agency to act according to their political advantage, even if these acts run against the sacred calendar. Hassig's perspective is a healthy counterpoint to interpretations of Nahua culture that overemphasize religious motivations. Scholars of religion are particularly fond of this interpretation and often even project (a simplified version of) Mircea Eliade's model of *in illo tempore* (in that time) on the Nahuas. According to this model, the Nahuas lived in cyclical sacred time and periodically reenacted the primordial past and mythical beginning of the cosmos, while the profane concept of linear history did not play any important role in their culture (see, e.g., Read 1998: 32–35, 103, 118, 261). The sources on these matters, however, are sketchy at best and in many cases contradictory in

their reference to cyclical and linear conceptualizations of time among the Nahuas.

3.3 *The Dynamics of the Cosmos*

The forces of time were seen as constantly in motion and moving through the world along certain pathways. The main passageway was a central axis running through the central navel of the four-leaved surface of Tlalticpac and connecting the several layers of the underworld and the sky. It was complemented by four main currents flowing through the four cardinal points and the four trees holding up the skies. These passageways, called *malinalli* (twisted grass), were imagined as two spiral cords that were colored, respectively, blue-green (water) and red (blood), twisted in a double helix. López Austin interpreted these two helices as energy currents, with hot, dry energies descending from the skies and cold, humid energies ascending from Mictlan and Tlalocan, that is, from the underworlds (López Austin 1988b: 59–63, 1993: 62–64, 1997: 100, 112). The four trees and their differently colored energy flows are depicted in several pictorial sources, for example, in the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl* (Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1993: folios 49–53). In some paintings, the tree trunks are divided into two parts, which twist around each other in a helicoidal fashion (see, e.g., the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*). López Austin furthermore identified these trees with the splitting tree in the myth about the migration from Aztlan (López Austin 1997: 46–47, 84–122).

The image of the *malinalli*'s two complementary energy currents shows the basic structural texture of the Nahua cosmos: the dual pairing of polar contraries. In addition to the *malinalli*, the sources depict this pairing primarily in the representation of deity couples, either in their female and male aspects, such as Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli, or as complementary partners such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. Not only the gods came in pairs, but also humanity was created from the first couple, Oxomoco and Cipactonal. According to López Austin's widely accepted interpretation, the general movement of energy in the cosmos was determined by matching pairs of all kinds: female~male, dark~light, wet~dry, cold~hot, wind~fire, below~above, and more.[10] These complementary pairs were believed to be in constant struggle with each other and thus produced the movement essential for the world to continue. If the pairs found the perfect equilibrium, the cosmos of the Fifth Era would cease to exist (López Austin 1988b: 52–53, 2008a: 43–44).

10 For more comprehensive tables of these pairs, see López Austin (1988b: 53 and 2008a: 59, table 2).

4 Living in Cosmic Relations

As evidence suggests, the Nahuas conceptualized the cosmos as a dense and extensive fabric of forces and agents interrelated with and influencing one another. Human beings were part of this fabric and primarily defined by their many relations to the world. The following sections examine how the Nahuas conceptualized the person as being closely related to the cosmos and the individual as firmly embedded in society.

4.1 *Bodily Identity*

The most commonly used Nahuatl term for the body was *tonacayo*, "our flesh."[11] In other contexts, the body was also called *in tlalli in zoquitl*, "the earth, the clay," and was often associated with corn and maize (Martínez González 2011: 30–31). The Nahuas employed many human–maize analogies, both in linguistic expressions and in diverse rituals. The human biography, for example, was identified with the life cycle of the maize plant (Clendinnen 1991: 181–182). In contrast to the European body–soul dualism, the Nahuas experienced body, emotions, and cognition as deeply intertwined, not as separate from one another (López Austin 1988b: 2–3).

In an extensive study, López Austin (1988a) reconstructed the Nahua concepts of the person in a highly abstract way by analyzing linguistic concepts related to the body, primarily from Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales*, *Códices Matritenses*, and the *Florentine Codex*, along with the Nahuatl *Vocabulario* by Fray Alonso de Molina (1880). He extended the results through ethnographic and mythological information and according to his results the Nahuas visualized the body as essentially filled with life force, which was particularly condensed in the bones, movable joints, nerves, blood, breath, and hair (López Austin 1988b: 165–170). In addition, the most constitutional "vital processes, organic liveliness, and the functions of knowledge, inclination, and feeling" were believed to be most present and concentrated in several "animistic centers" of the body (López Austin 1988b: 181). The "animistic entities" residing in these centers formed, in their entirety, a person's bodily appearance, health, and vigor, along with personality, character, and behavioral inclinations. A person's most important animistic centers, and the corresponding animistic entities, were the upper part of the head (*cuaitl*) with its *tonalli* energy, the heart

11 In Nahuatl, names for body parts are rarely used in the abstract but in the first person plural possessive form, referring to humankind in general, Launey and Mackay (2011: 96–97).

(*yollotl*) with its heart energy (*yolia*, *toyolia*, or *teyolia*), and the liver (*elli*) with its *ihiyotl* energy (López Austin 1988b: 199).

The head (*tocua*, our head), as carrier of the most important sense organs, was one of the prime centers for intellectual reasoning, and the sense organs apparently carried a part of consciousness themselves. The *tix* (our eyes) and the *tonacaz* (our ears), with their sensory abilities to see, watch, hear, and listen, were associated with vitality, knowledge, feeling, and perception. Someone who "very much possesses eyes and ears" (*cenca ixe nacace*), that is, someone who possesses the ability to see/watch and hear/listen carefully, was considered wise (López Austin 1988b: 195). "Hearing" (*caqui*) was moreover equivalent with "understanding." Understanding was articulated with the tongue (*tonenepil*), which knew and created the breath and the word (López Austin 1988b: 171). The eye, nevertheless, was called "our total leader" and placed at the top of a cultural hierarchy of the senses (López Austin 1988b: 177). Sight was also experienced as an active operation, a willful projection from the eyes that could affect things and beings (Houston and Taube 2000: 281). Accordingly, many depictions show protruding eyeballs, such as in the stargazer in the *Codex Mendoza* (see Figure 4; Berdan and Anawalt 1992: folio 63r).

The *tonalli* energy (deriving from the verb *tona*, to irradiate or to make warmth or sun, see López Austin 1988b: 204) was one of the most important life forces of a person. It was spread throughout the whole body, yet concentrated most fully in the crown of the head. Since *tonalli* diffused from the crown into the hair, the Nahuas put much attention to grooming their hair; and priests and warriors wore it in a long lock at the crown. Grasping the enemies' hair locks meant taking hold of their *tonalli* and thus of their life energy, personality, destiny, and social identity. This is why taking a captive is depicted pictorially as grasping the hair lock of the enemy (López Austin 1988b: 220–221). The shiny, radiant *tonalli* was experienced as the body's central heat and was influenced by the heat and light of the sun (Martínez González 2011: 48, 51). It regulated body temperature, health, and pathological processes, and the character of people's *tonalli* determined their temperament and their destiny. In order to live well, human beings needed to strengthen their *tonalli* and protect it from harm by other people or divine forces. Furthermore, they needed to establish a certain balance between the *tonalli* and the other animistic entities contained in the heart and the liver. The *tonalli* was believed to have a gaseous nature and was visualized as a luminous force and as a person's shadow. It could leave the body in certain situations, primarily in times of sickness; apparently, it was also the *tonalli* that left the body and traveled to other regions of reality in dreams and shamanic journeys (López Austin 1988b: 204–229).

The heart (*toyollo*, our heart) was regarded as the most important and strongest of all human vital centers. It was the primary organ of consciousness and included "memory, habit, affection, will, direction of action, and emotion" (López Austin 1988b: 190). In contrast to Westerners, who typically associate the heart solely with emotions and feelings, the Nahuas experienced this organ as the center of reasoning and understanding (see Sahagún 1961: X, 130–131). For "better perception and understanding," the *teyolia* energy of the heart needed to interplay with the eyes and ears (López Austin 1988b: 201). Only in rare exceptions could the *teyolia* leave the body; in most cases, the loss of the *teyolia* energy resulted in physical death, and after death the *teyolia* energy went to the world of the dead (López Austin 1988b: 199, 229–232).

The *ihiyotl* energy was contained in the liver, the place of memories, passion, courage, vigor, strong feelings, and personality traits such as being spirited, strong, and brave. If the *ihiyotl* was out of balance, it led to anguish and anger (López Austin 1988: 192). It was visualized as a kind of breath and wind, and if people acted morally improper, their bodies emanated a contagious *ihiyotl* gas that was dangerous to others. *Ihiyotl* gas could be smelled as malodor, for example, as the breath expelled at death and the odor emanating from cadavers. *Ihiyotl* could also be aromatic like the sweet fragrances emanating from flowers, jade beads, or nobles and rulers (Houston and Taube 2000: 267–270, 276, López Austin 1988b: 232–236).

All three major animistic entities—*tonalli*, *teyolia*, and *ihiyotl*—needed to "operate harmoniously to produce a sane, mentally balanced and moral person" (López Austin 1988b: 236). They were interdependent; if one of them lost its internal balance, the other two were affected. Furthermore, the entities needed to contain a balance of polar energies, such as hot and cold, fire and water (Martínez González 2011: 42–43). In addition to the three major entities, many further, smaller animistic entities influenced people in different situations and induced states such as sexual ecstasy, artistic creativity, or drunkenness. The animistic entities of the calves and of the movable joints and limbs were particularly vulnerable to damage by divine forces (López Austin 2004b: 34).

In Nahua experience, human skin presented the essence of its bearer and was laden with energy and power. The surface of things and their skin was thus not regarded as shallow and empty but merely as the outer appearance of an inner balance of diverse forces. Consequently, wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim filled the carrier with the victim's power and force identity. Similarly, everyday clothing, as well as warrior attire, ritual regalia, and masks, were not just outer disguises but expressions of status and identity (Clendinnen

1991: 228–229; see also Olko 2005, Anawalt 1981). Accordingly, the visual depiction of these "skins" was of utmost importance in the pictorial codices.

After death, the animistic entities and forces contained in the human being disintegrated and were recycled into the constantly moving stream of energy in the cosmos. If the dead person had died a water-related death, the *teyolia* returned through the cosmic tree and the *malinalli* went straight to the underworld of Mictlan or Tlalocan. Small children who died before being weaned went directly to Tamoanchan, where they sucked on the tree of sustenance. In all other cases, according to López Austin's interpretation, the *teyolia* needed to get rid of the earthly identity that it had acquired by entering the earthly food cycle. During its journey to the underworld of Mictlan, the *teyolia* was slowly depersonalized. After spending a certain amount of time at Mictlan, its pure essence was finally reincarnated (López Austin 1997: 261–262). For the two processes of depersonalization and reincarnation, the *teyolia* needed the dead person's *tonalli* energy.

A part of the *tonalli* energy could also be preserved for descendants by storing the person's cut hairs, fingernails, and funeral ashes (Martínez González 2011: 501). Some human beings who had performed extraordinary deeds in their lifetimes were destined to carry out glorious duties before returning to Mictlan. Warriors who died in battle went to the house of the sun and helped the sun on its morning way to the zenith, while women who died in childbirth helped the sun on its afternoon way to the horizon (López Austin 1997: 261–262). Despite these different forms of continuance after death, it was not people in their earthly identity recognizable by other people who lived on after life but the person's different parts, animistic entities, and energy essences.

4.2 *Cosmic Relations*

The Nahuas imagined the human being as a composite of different essences and energies, distributed through the organism, which created the physical appearance and condition, personality, and behavioral inclinations. These essences, however, were not exclusive to humanity (López Austin 1988b: 236) but imagined as essential parts of the cosmos in general. In their form as *ihiyotl*, they blew as wind across the earth and moved the celestial bodies. As *teyolia*, they were the energy contained in the hearts of mountains, bodies of water, fruit, or animals (López Austin 1973: 124). As *tonalli*, they shone from the sun and shaped the quality of the days (Martínez González 2011: 168). Hence, human beings were intimately connected with the cosmos and an essential part of the overall movement of energies. The particular composite of energies that human beings received and experienced at birth was responsible for their essential condition as well as their personal character, abilities, and talents.

Cosmic energies also influenced momentary experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Any change of mood, as well as "virtuous exaltation, an inclination to sin, artistic development, and madness," was attributed to the presence of particular forces (López Austin 1997: 40–41).

The *teyolia* was considered such a strong concentration of cosmic energy that it was dangerous to look into the eyes of ritual deity impersonators who presented these powerful energies. Similarly, the hearts of people with exceptional talent in the fields of divination, imagination, art, or rulership were filled with potent cosmic *teyolia* energy; they had a "deified heart" (*yoteotl*, Sahagún 1961: X, 28). The *tlatoani* was believed to need strong ties to cosmic energies in order to rule successfully. This becomes obvious in the Native interpretation of the behavior of the last Mexica ruler, Motecuhzoma II, during the conquest. Western scholars, seeing him from the perspective of Western notions of the individual, have typically interpreted his distress as mental overload due to personal weakness. The Native account of the conquest in book twelve of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1975), however, ascribed Motecuhzoma II's political failure to his weakening *teyolia* and his increasing loss of ties to the cosmic energies. Several passages of the text describe how Motecuhzoma II "fainted" or, literally translated, how he "died in regard to the *tēyōlia*" (Hill and MacLaury 1995: 299). Thus, the Native perspective saw the last Mexica *tlatoani* as the exemplary first victim of a general detachment from the cosmic order that had been initiated by the Spanish invasion (Hill and MacLaury 1995: 303).

The *tonalli* energy of a human being was closely related to the cosmic and solar *tonalli* energy. Infants received their particular *tonalli* at their birth and at their ritual bathing and naming ceremony. Exposing the newborn baby to the sun strengthened its *tonalli*. Accordingly, a person's *tonalli* depended on the type of *tonalli* present on the respective days of birth and ritual naming. This located the person firmly within a particular spatial-temporal orientation. The *tonalpohualli* was, in fact, not only the "count of days" but literally the "count of the *tonalli*," that is, the count of the distinctive qualities of the essences of the individual days (López Austin 1988b: 204–229). The *tonalli* is often translated as the "destiny" of a person, since it strongly influenced a person's fate in life. However, this was not "a fate caused by circumstances or forces beyond one's control" but "a primary component of one's identity" (Monaghan 1998: 138), which created one's character, talents, social status, and abilities to live a morally upright life. Hence, it was a form of "personality" distinguishing one person from another while combining both internal traits and social relations at the same time. As such, it was neither fixed nor unchangeable but influenced by how people actually lived their lives, whether they took the chances that they were given, and whether they cultivated it (Monaghan 1998: 129).

Furthermore, people shared their respective *tonalli* with other beings born on the same day, whether human, animal, or inanimate. Considering this aspect, Monaghan suggested interpreting the *tonalli* as a form of class membership. Counting through the complex *tonalpohualli* in its combination of qualities, "one counts through all possible social identities, all possible physical combinations, all possible temperaments, and a full range of lucky and unlucky personal contingencies" (Monaghan 1998: 140). Hence, the calendar almanacs of the *tonalamatl* were also "social charters" (Monaghan 1998: 140). Based on this interpretation, Monaghan suggested translating the concept of *tonalli* as "coessence." Everything that existed in the cosmos, including villages, mountains, or rainfalls, shared its essence with other entities. Human beings had the ability to establish a particularly close link to their coessential animal.[12] This animal was called the *nagual* or *nahualli* in Nahuatl, typically translated as "spiritual alter ego," or "guardian spirit." In special situations, such as dreams, human beings could share a consciousness with their animal *nahualli*. Shamans were even believed to possess the ability to transform into their animal coessence (Monaghan 1998: 141–143).

In sum, the Nahuas conceptualized the human person as embedded in a complex woven fabric of relationships between all things that existed in the cosmos. The personality and destiny as contained in the *tonalli* were not imagined to be autonomous but relational; they were properties of collectives instead of individual selves. As such, the Nahua concept of the person defies modern Western categories that separate the internal and external (Monaghan 1998: 139). Concepts from contemporary Nahuas support this interpretation. Rather than imagining individual beings and objects existing as entities separate from one another, even if strongly related, they believe that everything is "connected at a deeper level" as "part of the same basic substratum of being," with "everybody and everything" "an aspect of a grand, single, and overriding unity" (A.R. Sandstrom 1991: 238).

5 Living in Social Relations

5.1 *Individual Identity*

The Nahua concept of personal identity that comes closest to the modern Western idea of the individual is *in ixtli in yollotl*. While León-Portilla (1963: 12–13) translated this as "personality," it directly means "the eyes/face, the

12 For different visual representations of human beings and their *nahualli*, see Martínez González (2006).

heart." Accordingly, it referred to personal identity in its communication with the outside world or, in López Austin's words, to "that part of man where sensation, perception, understanding, and feeling unite in order to integrate a complete consciousness that is found in communication with the outside world" (López Austin 1988b: 197). As described in the previous section, this personal identity was the unique combination of animistic entities and heterogeneous forces, a "mosaic of essences" in relation to the cosmos (López Austin 1997: 35). In addition, human individuals were deeply shaped by socially induced energies, including their ancestors' *tonalli* and the social status of the family they were born into. This personal compound of aspects could vary and change over a lifetime, "a changing microcosm immersed in the course of history" (López Austin 1997: 35).

Thus, the person was embedded in the cosmic and social fabric of moving forces that existed both internally and externally to the individual body. These forces passed through the person and continually added and subtracted elements in a turbulent struggle. They influenced everything happening in people: the condition of their bodies regarding health and disease, their moods and feelings, their willpower, and their behavior (López Austin 1997: 40–41). People were, nevertheless, not merely puppets of the forces, completely and utterly at their mercy. To the contrary, human beings had far-reaching agency regarding the balance of internal and external powers. Individuals could influence their lives and their experiences through their initiative and decisions to act in a certain way. They could hone the particular talents they had been given and strengthen favorable personality traits. Everybody was, in fact, expected to exercise strict self-discipline and self-management. Warriors, in particular, were required to strive for excellence in their military skills; their complete social status depended on their success or failure. At the same time, Nahua individuals were part of a social world driven by competition and rivalry; they could be victims of antagonistic attacks by fellow human beings as well as by malevolent cosmic beings or imbalances in the cosmic forces (Gruzinski 1993: 169). To counteract these attacks and to balance the forces, people drew on a large reservoir of distinctive rituals.

This idea of a relational person stood in stark contrast to the Christian concept of the person that the missionaries, in their evangelization efforts, introduced into the Central Highlands. According to Gruzinski, the European concept gradually transformed the Indigenous manner of depicting human beings: In pre-Hispanic pictography, human beings had been painted in a stylized way. They were recognizable in their respective social roles from their clothing and body posture but had no individual profile. Their bodies were not painted realistically, but different parts of the body were emphasized through

size, apparently expressing the idea of several animistic centers and their relations to cosmic forces. In contrast, Europeanized colonial painting increasingly adopted naturalistic representations of the human body that emphasized individual features. Following Gruzinski's interpretation, these two different styles represent two radically different concepts of person: The pre-Hispanic perspective emphasized the complex interrelations between several forces in the cosmos and the many different vital forces in the human being. The Christian perspective emphasized the notion of the autonomous individual defined by free will and the ability to sin, along with the potential for individual contact with a personalized divine (Gruzinski 1993: 37, 169–170, 176–177).

5.2 *Social Relations*

The Nahuas regarded humans as deeply intertwined not only in cosmic relations but also in social relations with their fellow humans. Rather than being acknowledged as autonomous individuals, human persons were first and foremost regarded as part of several classes within humanity (see López Austin 1997: 36–38, 2004b: 32, 2008a: 66). Each of these classes was conjoined with a particular patron god according to the different stages of the world's creation. First, human beings belonged to the general class of humanity as distinguished from other species and created by humanity's patron god, Quetzalcoatl (according to the myth of the creation of humankind). Second, they belonged to a particular ethnic group that shared a language and specific tradition. This group had been born from Chicomoztoc with the help of a particular tutelary god, such as Huitzilopochtli for the Mexica (according to the myth about the birth of ethnic groups at Chicomoztoc). Third, they belonged to a particular *calpulli*, sharing a profession and honoring the respective patron deity of this profession, such as *Xipe Totec* (Our Lord the Flayed One) for goldsmiths. Fourth, they belonged to a particular family that favored a specific deity as their family patron god. Fifth, they belonged to one of two main genders and were thus descendants of either Cipactonal or Oxomoco, the divine couple (López Austin 1997: 36–38, 2004b: 32, 2008a: 66). Sixth, they shared their *tonalli* with every entity born on the same day. In sum, human persons incorporated the essences of each of these social classes throughout their lifetimes.

In addition, people temporarily shared some essences with the cosmos at large, with their animal *nahualli*, and with other entities and fellow humans in their intimate surroundings. At distinctive spatiotemporal locations, particular major and minor movable forces passed through a person's animistic centers. These forces influenced a person's well-being, mood, thoughts, and decisions. Their ensuing behavior in turn influenced the balance of forces within the entities and people with whom they shared a particular essence, social class, or proximity. This contagious nature of behavior was particularly

strong within families. If one member of the family acted morally improper, the entire family was affected and needed to counteract the imbalance of forces through antithetical behavior and by performing particular rituals. Because of the strong impact of individual behavior on the socio-environment, every individual was expected to act according to a strict code of conduct (López Austin 1997: 42).

Since Nahua society was strongly stratified by social status, individuals' life choices were restricted based on this status. Social mobility was relatively low regarding both social cast and wealth. People typically adopted their parents' professional occupation and married within the *calpulli*. Social status played a large role in the lives of the Nahuas, as Clendinnen impressively portrayed (1991: 111–152). This was particularly true for men in specific social fields. Military training was extremely demanding and conducted under strict discipline. Merchants also lived according to the same exacting warrior ideal and code of conduct. Priests had to endure a life of extreme hardship, discipline, and self-sacrifice. The rewards for success in the form of fame and higher social status were great, but the costs for gaining this status similarly great, with many casualties, few second chances, and cruel penalties for misbehavior. In contrast with the relational character of identity, rewards were given for individual success, a fact that fostered intense rivalry (Clendinnen 1991: 111–152). Apparently, even bodily and sensory experiences were shaped by social status. For one, the material culture differed according to wealth, for the other, particular sensory experiences were closely associated with social status. Perfumes, for example, were restricted to the nobility, and to sniff the pleasant aromas of some flowers was the sole privilege of the *tlatoani* and Tezcatlipoca (Houston and Taube 2000: 289). Similarly, the sound of speech was essentially identified with social leaders, particularly with the *tlatoani* (literally "one who speaks") (see Houston and Taube 2000: 267–270, 273–274, 289). Nevertheless, Nahua ritual performances might have been subversive to social distinctions, as Clendinnen argued (1991: 253–263; see also Scolieri 2013: 3, 85). The large public performances stimulated extreme sensory input and strongly invoked particular moods, emotions, and feelings. In many cases, this sensory overstimulation might have served to dissolve every sense of self and social distinction.

6 Living Properly—Living in Balance

Based on their concepts of the person and its position in the cosmos, the Nahuas developed guidelines helping people to live a good, healthy, and morally upright life in balance with the social and cosmic environment.

The Nahuas experienced living in the cosmos of the Fifth Era as difficult and dangerous. The expression for living "on the earth" (tlalticpac) meant directly translated living "on the point or summit of the earth," invoking the image of balancing a tight rope or narrow ridge with danger of falling into the abyss on either side (Burkhart 1989: 58, Launey and Mackay 2011: 121). This ridge was not only narrow but also "slippery" (*Tlaalauj, Tlapetzcauj in Tlalticpac*, "The summit of the earth is slippery", Sahagún 1969: VI, 228); one could easily slip in the mud and one's life fell into some wrong.[13] To prevent falling, the Nahuas needed to act carefully and to "live according to the guidelines established by the ancestors" (Burkhart 1989: 58). The reason why walking on the earth was so perilous was the unstable nature of the Fifth Era, with its continuous movement of complementary forces. Human beings depended on a certain degree of balance in their lives, without which they became victims of "pain, hunger, thirst, sorrow, disease, and death" (Maffie 2014: 167). One major problem was the unpredictability of disorder subverting order; hence, the Nahuas searched for omens announcing the impending "rupture of harmony" (Burkhart 1989: 64).

On the most basic level, any imbalance of the forces affected physical health (López Austin 1988b: 255, Ortiz de Montellano 2005: 34). The precarious equilibrium of diverse forces within the fragile human self could be lost through internal or external influences. Everyday activities, such as too much work or prolonged walking, could produce tiredness that was viewed as expressing an imbalance of forces. Similarly, walking in certain dangerous places, such as at a crossroads or on paths through the woods, exposed one to attacking forces that evoked imbalance (López Austin 1988b: 260). In the Nahua healing arts, many physical illnesses and mood changes were explained through an excess of either hot or cold forces. This excess could be counteracted with certain foods and medicines equally classified as hot or cold (López Austin 1988b: 53, 259, 264).[14] Any sickness was viewed as affecting not only the physical but simultaneously the mental and spiritual level. While the early Christian missionaries understood physical illness as a punishment for mental and spiritual sins, the Nahuas, in contrast, did not distinguish between these different levels of human existence with regard to sickness. Consequently, the evangelized Nahuas (mis)understood the Christian rite of confession as a direct therapy for physical diseases. The fact that the friars had compared confession with the

13 "Aço qujn jzqujnpa qualli inemjliz: çatepan itla ipan vetzi tlatlaculli, in ma iuhquj omalauh çoqujtitlan," translated by Dibble & Anderson as "Perhaps at one time one was of good life; later he fell into some wrong, as if he had slipped in the mud" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 228).

14 For the Nahua art of healing and Nahua medicine, see also Ortiz de Montellano (1990).

Nahua ritual of *neyolmelahualiztli* (straightening one's heart) reinforced this interpretation, since *neyolmelahualiztli* generally balanced the cosmic forces and thus helped people to regain overall equilibrium (Burkhart 1989: 182–183).

The equilibrium of forces was also sought with regard to human behavior, and morality was decidedly of this world (Burkhart 1989: 28). Behavior classified as immoral was "failing to balance surrounding forces," for example, by "allowing one inclination to overcome others" (Monaghan 2000: 33). It was linguistically expressed through images of tripping and stumbling or as "falling off precipices and into caves or torrents" (Burkhart 1989: 61). In most cases, this behavior was associated with excess and intoxication, but it also included accidental or deliberate damage to crops or handicraft items as well as crimes committed against other people (Burkhart 1989: 28–29). In general, it was not the act itself that was considered problematic or the quality of the agent's feeling but the effect of the act in violating (physical, social, psychological, etc.) balance. Accordingly, behaviors and feelings were not evaluated as good or evil in and of themselves but depended on their stabilizing, unbalancing, or disordering effects (Burkhart 1989: 34–35).

The natural motion of forces in the cosmos was produced by ordering, generating, and life-creating forces on one side and by disordering, degenerating, and death-bringing forces on the other side. Both were considered essential for any life cycle and the continuing existence of the cosmos of the Fifth Era. Nevertheless, the degenerating and disordering powers of *tlazolli* (filth), referring to "stuff out of place (or improperly placed)," usually had negative effects on human beings if they were intimately confronted with them (Maffie 2014: 97). These disordering forces were simultaneously regarded as cause and consequence of immoral behavior. Their excess could result in disease and even death. What is more, persons filled with an excess of these forces—such as during and after improper and excessive sexual behavior—radiated them outwards so that the surroundings and all people in contact with them were affected by *tlazolli* as well. Hence, a small act of pollution could result in bringing "the full range of *tlazolli*'s polluting impact crashing down upon the wrongdoer" and his social network (Burkhart 1989: 99). Despite the dangerous effect of *tlazolli* forces on human well-being, the Nahuas did not attempt to eliminate it from the cosmos, since it constituted a part of it and presented the profound powers of transformation between death and life in the regenerating cycle. Nevertheless, to achieve and restore the balance necessary for human well-being, the Nahuas tried to rebalance the power of *tlazolli* by relocating it to the periphery, its proper place in the cosmos (Maffie 2014: 97–99, Burkhart 1989: 89).

All in all, the Nahuas were deeply concerned with controlling pollution, which was active in both the physical and nonmaterial realms. Whereas the Christian missionaries used the images of physical pollution and filth as metaphors for the (im)purity of the soul, the Nahuas considered pollution as a metonymy for degenerating forces. That means that the Christian discourse projected the images of physical pollution and cleanliness onto the domain of spiritual sin and virtue and used this analogy to evoke the emotional responses related to cleaning the body of filth. For the Nahuas, in contrast, there was no ontological difference between pollution felt on material, emotional, mental, or spiritual levels of existence (Burkhart 1989: 13). Material filth was of the same essence as emotional and behavioral *tlazolli*, and change on one of these levels affected the others (Burkhart 1989: 98–100).

In order to control pollution and maintain the balance of forces, the Nahuas cultivated great self-discipline and aspired to live according to a strict code of conduct. At the same time, they engaged in many purifying and balancing rituals. These rituals did not work symbolically but metonymically: Their efficacy was based on the idea that the different levels of existence were deeply intertwined. A telling example for this is the purifying ritual in which straws were pulled through the pierced tongue and then burned (see Sahagún 1981: II, 197). Here, the *tlazolli* of persons performing the ritual was believed to adhere in the form of blood to the straw, which already presented *tlazolli* by itself. Burning the straw meant burning the pollution of the persons who had transferred their own *tlazolli* onto the straw. Similarly, the Nahuas considered sweeping as a balancing and purifying ritual of vital importance (see Sahagún 1981: II, 199). Sweeping filth with a broom made of straw balanced the negative effects of *tlazolli* on human beings by counteracting disorder with order and by returning *tlazolli* to its proper place (Burkhart 1989: 101). Hence, sweeping, along with a large number of other purifying rituals, was believed to directly affect the physical surroundings and the emotional, mental, and spiritual levels of the human and cosmic existence as well as reestablish the cosmic balance necessary for human survival (see also López Austin 1988b: 268).

In sum, the Nahuas distinguished between "power that is cosmically balancing, ordering, stabilizing, and immediately beneficial to human beings, on the one hand, and power that is cosmically imbalancing, disordering, deranging, unstabilizing, and immediately detrimental to human beings, on the other" (Maffie 2014: 103–104). In order to maintain the balance necessary for human well-being, they set great value upon order in nonhierarchical, cellular, or modular form; in the physical, psychological, spiritual, linguistic, and artistic spheres; and in social, economic, political, and cosmological relations (Maffie 2014: 105). Many Nahua professions were concerned with detecting imbalance

and teaching people how to live a balancing "way of life." Finding and honing this way of life played a paramount role in Nahua culture. Consequently, Nahua philosophy was "way-centered" as opposed to "truth-centered," as Maffie put it, and Nahua religion "focused upon practice—not belief or acceptance" (Maffie 2014: 97).

The general sense of "a fragile universe, the order of which can turn to disorder by the willful and forceful behavior of spiritual and human beings" appears to be such a foundational characteristic of Nahua cosmovision that it persisted into contemporary times (Taggart 2001: 361). According to Alan and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom's analysis (1991: 316), contemporary Nahuas from the Mexican Huasteca region still perceive the universe as "composed of sacred forces in equilibrium, of a balanced exchange between people and spirits, polluted by disruptions that shamans endeavor to smooth out through elaborate and deeply symbolic ritual offerings." Even the association of *tlasole* (tlazolli) with filth has persisted to the present day to describe disordering agents of pollution that "represent violations or disruptions of social norms and the culturally accepted arrangement of things" (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 99, see also A.R. Sandstrom 1991: 312).

CHAPTER 4

A World in Motion: Nahua Ontology

Being human in Tenochtitlan essentially meant living in a dense fabric of cosmic and social relations characterized by the constant motion of cosmic forces. Following this argument, we will now take a closer look at Nahua ontology. I use the term *ontology* (see Hofweber 2011), in this case, to refer to the Nahua perception, interpretation, and conceptualization of reality. It is difficult to reconstruct from the surviving sources how much time the Nahuas devoted to abstract reflection about the underlying principles of reality. The fact that the sources do not contain an elaborate intellectual system that discussed beliefs may be the result of attempts by Christian missionaries in the first colonial decades to erase the old "idolatry" by burning all Indigenous books containing references to Native religious beliefs. Notwithstanding this potentially biased evidence, it is probably not incorrect to assume that the Nahuas spent much (more) time on the practical and aesthetical application of their knowledge about the cosmos they lived in. In the words of Smart's (1996, see also 1995) model of different dimensions of religious and world views, the Nahuas emphasized the ritual, experiential, and material dimensions rather than the doctrinal or philosophical. Nevertheless, this chapter, for analytical reasons, examines the implicit and explicit cognitive conceptualizations of the cosmos separately from actions and aesthetics because this facilitates our understanding of Nahua being-in-the-world.

Nahua ontology, that is, Nahua understandings of the nature of reality, includes genres of knowledge that are separate in European thought: science, philosophy, and religion. Nahua ontology could be called *scientific* because it was based on the close, systematic, and persistent observation of nature and the regularities and irregularities of natural laws. Nahua ontology could also be considered *philosophical* because it comprised cognitive reflection and rational reasoning about the nature of reality itself. Finally, it could be categorized as *religious* because the Nahuas acknowledged powers at work that acted independently from humans, powers that were personalized and revered in personal relationships. Having said that, I go beyond the two most decisively voiced definitions of *religion* in recent studies on the Nahuas. The first, represented mainly by US scholars of religion, regards Nahua religion as an expression of the experience of a universal "sacred." The second—espoused, for example, by Juan José Batalla Rosado and José Luis de Rojas—understands it as a preliminary stage of science (or as pseudoscience) that tried to explain

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natural phenomena whose "cause-effect relation was beyond their [the Nahuas'] knowledge" (Batalla Rosado and Rojas 2008: 47, translation mine; similarly López Austin 2008a: 45). My own intention, in contrast, is to understand how the Nahuas themselves conceptualized the world in which they lived, without applying the European categories of *religion* or *science* and without evaluating the truth content or explanatory power of the Nahua cultural experience of reality.

Since the Nahuas considered the movement of particular forces through time and place as the fundamental characteristic of the Fifth Era, and since these forces are typically called "divine" forces or "gods/deities" by scholars, I start by analyzing Nahua notions of "divinity" and challenge traditional interpretations of this aspect of Nahua ontology. This leads to a closer examination of the Nahua concepts of *teotl* and *nahualli*, before finally discussing whether the Nahuas believed in the existence of a layer of reality unaffected by change.

1 Aztec Notions of "Divinity"

1.1 *History of Interpretation*

The (known) history of European interpretations of Mesoamerican religions began with the arrival of the first Spaniards in the Caribbean and in the Americas. In the first century of colonization, mainly missionaries and priests, with the occasional conquistador, were interested in the Indigenous religions. Although friars like Sahagún are currently and rightly called pioneering "ethnographers" of the Aztec world (Klor de Alva 1988), their subjacent interest was to unmask pagan superstitions to improve evangelization results. In later centuries, antiquarians became interested in history and roamed Mexico in search of material and intellectual treasures.

In the eighteenth century, historians such as Francisco Javier Clavijero and Antonio León y Gama eventually turned toward pre-Hispanic Mexican religions to create a foundation for a new Mexican national identity, followed by Manuel Orozco y Berra, Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, and Alfredo Chavero in the nineteenth century. These scholars provided basic interpretations of available pictorial sources and art-historical objects, such as the Calendar Stone; in the early twentieth century, scholars of Aztec religion in both Mexico and Europe fleshed out these interpretations. Eduard Seler, Lord Kingsborough, Alfonso Caso, and Paul Kirchhoff not only published print editions and studies of primary sources but also developed influential interpretations of the Mesoamerican calendar, along with the first catalogs covering the names, attributes, and regalia of the deities. They also associated both deities and aspects of the

calendar with celestial bodies and their movements (see González Torres 2008: 57–59, Olivier 2008: 44–45).

Because available historical information was scarce, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religions were often delineated by drawing on knowledge about ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern pagan polytheism as well as East Asian spirituality. In such a way, Séjourné (1957) portrayed the presumably ancient Mesoamerican worship of Quetzalcoatl as a spiritual path searching for inner perfection that was comparable to the Mediterranean and Indian mystery religions. Following Séjourné, the cult of Quetzalcoatl was even represented as a "transcendent religious philosophy" analogous to the (assumed) revolutionary, spiritual, moral, and intellectual breakthroughs in Near Eastern and East Asian religions in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (Willey 1976). Generally, in the middle of the twentieth century, Aztec religions were depicted as all-encompassing, determining pre-Hispanic individuals' every decision (see, e.g., Soustelle 1962: 119). This ideology-focused explanation of Aztec culture was heavily criticized in the 1980s by scholars who analyzed Aztec society and politics (P. Carrasco and Broda 1980, Berdan 1982, Brumfield 1990; see also Hassig 2001). The first comprehensive and systematic introduction, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," was published by Nicholson (1971) based on the extraordinary progress since the 1950s in the discovery and deciphering of primary sources. His survey of Central Mexican cosmogony, cosmology, deities, and ritual still holds ground.

Recently, Nahua religion has generally been approached in two different ways. On one side, linguists, anthropologists, and art historians, in significantly growing numbers, deal with Nahua culture, including religion. These scholars typically consider and analyze conceptual, ritual, or iconographic details and distinctive aspects of religion as they appear in primary sources and art-historical objects. On the other side, scholars of religion, mainly in the United States, have turned their attention to Central Mexican religion. These scholars are largely influenced by the history of religion as proposed by Eliade and, consequently, they often view Mesoamerican religion as the experience of a universal and timeless "sacred." Hence, aspects of "sacred space" and cyclical "sacred time," along with ritual reenactments of the primordial past, came into focus. The studies and publications by Carrasco ([1982] 2000, 1990, 1991, 2012) lead in this field. Clendinnen (1990, 1991) followed this general approach in her comprehensive and perceptive interpretation of the Aztec experience of the "sacred." Kay A. Read, in her study *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos* (1998), even considered what we might learn today from Aztec spirituality and their experience of the "sacred." Arnold (1999: 241), however, extended Eliade's idea about the dialectic interrelationship between the "sacred" and materiality,

interrelations that Eliade believed essential to any religion. Following this approach, Arnold understood religion as "intimately involved with material realities" and set out to analyze these interrelations rather than solely focusing on ideology, imagination, or internal processes (1999: 4). Maffie found another way to distance himself from the Eliadean understanding of the "sacred" without rejecting the classification altogether. In his interpretation (2014: 93), the Aztecs attributed sacredness to the cosmic forces because they experienced these forces (objectively) as extremely powerful and all-embracing and thus felt reverence and awe toward them. In most approaches, conceptions of *gods* and *divinity* are explicitly or implicitly considered as the central definiens for what counts as *religious* in Aztec culture. Consequently, the deities are presented as the heart of "Aztec religion."

Two understandings of the Aztec notion of *divinity* have proved to be highly influential in the history of the interpretation of Nahua religion: First, the comparison of the Nahua pantheon with the "classical" Greco-Roman pantheon and, second, the idea that Aztec philosophers were ultimately monotheists. In the following sections, I analyze both interpretations more closely.

1.1.1 A "Classical" Pantheon

In historical interpretations of Aztec religion, comparisons to the pagan polytheism of the ancient Greeks and Romans are prevalent. The early Franciscan friars introduced this interpretative blueprint, which has served as a frame of reference for many scholars trained in the European humanistic tradition. It was often coupled with evolutionary models positioning polytheistic religions at a primitive stage and monotheism at the most advanced stage; models which endured in studies of Aztec religion well into the twentieth century (see Olivier 2008: 44).

The early Franciscan missionaries drew on their scholastic training in their endeavors to make sense of the beliefs and rituals of the people they encountered in the New World. This training provided models for understanding pagan religion and for evaluating it from the perspective of Christianity. Typically, they interpreted the Indigenous world as a highly advanced civilization, like the Greek or Roman civilization, whose only problem was ignorance of the Christian message. Alternatively, they thought that Mexican religion had only deviated from original monotheism or from the Christian teaching as provided by the apostle Thomas. According to the later view, Saint Thomas had traveled to the New World, where he was called Quetzalcoatl and where he had taught the Natives Christianity. Later, over the centuries, the Natives had fallen back into paganism, leaving only vestiges of Christianity: the practice of fasting, the symbol of the cross, a contorted version of the communion, and the rejection of sacrifice in the cult of Quetzalcoatl (Lee 2008: 4–5).

Friar Sahagún, whose manuscripts strongly influenced later views of Central Mexican religion, used several European scholastic writings as interpretative and representational models for his own work. In the *Florentine Codex*, he arranged the information according to the models used by Pliny the Elder in his *Historia Naturalis* (first century CE), by Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologiae* (seventh century CE), and by Bartholomaeus Anglicus in *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (thirteenth century CE). In his condemnation of paganism, Sahagún apparently followed the argumentation of Saint Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* (fifth century CE). He also used the classificatory model of pagan gods as provided by Saint Augustine, who had adopted the model by Marcus Terentius Varro (Ríos Castaño 2009: 213–216). Moreover, Sahagún established many relations to Greco-Roman religion in his Spanish text, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (Ríos Castaño 2009: 218–221). In particular, he identified Central Mexican deities with gods from the "classical" pantheon; for example, he called Huitzilopochtli "another Hercules," or Tezcatlipoca "another Jupiter" (Sahagún 2011: 33, 34). One of the most influential sources for later interpretations of the Aztec concept of divinity is Sahagún's early manuscript, called *Primeros Memoriales* (part of the *Códices Matritenses*, Sahagún 1558–1585, 1993). In this document and in his later manuscript, the *Florentine Codex*, he included significantly Europeanized image representations of thirty-seven Central Mexican deities, complete with lists of their diagnostic attributes, clothing, and accessories (Sahagún 1558–1585: folios 261r–267r; see Figure 5). He also recorded songs written in Nahuatl devoted to the respective deities (1558–1585: folios 273v–281v) and included variants of some of them in the *Florentine Codex* (1981: II, appendix, 221–245).

This model of classifying Nahua deities defines distinctive deity personae, matches them with particular spheres of influence (mainly nature phenomena like rain, celestial bodies, fertility, etc.), and identifies them by their distinctive set of attributes. It is used by scholars to this day, for example by Olivier (2003), who applies it in his study of Tezcatlipoca without discussing its presuppositions. In addition, many museum exhibitions of Aztec deity statues often use this model and present it as a natural characteristic of polytheistic religions (e.g., Pohl and Lyons 2010: 31). The highly influential journal *Arqueología Mexicana*, in a special edition, published a catalog of Central Mexican deities that follows this pattern (Tena 2009).

Despite the impression given by these catalogs that the Nahua pantheon is transparent, well ordered, and structured, the source material by itself shows the contrary. Deities overlap regarding their functions, spheres of influences, attributes, regalia, and iconographic depictions; and honorific titles and salutatory addresses in a confusingly high number are used interchangeably. Ever

since Sahagún provided his classificatory model, Europeans have understood Nahua deities as distinctive, anthropomorphic, and individual, clearly separated from one another as in the scholarly vision of the Greco-Roman pantheon. "In doing so, however," they "oversimplified or even radically transformed the fluid, polysemic nature of the supernatural forces that animated the Mexican cosmos" (DiCesare 2008: 104). Apparently, the model of the "classical" pantheon does not adequately map to the Nahua concept of divinity and has insufficient power to explain it. One of the tasks of the later sections is to search for alternative models.

1.1.2 Philosophical Monotheism

Ancient Greco-Roman culture also serves as a frame of reference in the second common interpretation of the Nahua concept of divinity. This time, the (assumed) natural monotheism of (some) Greek philosophers is used for comparison rather than the "classical" polytheism. León-Portilla, in particular, elaborated on this comparison in his highly influential theory about a school of peaceful philosophers at Texcoco. According to León-Portilla (1992c: 21), those philosophers believed that "the various divinities are symbols that stand for what we would call natural forces or elements, such as water, wind, fire, and earth, which together manifest the action of one sole, supreme principle."

Factually, there are indeed some references in the sources that might point to a "trend in Mesoamerica toward the idea of a being in whom all the divine faculties and powers met," an "ultimate fusion" of divine forces "in the supreme god" (López Austin 1993: 147–148). Following this thought, López Austin (1993: 149) suggested that Nahua religion was most probably neither exclusively polytheistic nor monotheistic but both simultaneously. The common idea of a Nahua philosophical monotheism, however, appears to be a European projection that does not hold ground on closer examination. León-Portilla actually jumped at every wording and reference in the sources, however small, that could be interpreted, however far-stretched, as proof of the existence of this philosophical monotheism. He also translated the sometimes obscure Nahuatl poetry in a way that supports his reading and intentionally and deliberately selected for his many compilations of key Nahua writings those texts that appear to prove his point the best, at least in his translation of them.

King Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco typically serves as the most important representative of Nahua philosophical monotheism. Nezahualcoyotl is commonly believed to have intuited the one, peaceful, true God and thus to have prefigured the arrival of Christianity. Several sources are used for this claim. First, Ixtlilxochitl reported that Nezahualcoyotl built a temple for the "unknown god" in Texcoco, that is, a temple for the one, supreme, divine principle

(León-Portilla 1992c: 166). Second, the anonymous early colonial text *La Guerra de Chalco* relates the background story around this temple construction and featured Nezahualcoyotl's skepticism toward the Indigenous deities. According to this story, Nezahualcoyotl's armies had led a military campaign against the strong armies from Chalco with little success. This military failure made Nezahualcoyotl doubt the power of the Indigenous gods and idols of stone. Therefore, he decided instead to pray to the one true but hidden god and went to fast forty days in the forest of *Tetzcotzinco*, where God spoke to him through an angel. The subsequent miraculous defeat of the army of Chalco by his young son *Axoquentzin* convinced Nezahualcoyotl of the powers of the one, true God. Therefore, he built a temple in honor of this god and prohibited human sacrifice in Texcoco (Lee 2008: 197–198).

Problematically, these sources follow known narrative patterns from several stories of the Christian Bible and contain elements foreign to pre-Hispanic religion, such as the form of communication between Nezahualcoyotl and the supreme god through a messenger-angel. These two facts suggest that the (Native) authors of these colonial sources used narratives and motifs from the European scholastic tradition, in which they had been trained by the missionaries. Earlier pictorial sources, such as the *Codex en Cruz*, the *Codex Ixtlilxochitl* (Durand-Forest 1976) and the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, do not use these and paint a different image of Nezahualcoyotl, characterizing him as a great practitioner of the conventional Nahua religion (see Lee 2008: 96–127, 191–228). In sum, the image of Nezahualcoyotl as believing in the one, true God and supreme divine principle seems to be an invention in the first century of colonization by the Texcoco chroniclers, who conceived an Acolhuan natural philosophy and portrayed it as a forerunner to Christianity to vindicate pre-Hispanic memories, identity, and self-esteem.

In addition to colonial narrative sources, León-Portilla also referred to the *Cantares Mexicanos* (written in the 1550s) as a prime source to prove his theory. Some poems of the *Cantares* use salutatory addresses and titles from Nahua gods, predominantly those related to Tezcatlipoca, such as *Tloque Nahuaque* (Owner of the Near and Close), *Ipalnemohuani* (By It People Live), *Yohualli Ehecatl* (Night Wind) or *Moyocoyatzin* (One Who Invents Himself) (see Lee 2008: 209–210). Both Ixtlilxochitl and León-Portilla interpreted these names as expressions of the pre-Hispanic monotheism of the poems' authors. However, since these titles are used interchangeably in the *Cantares* with Christian deity and saint names such as Dios, Jesucristo, or Maria, they could very well be expressions of a colonial syncretism that used pre-Hispanic deity titles to refer to the Christian God. This was a common practice in early colonial times, encouraged by the Christian missionaries, who used Nahuatl phrases that, in their

view, presented acceptable translations of the Christian concept of God. In most cases, the missionaries adopted titles from Indigenous deities, sometimes complemented by the invented formulae *nelli teotl* (true god) or *iceltzin teotl* (only god). This attempt to Nahuatlize Christianity led to many mutual misunderstandings and forms of hybridity (Lee 2008: 110–112, Burkhart 1992). We will most probably never know whether the Indigenous authors had already adopted Christian thinking, expressed a pre-Hispanic monotheism, or interpreted the Christian God and the saints according to their own concepts of divinity.

The songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* display an extremely complex linguistic form and imagery that often eludes any understanding by modern Europeans. Many scholars have searched for some comprehension by applying European poetic structures and imagery, primarily those from European antiquity. In this way, Juan de Torquemada translated a quote from the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* in "the pastoral diction of European poetry" and gave it a "hint of the Old World *carpe diem* theme" (Bierhorst 2009: 23). Many later translators of the *Cantares* and *Romances* used this approach, most prominently Garibay and León-Portilla. By presenting the songs as "poetic ruminations of old kings stationed in flowery gardens—like shepherds stepped out of the *Eclogues* interlarded with firsthand reportage from pre-Cortésian battlefields" (Bierhorst 2009: vii), they cast "a glow of humanism over Mexico's ancient past" (Bierhorst 2009: viii). Garibay, who admired ancient Greek culture and philosophy, even homogenized and systematized the unwieldy Nahuatl songs according to the norms of Greek drama, forced them into a literary canon, omitted the frequent Christian allusions in the texts and presented "apologetic translations … entrusted with the task of representing a great civilization, comparable to the classical ones" (Payas 2004: 546). Thus, Garibay reconfirmed an interpretation of Nahuatl literature according to the ideals of ancient Greek culture. León-Portilla later expanded this interpretation into the idea of a philosophical monotheism among the pre-Hispanic Nahuas that fluctuated between a comparison with ancient Greek philosophy and poetry and a reference to natural Christianity. However, pre-Hispanic sources do not support this idea and it seems to have been an invention of the first generations of Natives, Mestizos, and Creoles after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, passed on to later scholars until well into the twentieth century (see Lee 2008: 2–15).

1.2 *Nahua Deity Personae*

After reflecting on these two prevalent interpretations of Nahua religion, we now examine their concept of *divinity* anew by going into more detail regarding the distinctive deity personae. Many scholars have attempted to explain and structure the confusing complexity of the Nahua pantheon. The Nahuas

themselves apparently felt no need to do so; judging from the sources, they were much more concerned with the influence of the deities on their lives. To this end, they were interested in acquiring more knowledge about the different deities and their interrelations with the movement of the world; they were also interested in making this complex knowledge available in writing and art and, finally, in finding the best ceremonies to influence and manipulate the deities. Consequently, presenting the Nahua abstract concept of divinity in a rationally systematic form, which I attempt to do in the following sections, is an outside interest typical for a specific European academic tradition.

1.2.1 The Historical Development of the Pantheon

One suggestion to explain the intricacy of the Aztec pantheon has been the reference to its historical development. According to this approach, Nahua religion over its history had added several layers of concepts without any attempt to harmonize them into a coherent whole. Along these lines, Burr C. Brundage (1979: 61) argued about historical strata in Aztec religion: shamanic approaches had been brought in by the Chichimecs, sacerdotal "pomp" had been adopted from Teotihuacan, and "the mysteries of elite societies or warrior's lodges" had been taken up from Tula. Be that as it may, the Nahua pantheon was most probably augmented and differentiated as Nahua society became larger and socially more complex. Each of the ethnic and social groups related to its own patron god. These tutelary deities were identified with the particular character of that group and stimulated and protected their main concerns. They were experienced as the agentive heart of the settlement (*altepetl iyollo*) and the prime mover of all life it contained (López Austin 1973: 61). The pantheon of tutelary deities can be visualized as a (nonhierarchical) pyramid, with Quetzalcoatl the patron at the top for all humanity, several deities for ethnic groups and/or *altepeme* on the next level, and at the bottom more tutelary deities for the *calpultin* and professional groups within the *altepetl*, and most probably even patron deities for individual families (see López Austin 1973: 44–47).

One of the most favored explanations for the intricacy of the Aztec pantheon is the reference to their practice of inclusion. After each conquest of an *altepetl* and its annexation into their empire, the Mexica took the deity statues from the main temple of the conquered town and brought them to Tenochtitlan, where they were housed in the Coacalco Temple (see, e.g., Brundage 1979: 61). This practice may have led to an increasing growth of the Nahua pantheon. López Austin, however, pointed out that these deities were not (necessarily) new gods added to the Mexica pantheon but in many cases well-known deities who had served as a tutelary deity for the conquered town. These deities were sometimes known under a different name or title and had differing

iconographic features. Yet, as López Austin argued (1993: 19), they were more variations and particular elaborations of a common pantheon than the "incorporation of foreign deities into a well-structured, stable cult of long tradition" exclusive to the Mexica.

From the sources, which cover two centuries of Mexica history, we know that Nahua religion was intentionally changed several times, most probably for political reasons. Accordingly, some particular deities enjoyed changing popularity and their spheres of influence could shift. The Mexica, with their growing political influence, became increasingly attached to their patron and war god, Huitzilopochtli, and increased the number of rituals performed in his honor. In this context, Huitzilopochtli apparently incorporated functions of other gods, such as Tezcatlipoca. During these times, the official religion was also homogenized and systematized into a proper state cult (Burkhart 1989: 189). While this official religion was destroyed with the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the general structure of religious practice persisted and was adapted to the new situation. As a consequence, the flexibility of their pantheon allowed the Nahuas to identify the three personae of the Christian God and the many saints with their distinctive spheres of influence with Indigenous deities and tutelary gods. Similarly, the flexibility of religious practice allowed them to incorporate Christian rituals such as confession or purification into their Indigenous system. Thus, Indigenous religion changed far less after the conquest and through the evangelizing crusades than the missionaries wished to believe (Burkhart 1989: 190).

1.2.2 The Categorization into Deity Complexes

In need for orientation in the overwhelming intricacy of the Aztec pantheon, scholars have sought for some kind of structure or pattern in it. Brundage (1979: 66–68), for example, identified four categories of deity types: (1) explanatory gods, that is, deities serving to explain characteristics of the world and to satisfy "the needs of the inquiring intellect"; (2) affective gods, "whose essence is their ability to move men … to passions and ebullitions"; (3) providential gods, presiding "over the material aspects of men's lives, nourishing, clothing, housing, training, curing them etc."; and (4) focal gods, that is, tutelary or patron gods. Even though Brundage's model helped to understand some functions of Aztec deities, it remained sketchy and was not adopted by later scholars.

In contrast, the elaborate categorization Nicholson (1971) proposed has been used in many introductions to the Aztec pantheon and as a foundation for further analyses of Nahua deities. Nicholson's model ordered the many deity personae into several complexes. Each complex is defined by a functional field and theme, which is shared by the respective gods assigned to it and

segmented into subdivisions with one or several deities each. Nicholson identified three overarching deity complexes: (1) Celestial Creativity–Divine Paternalism, with deities such as Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli or Tezcatlipoca; (2) Rain–Moisture–Agricultural Fertility, with Tlaloc, Ehecatl, or *Tlazolteotl*; and (3) War–Sacrifice–Sanguinary Nourishment of the Sun and the Earth, with Huitzilopochtli. Quetzalcoatl, Yacatecuhtli, and the Deities as Calendrical Patrons are discussed separately from these complexes. Nicholson's categorization of the complex Nahua pantheon into several deity complexes with subdivisions has proven to be a major accomplishment for scholars in understanding the many Nahua deity personae and their functions and associations. However, it is only an attempt to find some order and structure in the dizzying hodgepodge of the Nahua pantheon. There are many more deities than the ones mentioned in it. In addition, many of the deities shared functions and attributes with others, blended with them or split into several aspects, and defy any clear identification.

1.2.3 The Fluidity of Deity Personae and Deity Titles

López Austin (1973: 11) published a humorous quote by Kirchhoff that refers to Mexican history as well as the Nahua pantheon: "No entendí la historia del México prehispánico hasta que supe que cada personaje era su propia abuela." (I did not understand the history of pre-Hispanic Mexico until I realized that each character was its own grandmother. Translation mine). This captures quite well how confusing and frustrating the attempt to understand both of them can be for modern scholars. Working with contemporary Nahuas, the Sandstroms similarly faced the extreme flexibility of deity personae apparently defying any logical pattern, and its principles seemingly "intractable despite our best effort and years of trying to understand it" (A.R. Sandstrom 2010: 64; see also A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 129, 250). The pantheon of contemporary Nahuas is not just bewilderingly large but appears to have no limitation at all. Shamans creatively single out new spirits as often as they see the need in any new situation. Furthermore, even spirits identifiable to the ethnographer could have contradictory characteristics and roles.

As we can see from the sources, deity personae were highly dynamic and in constant flux. Depending on context and situation, they appeared in dual, quadruple, or quintuple form; they could endlessly split up and fissure into smaller units that covered different aspects of the deity. At the same time, the deity personae could fuse with each other and unite into an overarching deity personality. They were like clusters overlapping one another, interacting, merging, mixing, and flowing in and out of each other (Nicholson 1971: 409, López Austin 1993: 126, 147–148, 2008b: 29). This fluidity of deity personae is vividly visible

in the material objects and pictorial paintings presenting the deities. The attributes Sahagún listed as iconographic identity markers for distinctive deities migrate between the different deities, appear here and there, and merge, combine, and interchange with others (Boone 2007: 39–43). In ritual performances, different aspects of deities were emphasized, which allowed for a flexible contextualization appropriate to the concrete situation.

This fluidity also involved the gender identities of the deity personae. Although many deities came in pairs that represented female and male aspects complementing one another, the gender identities were not stable. The divisions between female and male persons were adaptable, melted into each other, and thus showed a fundamental androgynous essence. Clendinnen stated, "Relationships were revealed not through differentiation, but through permutations and transformations, and spoke more clearly of connection than opposition. Only by way of interrelationships did each part yield its meaning, which was always relative, always locational" (Clendinnen 1991: 168). Analyzing the complex relationships between Nahua deities, Brundage called the Aztec pantheon a

> continuum of divine activity.... A continuum is the opposite of a formal association of parts. It implies wholeness of quality and singleness of essence, and it therefore rejects structuring, which is the articulation of parts. The Aztecs felt a need to see their gods in various transfigurations, and this was allowable because they could also experience the divine as a numinous autonomy, pure and undifferentiated. The priests therefore never evolved a pantheon or theater of the gods where each was restricted to one shape for eternity. Though the masks were many, the divine world was one. (Brundage 1979: 55)

Following this interpretation, the Nahua notion of divinity had a pantheistic quality, with the properties and guises of the deity personae in constant change and with humans constantly reinterpreting and reconceiving them (Maffie 2014: 84).

Accordingly, the names given to different deities could be interpreted as well not as distinctive personae but merely as titles, epithets, and salutatory addresses of essentially the same deities (Townsend 1979: 29). Typically, we follow the models of the early colonial missionaries and chroniclers, who tried to differentiate between "proper" deity names that referred to the essential, unchangeable character of a deity, on the one hand, and salutatory titles that could be used for several deities, on the other hand. However, did the Nahuas themselves differentiate between deity names and epithets? At least the early

colonial times show a flexible practice, for example, Saint Mary and Saint Anne were quickly addressed with the deity names *Toci* and *Teteoinnan* (DiCesare 2008: 107, 117). The Europeans attempted to fit what they learned about Nahua divinities into their frame of reference: the idea of a pantheon as a family of discrete, separate gods with clear boundaries regarding their spheres of influence. The fluidity of the Nahua pantheon, however, has a "rainbow quality," as Richard F. Townsend wrote, with "evanescent and immaterial" personal identities of the deities, which "dissolved in mists of allusion and allegory with which Mexica poets and sculptors expressed their sense of the miraculous in the world about them" (1979: 30).

1.2.4 The Deities' Forms

Nahua deities existed in many different forms. They were constantly transforming and changing between their astral, natural, vegetal, animal, or human shapes and even merging themselves with one another. The missionaries and conquistadores best understood the deities' anthropomorphic appearance and this is consequently the one most described in the colonial sources. The Indigenous sources, nevertheless, paint a more diverse picture.

In the myths and migration stories, deities appear most often in their human shape. Following Boone's (1989) early analysis of the physical characteristics of the tutelary god of the Mexica, Huitzilopochtli was always present in his sacred bundle carried by the *teomamaque* (god-carriers) but acted primarily in his anthropomorphic form. As such, he merged with human warriors, with the *teyacanque* (the group leaders), and with deity impersonators (Boone 1989: 57). In many cases, these characters fluctuate between their human and divine nature, and thus López Austin (1973) named them "hombre-dios" (man-god). In the myths, the deities behave in the way humans do: They have love affairs, feel envy and resentment, engage in conflicts with their siblings, and wage war with their enemies (López Austin 2008b: 31). The deities show human characteristics in their personalities, in particular, in their emotions, passions, needs, agency, and capriciousness. Accordingly, deities can act benevolently or malevolently toward human beings; they can be affable or cruel, generous or avaricious. But above all, they communicate with human beings, listen to them, talk to them, and change the course of events for better or worse (López Austin 1993: 144–145, 2008b: 27).

In other Indigenous sources, zoomorphic features of the deities are prevalent, primarily in the form of the deities' animal *nanahualtin* (sg. *nahualli*). Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl, for example, were named after their *nahualli*; Huitzilopochtli is a hummingbird and carries a fire serpent, and Quetzalcoatl is the feathered serpent. In the origin myths, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl

transform into their serpent guise. Some deity statues are completely zoomorphic. Thus, the serpent with jaguar spots holding a smoking mirror is Tezcatlipoca, the feathered serpent and the ape with cut snail shells is Quetzalcoatl. Statues and pictorial depictions often combine anthropomorphic with zoomorphic features. Hence, the largely anthropomorphic Tlaloc has both serpent and jaguar body parts as well as fangs in his mouth, while Coatlicue has a head formed from two serpents, animal claws as feet, and wears a snake skirt. *Xochipilli* sometimes wears a headpiece shaped like an eagle's head and beak. Xochiquetzal wears a similar headpiece and sometimes sits on a jaguar (see Martínez González 2011: 170).

In addition to human and animal forms, deities also appeared solely in material objects of certain kinds. Most prominent among these are the sacred bundles, which carry items quintessentially identified with the respective tutelary deity. The sacred bundles were held in great awe and were, because of the power contained within, opened only in protected environments and situations. We do not know much about these bundles, most probably because the Indigenous peoples protected the esoteric knowledge and the power associated with them (Olivier 2007: 285; see also Guernsey 2006). In rituals, the deities could also appear in the form of small and large figurines and objects made from paper, rubber, wood, or dough (Heyden 2005).

Finally, the deities were present in their natural form as celestial bodies, plants, minerals, or elements. Quetzalcoatl and *Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli* were Venus; Coyolxauhqui and *Metztli* the moon; Tlaloc the rain and storm; Chalchiuhtlicue the standing sweet waters and rivers; Ehecatl, with his conch shell and specific mouthpiece, the wind; and *Xiuhteotl* the fire. Tlazolteotl had weed and straw as her hair, Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal were beautiful flowers, *Mayahuel* was the maguey plant, and *Ometochtli* was the alcoholic beverage *octli* made from its sap. Finally, many deities were identified with different aspects and stages of development of the maize plant such as *Centeotl*, *Xilonen*, or *Chicomecoatl*.

In sum, the Nahua deities existed in many forms. Furthermore, they were divisible, that is, the same god could exist not only in several places simultaneously but also concurrently in its different forms, as natural element, plant, animal, human being, statue, pictorial image, or ritual object. Still, it was the same deity, and what happened to one of these manifestations affected the deity in itself and at large (López Austin 1993: 137, 1997: 129–130).

1.2.5 Deities and Moral Categories

The Nahuas did not apply moral categories to their deities. They did not consider any deity inherently good or bad. This corresponded to the lack of a

fundamental dualism between good and evil in Nahua cosmovision in general. Pre-Hispanic Nahuatl had no term for *evil* in the abstract sense, only many unique terms describing conditions of disorder and decay. The early missionaries translated the Christian concept(s) of *sin* and *evil* with the Nahuatl word *tlatlacolli*. *Tlatlacolli*, however, meant "something damaged," and is derived from the verb *itlacoa* meaning "to damage, spoil, harm" things. The related substantive *itlacauhqui* referred to anything dislocated and off-balance, including general failure (Burkhart 1989: 28).

As previously stated, the Fifth Era was characterized by the back-and-forth movement between creative, ordering, life-generating forces and destructive, chaotic, death-producing forces (see also Burkhart 1989: 37–38). Consequently, there were also deities who presented these destructive and death-bringing forces. Above all others, Tlazolteotl, the goddess of "Sacred Filth," presented this aspect of the cosmos and referred to everything out of place, disordered, and deranged. She incorporated everything "rotten, worn out, used up, decomposed, disintegrated, deranged, and decayed" and was present in things like "excrement, vomit, nasal mucus, dirt, muck, slime, rags, and random bits of straw or hair" (Maffie 2014: 97). Tlazolteotl was nevertheless a necessary element in the circulation of cosmic energy within the cycle of life and death. She ate excrement and transformed it into humus as fertilizer and revitalizer of the soil to nourish the plants that fed human beings. Thus, Tlazolteotl presented the profound powers of transformation and of the regenerating cycle and, therefore, also fertility and abundance (DiCesare 2008: 118–122).

In addition, Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl were associated with degenerating and disordering forces. As the deities of death, they were depicted as dark and grim but not considered as evil. They were the counterpart to the divine creator couple, with whom they were "partners in the cosmic dance of life and death, creation and destruction" (Burkhart 1989: 51). The life-creating forces needed the death-bringing powers, since life without death was not possible. Constructive and deconstructive forces essentially depended on each other and formed an overarching synthesis and balance (Burkhart 1989: 37). Although the degenerating and disordering powers of the deities were not defined as essentially "evil" or "bad," they usually had negative effects on human beings when intimately confronted with them. An excess of these forces could result in disease and even death. Although the Nahuas considered death as a necessary element in the world, without which its counterpart life could not exist, they attempted to prevent death interrupting their human lives at an unorderly time. To this end, they performed a large number of rituals addressing the respective deities.

1.3 *An Alternative Interpretation: Pantheism and Deities as Force Complexes*

In the last sections, I analyzed Nahua presentations of deities with particular regard to individual deity personae. The early missionaries had already squeezed the swirling, oscillating, drifting verbal and practical references to deities into a neat polytheistic model that associates distinctive gods with concrete spheres of influence who can be identified in pictorial sources and material objects according to particular attributes. However, a closer examination of the sources reveals how much the Indigenous material escapes this neat model. The deities seem to be mocking European observers who attempt to capture them in their categorial cages by jumping from here to there, blending with each other, splitting themselves up and reappearing in unexpected places, and shape-shifting and reappearing in unexpected forms. Rather than attempting to tighten the grip and search for a better fitting polytheistic category set, I follow an alternative interpretation that several scholars have asserted.

First, the Indigenous sense of reality was, as the Sandstroms had understood for the contemporary Nahuas, most probably much more a pantheistic vision of the cosmos than a belief system based on a polytheistic pantheon. In fact, this idea of pantheism was, for the Sandstroms, the first interpretation that made any sense of the baffling fluidity and illimitability of the pantheon. The Sandstroms' aha moment was a remark made by the most influential and respected ritual specialist of the community in which they were living. When Alan Sandstrom, after years of attempting to find any structure in the pantheon of paper figures, desperately exclaimed, "How many of these are there?," the specialist, astounded by the apparent ignorance of the ethnographer, simply replied, "They are all the same" (A.R. Sandstrom 2010: 64). Put more abstractly, the "workings of the universe as a whole, including the sun, the earth, water, growing crops, and human beings" are believed to be "connected at higher and higher levels until all parts are subsumed into a totality" (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 276, 277). This contemporary interpretation of the Nahua pantheon most probably also matches the pre-Hispanic cosmovision.

Within this general pantheistic idea, the complexity of the Nahua pantheon can be explained by understanding the deities as forces and powers moving through the cosmos. As such, they were merely different aspects of the same metaphysical essence, *teotl*, which was unfolding and manifesting in a kaleidoscopic fashion of facets, essences, and qualities. Eva Hunt (1977: 55) described the "divine reality" of the Nahuas as "multiple, fluid, encompassing the whole" with its aspects as "changing images, dynamic, never frozen, but constantly

being recreated, redefined. This fluidity was a culturally defined mystery of the nature of divinity itself." Only for iconographic, analytical, and pedagogical reasons, some aspects and qualities were emphasized and, in accordance with particular contexts, specific clusters of energies singled out (Maffie 2014: 85–86). In Brundage's words (1979: 56), the deities presented the same "numinous" but epitomized certain qualities, which easily transfigured into another, and adopted various disguises and iridescent shades when they manifested in their attributes and material regalia. Rather than forming a neatly defined pantheon, they presented a continuum of essences. And instead of being delimitable entities, the deities were "clusters of possibilities invoked by a range of names than specific deities with specific zones of influence" (Clendinnen 1991: 248).

This interpretation of Nahua theology was brought into the Mesoamericanist discourse by Arild Hvidtfeldt (1958) in his philological analysis of the Nahua concepts *teotl* and *ixiptla*. In this study, Hvidtfeldt compared the Aztec concept of divinity with the Polynesian *mana* as a kind of divine, animistic power that permeated the cosmos and inspired awe in human beings. Yolotl González Torres (1975) compared the Nahua concept of *tona*(*lli*) not only with *mana* but also with the Chinese *yang*. Since then, several scholars have adopted this general understanding of Nahua deities as "numinous" forces with regard to the Nahua concept *teotl*, while *tonalli* is (mainly implicitly) taken as a subgroup of *teotl* (see Townsend 1979, Clendinnen 1991, Read 1998). Consequently, Klor de Alva (1979) even named Nahua theology "teoyoism." He based this English denotation on the Nahua *teyotl*, the substantive derived from *teotl* expressing the abstract quality of *teotl*.

This line of reasoning is compatible with an interpretation of the deity complexes by López Austin (1993: 125–126). According to him, the deity clusters are not merely *associated* with the particular phenomena over which they preside, but they *personify* the underlying qualities and essences. For example, Tlaloc is not merely presiding over the rain but personifies the qualities underlying the rain theme, such as moisture and wetness, the seed of fertility power contained in the process of watering, the destruction of hail, or the flash of lightning. This interpretation also explains why many deities encompass several phenomena that at first sight appear to be quite different from one another. Quetzalcoatl, for example, conjoined not only the astral Venus and the process of dawn, the element of wind, and the natural quality of fertility but also human wisdom, learning, and the skills of the human arts. Upon further consideration,

> the theme of beginning, or of extraction, unifies this apparent conglomerate of attributes: the emergence of light before sunrise; the emergence of earthly things beneath that light; the emergence of rain after the wind

> that sweeps a path for it; the beginning of human life. Within this unifying idea, particular qualities call forth different names: Quetzalcoatl becomes Ehecatl with the specific qualities of wind, or Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, with those of dawn. (López Austin 1993: 126, emphasis in original)

Thus, Quetzalcoatl incorporated the particular quality of beginning or extraction within the overall motion of forces in the cosmos. Following this idea, López Austin (2008b) understood the knowledge that the Nahuas had acquired about the deities as a kind of scientific knowledge gained from observing nature, life, and the cosmos. The Nahuas experienced the world of which they were a part as constantly in motion. They explained this motion by reference to particular qualities personified in the deities. Accordingly, they could identify and address the driving forces behind the regular movement in the seasons of the year or in the life cycles of plants and human beings. At the same time, they could identify and address motions that were not in accordance with these regularities, that is, the irregularities occurring in the cosmos, the unexpected, the contingencies of life. This abstract interpretation makes good sense of the many intricacies of the Nahua pantheon.

Nevertheless, an important question remains. Did the Nahuas actually think in terms of a "pantheon"? Did they actually refer to the forces and qualities of the cosmos with a concept comparable to the European notion of "deities," or "spirits" as contemporary Nahuas do (see A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 276–277)? We may never know. The earliest Spaniards who studied Nahuatl, compiled Nahua-Spanish dictionaries, and translated the Christian creed into the Nahuatl language were under the impression that some Nahuatl terms could be used to transport the European ideas of the single, true "God," of pagan "deities," and of evil divine characters such as "demons," "devils," and Satan. Correspondingly, the conquistadores and missionaries regarded the statues in the Indigenous temples as idols of deities or devils and understood the names and titles used in the many rituals and songs of worship as names of these deities (or devils). Later scholars analyzing pictorial manuscripts were reminded of polytheistic deity depictions because the images characteristically combined human figures with animal features and particular regalia to form "non-natural" beings. The scholars did not believe that these were depictions of creatures that actually physically existed in the Americas. They did, however, believe that the Indigenous cultures were strongly religious. Consequently, it seemed only natural to them to interpret these creatures as representations of mythical figures and Indigenous deities comparable to the polytheistic systems of the known paganism of the Old World.

In conclusion, the scholarly understanding of Nahua cosmovision has been shaped by particular frames of interpretation, most importantly by the idea of a polytheistic pantheon. The alternative interpretation not only acknowledges Nahua cosmovision as pantheistic but moreover understands the "deities" as representing ideas of forces or essences moving through the cosmos. Understanding these forces as "numinous" or "divine," however, brings in a new frame of interpretation that appears to project non-Indigenous ideas. In the following sections, I attempt to transcend these frames of interpretation derived from the European concept of *divinity* by analyzing the two cultural concepts of *teotl* and *nahualli*.

2 The Nature of *Teotl*

According to the scholarly interpretation of Nahua theology as presented in the last section, the individual deity personae were manifestations of particular "divine" or "numinous" qualities, essences, or forces moving in the cosmos. Is such a concept of *divinity* actually adequate to describe Indigenous ontology? Can we learn something about the ontological nature of these forces from the surviving sources? Was there actually an idea of a fundamental duality between the material world, on the one hand, and its animating forces, on the other hand, as López Austin suggested with his theory of "light and heavy matter"? Or was Nahua ontology monistic? Did the Nahuas consider *teotl* as essentially transcendent, as León-Portilla suggested, with reference to the deity Yohualli Ehecatl, or did they instead experience it as inherently immanent?

2.1 *Light and Heavy Matter: the Problem of Ontological Dualism versus Monism*

Put abstractly, the Nahuas believed that the cosmos of the Fifth Sun and its temporal-spatial frame of existence were created by the movement of forces. The diversity of entities existing in the world, ranging from stars, stones, and plants to animals and human beings, was based on the diversity of essences and qualities that were constantly moving through the world and transforming it. Everything that existed was a particular materialization of these forces—in most cases a distinctive composite of several of them—and was changed over time by the intrusion or extrusion of these and other forces.

López Austin, in his interpretation of Nahua ontology based on the known cosmogonic myths, suggested that these "animating" forces were subtle, invisible, and imperceptible. Originating from Tamoanchan and Tlalocan, they moved through the *malinalli* into the earthly time-space continuum, only to

return to the underworlds after their journey. If a child was conceived, a "divine soul" was sent by the "gods on high" from Tamoanchan to enter the womb of the mother; after death, this animistic force returned to this original place (López Austin 1997: 12–13). The cosmos was animated by these divine, animistic entities, and every entity that existed in the world was "a god encapsulated in heavy, durable, perceptible, deteriorating matter" (López Austin 2008b: 31, translation mine). According to López Austin, this divine force was not supernatural in contrast to the natural world, nor was it sacred in contrast to the profane world. Rather, the cosmos was made from two different kinds of matter distinguished only by being light or heavy. While "heavy matter" constituted the material world, the forces moving through it were "light matter." Human sensory perception in normal states of awareness only perceived heavy matter, while light matter was generally imperceptible (López Austin 1993: 128–131, 1997: 20). Light matter was manifold in itself and made up of the elemental opposition of features such as "luminosity" and "darkness." The deities were particular composites of distinctive qualities of light matter. These composites, in turn, endowed and permeated heavy matter, thus creating the world in its manifold shapes (López Austin 1993: 131).

López Austin (1997: 20) also explained his theory of light and heavy matter by referencing a cosmogonic myth that Sahagún had recorded (1978, III: 1) in which the deities must die to create the world.[1] López Austin concluded that the dead substance of the deities transformed into the essences of "stones, minerals, trees, plants, vegetation, of human beings, and of stars." This transformation was only possible through the interference of the sun,

> who with his rays had enclosed the divine substance in a heavy covering and had crystallized it in a new type of existence. The heavy covering, the covering of death, limited the circulation of the divine forces. The beings of this world were partly crystallized, enclosed gods, limited in their power. (López Austin 1997: 20)

Following this interpretation, the light matter encapsulated in heavy matter became bound to the temporal-spatial continuum of the Fifth Sun, while light matter in itself could "move easily across the barriers of time and space in the cosmos" (López Austin 1993: 128). Thus, heavy matter, even in combination with light matter, was ruled by time; the light divine forces, though, were "able to pass out of time sequences into the eternal present" (López Austin 1993: 132).

According to López Austin, this ontological difference between light and heavy matter is manifest in the different cosmic spheres and time units as recounted in Nahua creation myths. The divine couple Omecihuatl and

1 This is a variant of the story about the creation of the sun and moon at Teotihuacan.

Ometecuhtli and their four sons initially dwelled in the original time-space, the "anecúmeno" (the uninhabited world). This was a time-space of "allá-entonces" (beyond way back) without any activity, and it was in-transcendent. At some point, this initial existence was interrupted by the mythic adventures of the deities, who started the transcendent time of divine activity. Finally, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca also created, simultaneously with the earth and sky, the time-space of causality, the "ecúmeno," which was inhabited by the celestial bodies, the earth, plants, animals, and human beings. In the world of the Fifth Era, the dwelling place of the deities (in other words, of the light matter) generally remained in the *anecúmeno*. However, they were able to travel to the *ecúmeno*, the time-space of the earthly existence, moving through time and space and animating, transforming, creating, and damaging all heavy matter (López Austin 1993: 38–55, 2008b: 25–27).

Human beings, like everything else that existed, were made of both light and heavy matter. While the human parts consisting of heavy matter were subject to death and decomposition, their light matter was not. After death, the light matter (in form of the *teyolia*) returned to Tamoanchan or the *anecúmeno*, waiting to be recycled in the continuing movement of forces through the cosmos of the Fifth Sun (López Austin 1997: 20).

In sum, López Austin argued for a constitutional dualism of light and heavy matter that is reminiscent of the well-known dualism of the spiritual and the material. Although he emphasized the immanent existence of light matter and the strong intertwinement of light and heavy matter in the world, he also thought that both kinds of matter existed independently of each other, with light matter originally dwelling in a transcendent time-space. López Austin's highly abstract model of Nahua ontology is coherent and convincing in itself. Nevertheless, its grounding in the surviving primary sources does not satisfactorily convince me. For example, beside the fact that the deities died to create the world, there is no further evidence in the narrative to suggest that the "divine substance" of the deities was "enclosed … in a heavy covering," thus suggesting a dualism between a (light) divine substance and a (heavy) material world.

In my own search, I have found no further references in the sources that could be interpreted to support López Austin's theory of a constitutional dualism. On the contrary, everything points toward a fundamentally immanent and monistic ontology in which the forces moving through the cosmos are not constitutionally separate from materiality (see also Maffie 2014: 47–62). I believe that the Nahuas perceived the forces and materiality as merely different forms, or facets, of the same substance. This is not to say that the Nahuas were incapable of cognitively differentiating between the spiritual and the material

or between the physical body and emotional or mental processes in human beings. Nevertheless, I think they interpreted both as different facets that were ontologically the same. To support this alternative interpretation, the next section examines another theory León-Portilla proposed that suggests an ontological dualism in Nahua cosmovision, this time between transcendence and immanence.

2.2 Yohualli Ehecatl*: the Problem of Transcendence versus Immanence*

The opposition of transcendence and immanence in León-Portilla's interpretation of Nahua ontology proposes an even stronger dualism than the one between light and heavy matter. Did the Nahuas indeed believe in a transcendent realm of reality, and did they perhaps even regard this realm as more real than the worldly existence because it was eternal and not ephemeral?

For León-Portilla, the answer was obvious: they did. According to him (1980a: 44), the Nahua philosophers had expressed in several sources their "deep spiritual concerns" about the perishability and evanescence of earthly life. They had not only lamented the transitory nature of earthly life but also longed for the only thing León-Portilla imagined as able to counteract this impermanence: an eternal, transcendent realm of reality not affected by the passage of time. Following this idea, León-Portilla set out to find this transcendent realm in the beliefs of the Nahuas. And he felt certain he had found it in two deity concepts that he imagined to be interrelated: Ometeotl and Yohualli Ehecatl.

According to León-Portilla (1963: 82–90), the philosophers around Nezahualcoyotl not only believed in the one supreme divine principle underlying all nature, but they believed this divine principle to be otherworldly, an "invisible and impalpable reality" that in its "transcendent nature" went beyond "that world of experience so graphically conceived by the Nahuas as the visible and tangible." León-Portilla found the ultimate expression of this principle in the divine creator couple, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl, mentioned in the cosmogonic myth and commonly translated as "Lord and Lady of Duality" (*ome* = two). The couple dwelled in the thirteenth layer of the heavens, *Omeyocan*, a place León-Portilla imagined to be beyond all time and space, a supernatural realm. León-Portilla believed (1963: 99, 102) that this self-engendering divine couple, similar to the Christian idea of the Trinity, presents a single and transcendent divine principle, which he named *Ometeotl*.[2] The scholar was so

2 The name *Ometeotl* (Hometeule) appears, to my knowledge, only in the *Codex Vaticanus 3778/Ríos* (Anders and Jansen 1996: folio 3), where it is translated in the commentary as "Lord of Three," an obvious Christian interpretation.

convinced of his interpretation that he even "corrected" some lines from the *Cantares Mexicanos* accordingly. Believing in a colonial linguistic distortion, he replaced the term *Dios* whenever it was used with the assumingly Indigenous monotheistic concept of *Ometeotl* (see, e.g., León-Portilla 1997: 213).

In a thought-provoking article, Richard Haly (1992) radically challenged the interpretation of Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl as the paired deity of duality who represent an essentially single, supreme, and transcendent principle heading the Nahua pantheon. According to Haly's analysis, the few written references to the names Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl could have been colonial alternative spellings of the spoken *Omitecuhtli/Omicihuatl*. Hence, the deities should actually be translated as "Lord and Lady of Bones" (*omi* = bones), a translation and interpretation far more consistent with Nahua cosmovision. Bones played an important role in Nahua rituals and in cultural concepts connecting the living with the dead ancestors. Bones also play a prominent role in the myth about the creation of humanity, where they were thought to store the dead person's *tonalli*, represented the ancestors in general, and were kept in special places. Considering the high importance of bones in Nahua ritual life, it makes more sense to identify the creator couple, the primordial ancestors, with bones and Omeyocan as the place of bones.

León-Portilla, however, attempted to underline his interpretation of Ometeotl by pointing to several assumingly monotheistic Nahua deity titles, such as Moyocoyatzin. In his view, the title of Yohualli Ehecatl most poignantly expresses the Nahua idea of the transcendent nature of the supreme divinity Ometeotl. Since, in León-Portilla's perspective, the night is invisible and the wind intangible, Yohualli Ehecatl refers to a realm of existence beyond the world of sensory experience, that is, a transcendent world (León-Portilla 1963: 82–92, 1980a: 35). Do the sources support this understanding of Yohualli Ehecatl?

Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* includes several references to Yohualli Ehecatl, largely relating the title to Tezcatlipoca. In book three, it is written that Tezcatlipoca was "invisible, just like the night, the wind" (Sahagún 1978: III, 11).[3] In a song recorded in book six, Tezcatlipoca, the "all-powerful, the invisible, the untouchable one" is addressed with, "O master, O our lord, O lord of the near, of the nigh, O night, O wind, now in truth I come to appear before thee, to reach thee" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 1).[4] Finally, the list of figures of speech at the end of book six says:

3 "amo hitonji, çan iuhqujn ioalli, i ehecatl" (Sahagún 1978: III, 11).

4 "ca ixquich iveli, amo ittalonj, amon matoconj … Tlacatle totecue, tloquee, naoaquee, iooalle, ehecatle" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 1). Note the vocative form of the titles.

> THE NIGHT, THE WIND, THE SORCERER, OUR LORD. This saying was said of the demon Tezcatlipoca. It was said: "Can perchance Tezcatlipoca, can Uitzilopochtli as personages speak to you? For they take a form only like that of the wind and the night. Can they perchance as personages speak to you?" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 254).[5]

If we actively search for references to the idea of a transcendent, supreme divine principle, we might read these passages accordingly: the all-powerful, invisible Tezcatlipoca or the question whether he and Huitzilopochtli appear in a form of human "personages" and speak to humans in that form. However, we could also interpret these passages in a completely different way, without the idea of a transcendent supreme deity as interpretative frame, as I discuss next.

Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2007) analyzed the figure of Yohualli Ehecatl in the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*. According to their interpretation (2007: 19), many images in the codex represented the "transformation of humans into serpents with the masks of the Wind-God and a body consisting of darkness, according to the Nahuatl expression *yoalli ehecatl*, 'night and wind,' which describe the mysterious character of the deities and those who have contact with them." Following this image, the wind was not only identified with the breath of the gods but also experienced as the road sweeper announcing the coming rains. As such, it was perceived as a tangible source of creative powers (2007: 3–4). The darkness, on the other side, represented the primordial condition before the creation of time and history. Instead of associating this condition or place as transcendent, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2007: 49) defined it as the "place of mystery." All in all, the two scholars correlate the Yohualli Ehecatl with the Plumed Serpent and interpret both as general expressions of a visionary, shamanistic *nahualli* experience (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: 51).

According to Stephen Houston and Karl A. Taube (2000: 264), Mesoamerican peoples perceived the source and content of certain sensations, such as odor or tactile stimuli, neither as "empty nor ethereal." Rather, they apparently perceived them as invisible but highly tangible phenomena. The wind, in particular, was by no means intangible for the Nahuas feeling it on their skins, nor was it in any way transcendent. Ehecatl visibly swept the earthly roads for the rain deities, he cleansed and purified the fields and paths by blowing and breathing upon them, he transformed *tlazolli* into fertilizing energy (Maffie

5 "In iooalli, in ehecatl y naoalli in totecujo. Injn tlatolli, itechpa mjtoaia: in tlacateculotl Tezcatlipuca: mjtoaia. Cujx vel amechnotzaz in tlacatl in Tezcatlipuca, in Vitzilopuchtli: ca çan juhquj in ehecatl, auh in iooalli qujmonaoaltia: cujx vel amechtlacanotzaz." (Sahagún 1969: VI, 254).

2014: 284). Ehecatl also blew life and movement into the sun (according to the myth as recorded by Sahagún, 1953: VII, 3–9). The wind also carried smells and odors, which in themselves were regarded as highly significant. The deep bouquet of flower fragrances was left for Tezcatlipoca to smell. Social elites, jade jewelry, and the condition of happiness were identified with pleasant fragrances, while the underworld of Mictlan smelled dingy and foul (Houston and Taube 2000: 266–270, 276, Sahagún 1969: VI, 245). The *ihiyotl* energy was visualized as breath or wind, as a contagious gas emanating from bodies and expelled at death. In its form as the air of death, it was also called the "night air." Furthermore, a certain type of cold night wind was perceived to be the source of serious diseases (López Austin 1988b: 232–236, Arnold 1999: 59, Olivier 2003: 24).

Contemporary Nahuas attribute all kinds of disease, misfortune, and death to a certain class of spirits, the *ejecamej* ("gusts of winds," sg. *ejecatl*) or *malos vientos/malos aires*, which are the most dangerous and life-threatening of all spirits. According to this belief, it is the wind spirits that bring "drought, crop or animal disease, mental disorders, illnesses, bad luck, and infertility" (A.R. Sandstrom 1991: 252; see also A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 81–83, Santiago and Nallely 2012: 18). It could well be that this contemporary idea provides a key for the interpretation of the epithet "wind" for Tezcatlipoca, since Tezcatlipoca was also believed to bring all kinds of horrible diseases and great misfortune upon humanity (see Sahagún 1978: III, 11–12).

Analogous to wind, there is also no evidence that the Nahuas identified the night with transcendence simply because of the reduced visibility of human beings. Rather, the night was experienced as dangerous and perilous. It was filled with dangerous creatures hostile to human beings, it was Tezcatlipoca's preferred time of action as trickster and sorcerer, and it was also the preferred time of action for evil-causing human sorcerers and witches (Brundage 1979: 84–85, Olivier 2003: 23). Thus, the night presented essentially earthly and worldly dangers for human beings. Midnight was therefore announced with the sounds of conch trumpets, horns, and drums from the temples and accompanied by priestly sacrifices. Instead of invisibility, that is noncolor, the night was associated with the color black, and perhaps the priests' black face and body color referred to these kinds of energies (Brundage 1979: 65–66, 84).

In sum, many references in the sources and cultural concepts suggest that the Nahuas did not associate "wind" and "night" with invisibility and intangibility in the sense of transcendence. Rather, they experienced them as this-worldly phenomena with direct and materially, sensorially felt effects on human beings, usually dangerous ones. Based on this information, León-Portilla's interpretation of Yohualli Ehecatl as the expression of a transcendent, supreme

divinity appears to be a European projection. Apart from León-Portilla's suspect interpretation of the creation myths featuring Ometeotl, no references in the sources suggest the idea of a constitutional transcendency of the divine among the Nahuas. Instead, the deities are largely identified with immanent aspects, such as natural phenomena. This was a "fully materialized sacral reality, a divine presence immanent in worldly things ranging from maize to all the special substances linked to song in the *cantares*" (Tomlinson 2007: 80). Therefore, I argue with Maffie that the Nahua divine was ontologically this-worldly:

> Teotl is metaphysically *immanent* in several significant senses: First, teotl does not exist apart from or independently of the cosmos. Teotl is fully *copresent* and *coextensional* with the cosmos. Second, teotl is *not* correctly understood as *supernatural* or otherworldly. Teotl is identical to and hence fully coextensional with creation: hence no part of teotl exists apart from creation. Teotl does not exist outside of space and time. It is as concrete and immediate as the water we drink, the air we breathe, and food we eat. Teotl is neither abstract nor transcendent. (Maffie 2014: 29, emphasis in original)

2.3 *Conclusion: the Immanent Nature of* Teotl

In the last two sections, I argued that the sources contain no direct evidence that Nahua ontology was dualistic and divided between "spiritual" (light matter) and "material" (heavy matter) or between transcendence and immanence. However, substantial evidence does show that the Nahuas experienced the cosmos of the Fifth Era as filled with energy and as characterized by particular qualities that were present in the myriad of beings and things existing in the world. Many scholars refer to this characteristic of Nahua reality by using the Nahuatl term *teotl* in the abstract, although the Nahuas themselves apparently did not theorize about it in the abstract.

The colonial dictionaries typically translate *teotl* with the Spanish "dios/diosa" or, in later English-Nahuatl dictionaries, with "deity" (Molina 1880, Siméon 1977, Karttunen 1983; for an analysis of all the dictionaries and grammars, see Bassett 2015: 52–56). In the *Florentine Codex*, *teotl* is used frequently and in different contexts. First, the standing-alone *teotl* is often employed in descriptions of nonhuman agents or qualities and ritual contexts. In these cases, it is typically translated as "god" or "deity," since this makes the most sense in European eyes for these contexts. Second, *teotl* is used commonly in everyday contexts, in particular as a compound for words naming objects of the natural world (in book eleven on "Earthly Things," Sahagún 1963). In these cases, the

modifier *teo*- is usually translated with adjectives such as *sacred*, *marvelous*, *strange*, *surprising*, and *terrible* (see Siméon 1977: 490).

In their efforts to understand the intricate pantheon of the Aztecs, some recent scholars have attempted to break free of the simple translation of the complex concept of *teotl* with "deity." Although not mentioned explicitly, the range of adjectives given for the *teo*-compounds most probably reminded them of the European concepts of "the sacred," in particular, of the sacred as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*[6] that Rudolf Otto (1917) coined. In this way, many scholars described the Nahua concept of divinity as a force, energy, or power. Gruzinski (1989: 22) thought *teotl* was something between *mana* (see Marrett 1909) and a personalized divinity (Gruzinski 1989: 22). Bierhorst (1985b: 310) translated *teotl* with "spirit" and compared it—like Read (1998: 145)—to similar, if not identical, Native American concepts such as the Ojibwa *manitou* or the Quechua *huaca*. As already mentioned, Klor de Alva (1980a: 68, 77–83) even named the Nahua religion a "teoyoism," because he thought that it was primarily focused on the ritual manipulation of *teotl* in its manifestations in natural cycles. In my view, the label "teoyoism" is far too inspired by the typically European focus on (fixed and stable) concepts of *divinity* as the heart of any religion. Nevertheless, I position myself within this general tradition of scholarship that identifies the Nahua concept of divinity within their general ontology with our concepts of *forces*, *power*, and *energy*. I do so because this interpretation most convincingly explains many aspects of Nahua cosmovision and, even more, of their (ritual) behavior and their use of aesthetic media.

As a result of his extensive and thorough study of ethnohistorical and colonial sources, archaeological evidence, the symbolism of Nahua art, and linguistics, Maffie (2014: 21–22) regarded the nature of *teotl* as a "continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy." All evidence suggests that no separation existed between spiritual and material, between this force and matter; in contrast, *teotl* was "identical to reality per se and hence identical to everything that exists. What's more, teotl is the basic stuff of reality. That which is real, in other words, is both identical with teotl and consists of teotl" (Maffie 2014: 22). Thus, Nahua ontology was constitutionally monistic. It was also essentially dynamic, a process "like a thunderstorm or flowing river rather than a static, perduring *substantive entity* like a table or a pebble" (Maffie 2014: 23, emphasis in original). It is

6 Robert Roberts (2016) translated the concept as "the mysterious presence of the wholly other that inspires awe and devotion."

> neither teleological nor eschatological. Teotl simply becomes, just as the seasons simply change. Teotl's becoming has both positive and negative consequences for human beings and is therefore ambiguous in this sense. Creative energy and destructive energy are not two different kinds of energy but two aspects of one and the same teotlizing energy. (Maffie 2014: 23)

Although *teotl* was metaphysically homogenous and nonhierarchical, it enfolded itself into the myriad of existing things, which were "merely momentary arrangements of this sacred energy" (Maffie 2014: 24). Hence, the "teoyoism" of Nahua ontology was a kind of pantheistic animism because all existing entities were believed to be metaphysically "empowered and vivified by teotl's energy" (Maffie 2014: 115). Consequently, everything possessed a certain degree of agency—even things without the ability to move, such as rocks, mountains, or the earth—because the *teotl* energy of every existing entity influenced its surroundings (Maffie 2014: 115). Thus, the cosmos was regarded as fundamentally alive. Nevertheless, Nahua monistic animism did not differentiate between the animating force and the animated thing. Most importantly, the Nahuas apparently did not spend much time reflecting on their own ontology in an abstract way. Rather, they aesthetically expressed their experience of the cosmos and pragmatically worked for a beneficial coexistence within a community of forces and persons characterized by complex interrelationships.

3 *Teotl*'s Realization: *Nahualli* and the Layers of Reality

Although Nahua ontology was constitutionally monistic, *teotl* nevertheless manifested itself in different forms. More precisely and to avoid a potential dualist reading, *teotl realized* itself in many different facets, like the colors of a rainbow refracted from the same source of light. In this way, *teotl* realized itself in the many different qualities of things, that is, in their "narrowness . . ., their sharpness, their flatness, their harmoniousness or their oppositeness, their filthiness or their freshness, their atrociousness or their domesticness" (Brundage 1979: 56). It also realized itself not only in the abstract qualities of things but also in their many different surfaces, forms, colors, textures, appearances, and—if animated beings—also in their behavior and personalities. For example, the jaguar, with its distinctive spotted fur, special graceful movements, nighttime hunting habits, and personality expressed a distinctive quality or, more precisely, a distinctive combination of qualities and thus of *teotl* forces.

The same forces also realized in other existing things with resembling forms, appearances, behavior patterns, and personality traits.

One of the major indicators in the sources for this idea is the concept of the *nahualli*, which expressed the belief in special relationships between particular entities in the cosmos who share the same type of *teotl* quality. The Nahuas observing nature detected many semblances between entities from very different natural spheres. Resemblances for example in surface appearances or behavior were regarded as signs for the underlying relationships of forces:

> The rosette markings on a jaguar's skin, taken along with the jaguar fondness for hunting by water, recalled the formal roundness of water lilies. In view of the creature's nocturnal and solitary habits, and its superbly indifferent demeanour, those ambiguous signs also pointed to the stars which studded the night sky, and so to the secret doings of night-walking sorcerers and of their divine patron Tezcatlipoca, the "Smoking Mirror" of the seer's scrying glass. (Clendinnen 1991: 224–225)

The Nahuas expressed their knowledge of many of these relationships, particularly those between human beings, animals, and plants, in linguistic metaphors, idioms, and riddles. For example, a liar was a coyote; a humble, poor person a turtledove; a fugitive became a rabbit or dear; and a ruler was a silk cotton tree giving protection to the subjects (Sahagún 1969: VI, 219–260). Many of these expressions prevalently used in Nahuatl most probably were not thought of as metaphors comparing one thing with the other, saying, for example, fugitives were *like* rabbits because they ran in the same way as a rabbit. Rather, fugitives were thought to share the same quality of rapid and anxious running as rabbits. Thus, linguistic expressions of this kind referred to the shared inherent quality of things. Other commonly used examples are the many linguistic analogies of human beings and maize, the name "Jade Skirt" for Chalchiuhtlicue or the image "water-mountain" for *altepetl* (typically translated as "town"). The spoken word was embedded in a complex set of cultural expressions and evoked a "multiplicity of reference," which pointed semantically to the many force relations in the cosmos (Tomlinson 1996: 268).

In addition to language, these relationships were also intentionally expressed and made tangible for human beings in sculpture, architecture, painting, costumes, tools, and material objects as well as in music and dance (see also Read 1998: 39–40). Hence, the painted, sculptured, and embodied depictions of the deities were regarded as realizations and unfoldings of distinct qualities and forces; they personified different and specific aspects of the same underlying *teotl*. For their rituals, the Nahuas selected some of these facets to

materialize in personified or material form. They "referred to these energy-clusters using metaphoric names or kennings, and depicted them artistically by means of semantically charged colors, vestments, insignia, paraphernalia, body postures, and human shapes." They also identified particular behavior patterns and activities with them. All of these expressions in different media and forms of behavior essentially articulated the "powers and forces associated with the relevant deity-cluster" (Maffie 2014: 87).

The fluidity in the pantheon, nevertheless, as well as in attributes, material objects, functions, and behavior associated with the deities were expert expressions of the complexity and kaleidoscopic nature of the qualities and forces running through the Fifth Sun's time and place. Conveying this kaleidoscopic nature and complex web of relationships, the Nahuas played with semblances and references in their cultural media, including their elaborate rituals:

> Abstractions, juxtapositions, elucidations or relationships, proliferated.... Parallel transformations in substances perceptually different hinted at hidden resemblance, and so to connection.... In ritual action those connections and identities and relationships could be played out and puzzled over for what they revealed of relationships between the sacred forces of water, sun, and fire, and how each worked on the matter which constituted man. (Clendinnen 1991: 246)

Contemporary Nahuas do so in a similar way with cut paper images of spirits. According to the Sandstroms, the paper images

> are intellectual achievements because they are visual images of what people think about nature and humanity's place in it. The images break the flow of consciousness and events into analytical units.... These are symbolically depicted in paper and laid out in an organized pattern during rituals so that they form a meaningful whole. (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 259)

It might also well be that the complex taxonomies of symbols in the contemporary Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua cosmovision express a similar idea of cosmic relationships between animals, plants, natural phenomena, directions, celestial bodies, numbers and mathematical orders, geometric designs, parts of the human body, diseases, material culture, and social positions (see A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 280–301, based on Hunt 1977).

Explained in an abstract way, all the many different layers of reality were shaped by *teotl* qualities and moving forces. Thus, the same quality realized

itself analogically in these different layers. At its most basic, it realized itself basically in aspects such as surface condition, color, texture, material, or sound. More complexly, it realized itself in the celestial bodies, the natural world on earth, plant growth and animal behavior, the social world, human activities and professions, the human body, the activities of the deities, as well as in human cultural media and ritual performances (López Austin 1993: 126). Following this analogy, manipulation of forces in one of the layers affected the other layers as well.

The Nahuatl concept of *nahualli* expressed this idea of the parallel nature between the different layers of reality. Scholars have translated *nahualli* (alternatively named *nagual*) most commonly as a (1) "spiritual alter ego," "personal totem," or "guardian spirit"; (2) "companion animal" or "destiny animal"; or (3) "transforming animal." In Monaghan's (1998) view, all of these suggestions cover aspects of the concept but miss its essential sense. These translations of *nahualli* focus only on human beings, although other things in the cosmos might also have a *nahualli* partner, such as the sun, moon, lightning, rain, mountains, or villages. In contrast to the suggested translation as guardian spirit or companion animal (1 and 2), the *nahualli* did not have a protective function for human beings, as is often the case in comparable concepts in other cultures. The idea of the transforming animal (3), finally, is too heavily influenced by images from European folklore about human witches or sorcerers transforming into animals. The latter translation also considers only one aspect of the *nahualli*, the shape-shifting of human beings. Because of these shortcomings, Monaghan proposed an alternative meaning for *nahualli* as a kind of "coessence" related to the idea of the *tonalli*. This idea of coessence "highlights what seems to be in most areas the central feature of the phenomenon: the coessential link between what appear to be phenomenally distinct entities, caused (usually) by their having been born at or around the same time" (Monaghan 1998: 142). This type of coessence is not anthropocentric, since all things in the cosmos share their *tonalli* with other entities in the cosmos, be it human, animal, or other natural phenomena. Although there is typically no direct interacting between the different phenomena, the action of one nevertheless had effects on the other, since a change of essences on one layer affected the other layers as well (Monaghan 1998: 141–143).

Many human beings felt a special connection to a distinctive species of animal with which they shared the same essence. The most common *nanahualtin* were jaguars, eagles, snakes, coyotes, dogs, and owls. Many Nahua costumes for ritual specialists or warriors contained references to the animal *nahualli* of its wearer. The best-known examples are the eagle and jaguar warriors, but some "conjurers" also wore costumes with animal references, such as the ocelot hide,

including the animal's forehead, nose, chest, heart, tail, claws, and fangs (Sahagún 1961: x, 3). Humans with special powers could even shape-shift and transform into their companion animal in special situations. According to this belief, they literally became the *nahualli*, since they were believed to be essentially the same (Maffie 2014: 41). Additionally, human and animal *nanahualtin* might share a consciousness in special situations, such as shamanic journeys or dreams. The animal was considered to be the

> personification of that man's fate, and in some readings of the concept the animal's death caused—indeed *was*—the simultaneous death of the person. An invisible and indestructible bond thus might unite a man with his animal partner—the two could exist simultaneously or the *nahualli* could become his animal counterpart while temporarily giving up his own being. (Brundage 1979: 183, emphasis in original).

If we understand the anthropomorphic deities of the Nahua pantheon as expressions of distinctive sets of qualities and forces, they also have *nanahualtin* and share the same set with other entities in the cosmos. The sources particularly show the animal *nanahualtin* of the deities, such as the colibri (hummingbird) for Huitzilopochtli or the feathered serpent for Quetzalcoatl. Deities often appeared to human beings in the guise of their respective *nahualli* (see Martínez González 2011: 90–91). We know from colonial sources that this idea of an essential consubstantiality of deities and their animal *nanahualtin* produced many misunderstandings between the Nahuas and Christian missionaries. In the missionaries' Catholicism, the animals depicted in images of Christian saints served as allegories or symbols, typically for particular personality traits of the respective saint. The Nahuas, in contrast, read these depictions as expressions of the metaphysical identity of the saint and the animal, who share the same essence (Gruzinski 2001: 79–84, 180).

In conclusion, the concept of the *nahualli* is expressed in many aspects of Nahua culture. I have covered only a few of these aspects here and an extensive study would be worthwhile. For now, it is sufficient to say that the concept of the *nahualli* expressed the idea that different layers of reality were essentially interrelated to one another if they shared the same quality and *teotl* force. This was possible because *teotl* realizes itself in many distinctive aspects, qualities, and entities, comparable to light fracturing into the colors of the rainbow.

4 A World in Motion: the Fifth Era

4.1 *Agonistic Inamic Unity*

The Fifth Era was essentially a world in motion, with *teotl* constantly moving through time and place. Neither the cosmos of the Fifth Age nor the identities of the beings living in this cosmos were regarded as resting and stable but as dynamic and continuously changing processes. Maffie analyzed this *teotl* cosmovision as one of constant self-transformation, as condensed in more detail in the sources. In line with López Austin, he saw this process as fundamentally defined by the "continual and continuous cyclical struggle (*agon*) of paired opposites, polarities, or dualities" (Maffie 2014: 137). He called this struggle the "agonistic inamic unity" of *teotl*, referring to the Nahuatl term *inamic* (its equal, something squaring with something else): "Generally speaking, an *inamic* is a power, force, or influence that is necessarily matched, partnered, or paired with a second power, force, or influence" (Maffie 2014: 138). These *inamic* "matches" (Maffie 2014: 146) were considered paired opposites that were "interdependent, interrelated, mutually engendering, and mutually complementary *while at the same time* mutually competitive and antagonistic. Neither opposite is *conceptually* or *temporally* prior to the other. Neither is morally or metaphysically superior to the other" (Maffie 2014: 137, emphasis in original). These dualities are "locked in a continual process of agonistic, dialectical alternation with one another" (Maffie 2014: 143). In their ongoing dance, they produce the diversity of things that existed in the cosmos (Maffie 2014: 138).

Extending López Austin's list with the results of his own analyses, Maffie specified several of those pairs: life~death, day~night, fire~water, male~female, light~darkness, above~below, ascending~descending, drought~humidity, hot~cold, active~passive, flower~flint stone, eagle~ocelot, fire~wind, west~east, south~north, perfume~foul smell (2014: 153). Maffie also included more abstract concepts, such as being~nonbeing, generation~degeneration, order~disorder, and arrangement~derangement. Some pairs that are commonly juxtaposed in European thinking, however, are not part of the *agonistic inamic unity*, such as the moral categories of good and evil (Maffie 2014: 155). Balance and imbalance or center and periphery were not considered as *inamic* pairs but rather as consequences of the movement of forces between the two partners of a pair. Balance was generated by the back-and-forth movement between two imbalances; it was generated in the center with the imbalances at the periphery. In contrast to Western metaphysics, balance did not equal peace and harmony but was created by the constant struggle between the complementary pairs of energy (Maffie 2014: 168–169). Although there is always a temporary imbalance between the two equals of the respective pair, an overarching, dynamic

equilibrium stabilizes the center (Maffie 2014: 138). Following this core idea, reality was considered as "ineliminably and irreducibly ambiguous," since with *teotl*, "reality, cosmos, and all existing things are characterized simultaneously by inamic pairs such as being *and* nonbeing, life *and* death, male *and* female, and wet *and* dry" (Maffie 2014: 27, emphasis in original).

The Nahuas expressed the idea of complementary pairs in many artistic depictions, most famously in the frequent pairing of deities with their respective face-to-face counterpart. Some portrayals of individual deities also contain pairings, such as the two facing snakes forming the countenance of Coatlicue. More abstractly, the idea was expressed in many designs and motifs on ceramics and woven fabric and in architecture or the painted codices— designs such as spirals, squiggles, step frets, zigzags, and ribbons or, more intricately, in *olin* signs, quincunxes, or butterflies (Maffie 2014: 159–163).

The frequent use of complex designs such as the quincunx indicates a further structuring pattern within Nahua ontology. This pattern expanded the idea of the complementary pair by symmetrically arranging "equal independent parts" (Lockhart 1993a: 468). This nonhierarchical, cellular, and modular organization shaped many aspects of Nahua culture, among them linguistic expression, grammar and narrative, the painted codices and the arts, architecture and settlement patterns, political and social organization, and cosmological principles (Lockhart 1993a: 436–442).

4.2 *Types of Movement:* **Olin, Malinalli*, and* Nepantla**

Linguistic patterns, narratives, and artistic depictions also provide evidence for the distinction between the different movement types of the complementary forces through the cosmos: the *olin* movement of up and down, up and over, and down and under; the *malinalli* movement of spinning and twisting the partners together; and the *nepantla* movement of middling and weaving them together (Maffie 2014: 172). These types of movements, which defined the dynamics of the Fifth Era, were imagined as different paths of energy circulation and interaction and thus as different patterns of change, becoming, and transformation (Maffie 2014: 185).

According to Maffie's analysis (2014: 480), *nepantla* movement was cosmogonically primordial and metaphysically fundamental. Its mutual middling and reciprocating movement unified the complementary pairs in a balanced agonistic tension. This type of movement had existed with the first divine couple, Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli, in the cosmic time before the creation of the world.

Olin movement was characteristic for the Fifth Era, which was consequently called *Nahui Olin* (4-Movement). It consisted of cyclical continuation,

completion, and renewal and bound life~death cycles into a seamless process. Its back-and-forth pulsating, oscillating, and undulating was exemplified by bouncing rubber balls, pulsating hearts, respiring chests, labor contractions, earthquakes, and tremors (Maffie 2014: 480–481). Since it was four-phased and centering, it was depicted not only with the *olin* day glyph but also with quatrefoils, quincunxes, four-leaved flowers, butterflies, ball courts, and *patolli* game boards (Maffie 2014: 230–240, 481). The *olin* sign was one of the most used symbols or emblems among the Nahuas (Maffie 2014: 236).

Malinalli movement, finally, was characterized by twisting, spinning, spiraling, whirling, coiling, and drilling like fibers spun into thread. It was also present in the transformational qualitative change brought by cooking and digesting food, blowing life into things, drilling fire, burning incense, spinning raw cotton into thread, or more abstractly in ritual music, speech, and song (Maffie 2014: 481). *Malinalli* fed and renewed life~death cycles, it nourished humans, plants, the earth and the sun and recycled the "vital energies that initiate, fortify, and help complete these olin-defined biorhythms" (Maffie 2014: 482). While *olin* was the pulsating heart, *malinalli* was the bloodstream (Maffie 2014: 482). *Malinalli* energy was the central component of Nahua rituals, recycling energy and nourishing the earth and the sun. It was depicted in spirals, coils, twists, double helices, or double-unfolding spirals (Maffie 2014: 482). *Malinalli* referred linguistically to a family of wild twisted grass growing in the Central Highlands that was spun into ropes, threads, and cordage (Maffie 2014: 261). Woven *malinalli* mats were also used for many quotidian things, from sleeping mats to the ruler's mat symbolizing his rulership (Maffie 2014: 276–279). Tlaltecuhtli is typically depicted with *malinalli* hair bathed in the sun's *tonalli* and is either well groomed or ill-kempt with spiders and scorpions in it. As such, Tlaltecuhtli's hair manifested the fertility, fecundity, and regenerative power of the earth (Maffie 2014: 267–271). The cosmologically significant ritual sweeping was done with brooms made of *malinalli* grass in a swirling movement. In this way, sweeping had the power to displace the disorderly forces of *tlazolli* from the center to its proper place, the periphery, where it could be recycled into the process of regeneration and thus lead to fertility and abundance (Maffie 2014: 279, 279–282). In addition to sweeping, many other human activities used *malinalli* energy, among them the New Fire Ceremony and singing and reciting (Maffie 2014: 285–289, 294). *Malinalli* energy was also present in the swirled form of Quetzalcoatl's conch shell and his circular temples (Maffie 2014: 321–323).

These three movements of *nepantla*, *olin*, and *malinalli* were, according to Maffie's analysis, the most important types of motion that the Nahuas distinguished for the movement of the complementary forces through the cosmos of

the Fifth Age. These fine distinctions between types of motions show that the Nahuas perceived and conceptualized patterns of change in the natural world in a highly abstract way.

5 The Problem of Ephemerality: What Is Really Real?

The Nahuas perceived the cosmos of the Fifth Era as characterized by motion, change, and the continuous cycle of life and death. Judged by the sources, they experienced life as transitory and painfully perishable. How did they explain this ephemerality and how did they cope with it? Did they search for something enduring beyond the evanescence, something "really real"?

In searching for answers to these highly abstract, philosophical questions, scholars have typically turned to the songs preserved in the colonial manuscripts, the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España*, since many of these songs appear to express anguish and sorrow about the perishability of human life. According to León-Portilla's (1992c: 203–205) interpretation, the Mexica were convinced of the Triple Alliance's grandeur and obsessed with their ideology of war and human sacrifice. The Texcoco philosophers, in contrast, had realized the inevitability of the empire's downfall and therefore devoted themselves to perennial philosophical concerns. These philosophers were afflicted by a deep melancholy about the transitory nature of earthly life, haunted by the "idea of death and annihilation," and crushed "with the harshness of a fate" that was beyond their control (Soustelle 1962: 115). The only coping mechanism they found was "carpe diem": to enjoy the beauty of flowers, happiness, and friendship as long as these exist. However, they were not satisfied with this response. According to León-Portilla, they experienced material life as a dream and subsequently as not only transitory but also unreal and illusory. Therefore, deep in their hearts they yearned for something ultimately real, something enduring and permanent, for an absolute truth that went beyond the ephemerality of earthly life (León-Portilla 1971a, 1980a: 44, 53, 1992a: 80–81). León-Portilla concluded that the "beauty of the poems carries at times the voice of hope but also the clamor of pessimism. A deep spiritual concern is at the core of the question: whether or not it is possible to say true words about the beyond and the survival of one self" (1980a: 44).

There are several objections against León-Portilla's interpretation of the songs. First, we have no idea whether the *Cantares* and *Romances* actually expressed pre-Hispanic thoughts and feelings. It could well be that this concern about the perishability of life, deeply shaded by a tone of resignation, was a

genuine postconquest response to the downfall of the Aztec civilization and the catastrophic conditions of disease and death that came with the Spanish invasion. Second, the theme of the fragileness of life was not only the concern of Texcoco philosophers but characteristic of the dominant Mexica cosmology, with its succession of finite cosmic ages and the Fifth Sun's era of movement (see Lee 2008: 180). Ephemerality was a "universal principle consonant with the repeated cycle of creation and destruction of the world in Mesoamerican origin myths and with the cosmological significance of ritual wars and human sacrifice" in Nahua cosmovision (Lee 2008: 174). Third, ephemerality is not even the most characteristic subject of the *Cantares* and the *Romances*. Rather, as Lee argued, "the practices of ritual war and human sacrifice are the more important themes of Nahua poetry" (2008: 174). Frequently, dead warriors are identified with precious flowers and the militaristic praising of *yaomiquiliztli* (war death), *xochimiquiliztli* (flower death), and *itzmiquiliztli* (obsidian-knife death) (Lee 2008: 183). Consequently, both Lee and Bierhorst argued that these poems reflect a general Native American war ethic that idealized dying on the battlefield by emphasizing the general impermanence of earthly life (Bierhorst 2009: 47–48): "It might be inferred that the singer is deliberately placing a low value on earthly life in order to strengthen the warrior ethic. If so, this would steer speculation away from comparisons with Western philosophy" (Bierhorst 1985b: 50).

Notwithstanding these arguments, Clendinnen opted for a reinterpretation of León-Portilla's argument. She agreed with León-Portilla that the Nahuas considered earthly life as only a dream and that they yearned for something enduring given the fleetingness of sensory experiences and the ephemerality of earthly beauty: "While the songs evoke a daze of images of sound, scent, colour, movement, touch, the world so vividly experienced has no reality. Even moments of rapture and exaltation, like all else in this veiled and shifting world, are no more than a dream" (Clendinnen 1991: 222). Clendinnen, however, changed the frame of reference for this interpretation from León-Portilla's ancient Greek philosophy to the modern (Eliadean) concept of "the sacred." Following the latter approach, Clendinnen identified "the sacred" as the eternal and enduring in contrast to the historicity of the profane. From this perspective, the Nahuas intentionally used perishable paraphernalia in their rituals, such as flower wreaths or the spring green of maize, and fleeting media such as singing and dancing. This paraphernalia yielded "to the attentive watcher intimations not of mortality—that was a commonplace—but of the enduring sacred" (Clendinnen 1991: 222) because, in Clendinnen's view, "fugitive beauty hints at the unseen but real world of the sacred and the enduring" (1991: 216).

Indeed, one of the songs addressing the perishable nature of human life described this life as a dream (see song eighteen in the *Cantares*, folios 14r–14v, Bierhorst 1985b: 172–175; see also the *Romances*, folio 35v, Bierhorst 2009: 149–150). Based on a common modern Western perspective, both León-Portilla and Clendinnen understood dreams as illusionary and unreal. Consequently, they interpreted the Nahua identification of life with a dream as associating the perishable earthly life with the illusionary and unreal, in distinction from the true reality of the permanent and enduring. However, there is one serious flaw in this argument: the association of the dream with the unreal. Apparently, the Nahuas did not make this association but considered the dream just as real as waking experiences. Among the several verbs used to refer to the act of dreaming, *cochitlehua* meant "to see in dreams" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 8, 25, 44, 45, 47, 49, 52, 61, 64, 138) and *ontemictlamati* "to know in dreams" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 9). In these cases, "seeing" and "knowing" in dreams was not qualitatively different to seeing and knowing in waking consciousness; the insights gained in dreams were as real as those gained while awake. Dreams even expanded the dreamer's scope of vision and understanding; while dreaming, the *tonalli* was able to leave the body, perceive reality in faraway places, and acquire essential knowledge about the fundamental workings of world. The Nahuas valued this knowledge highly (see Maffie 2014: 60–62, Clendinnen 1990: 124). Nevertheless, this knowledge was not always easy to comprehend but mysterious and full of references and symbols. Experts helped dreamers to interpret their insights with the help of the book of dreams. No copy of this book has survived, but its great importance is mentioned in several sources (see, e.g., the list of dream interpretations in Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales*, Sahagún 1993, folio 85v). In sum, the dream was an important, if difficult to comprehend, means to gain knowledge about reality. Based on this cultural concept of the dream, the interpretation of the poetic identification of life with a dream changes significantly. Life is no longer illusionary and unreal but merely mysterious and difficult to comprehend (see also Maffie 2014: 62). Apart from the mistaken equation of "dreams" with "illusion," no other evidence in the sources suggests that the Nahuas believed the material world was illusionary in distinction to the true reality of the enduring sacred.

It seems that León-Portilla and Clendinnen projected the Platonic concept of reality onto the Nahua songs. Following this concept, sensory experience of the physical world cannot provide real knowledge because the physical world is constantly changing; only the transcendent, unchanging essences are truly real (see Johnson 1990: 142–143). In contrast, the Nahuas considered constant change and movement as true reality. Reality, for the Nahuas, was apparently not an issue of substance and transcendent Being but an issue of becoming:

"Aztec metaphysics ... embraces flux, evanescence, and change by making them *defining* characteristics of existence and reality—rather than marginalizing them by denying them existence and reality.... That is, what something *is* follows from *what* it does and *how* it does it" (Maffie 2014: 25–26, emphasis in original).

Undoubtedly, some songs communicate the ephemerality of both beautiful flowers and human life. However, why should this express yearning for a transcendent reality? It might also be expressing fundamental knowledge about the transitory nature of life in the Fifth Era and about the immanent connectedness and interrelatedness of all materially existing things (see Tomlinson 2007: 65, 80). Maybe the songs did not wish to emphasize the fleetingness of ephemerality but the "palpable and substantial" nature of reality as experienced in change, in the constant movement of the forces, and in the cycle of life and death (Tomlinson 1996: 270). Along these lines, the perishability of life became part of the constant balancing of the complementary forces of life and death, of generating and degenerating, of "material presence and (material) absence," of "palpable fulness and privation" (Tomlinson 1996: 270). This interpretation might even explain the identification of flowers with song in the famous phrasing *in xochitl in cuicatl* (flower and song), referring to heightened speech. As flowers are withering, songs are fleeting. This nature of songs was, however, not understood as a reference to transcendency, as it often is in the West, but as a representation of the evanescence and material perishability of all life (Tomlinson 2007: 65).

The Nahua concept of *truth* supports this interpretation. *Neltiliztli* (truth) is derived from the term *nelli*, which refers to something being well rooted. The phrase *nitlanelhuayotocac uel ynelhuayocan onacic*, "I discovered the truth of something," literally meant "I sought out the root of the matter," or "I reached completely down to the place where the roots were" (Gingerich 1987: 102–103.) Rather than interpreting the roots as an image for a transcendent, nonperishable but enduring essence (as León-Portilla did, see 1963: 8, 1992a: 170), this image could well refer to the constant necessity of stabilizing the movement of the complementary forces. As examined previously, in order to survive, humanity needed the stability of the center of the four-leaved cosmos as supported by the well-rooted cosmic trees. Many rituals and activities were devoted to maintaining and reestablishing this stability. If we identify the well-rootedness of *nelli* with these cosmic trees, we might understand the Nahua concept of *truth* as the knowledge about reality, that is, about the nature of the Fifth Era, with its continuous movement and balancing of complementary forces into an overarching stability. Although the resulting change was considered as really real, as the true reality, humanity nevertheless suffered from the

perishability of material life and the inevitability of death and expressed sorrow and anguish over this fact in the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*. Nevertheless, nothing suggests their searching for a reality transcending this essential nature of life in the Fifth Era.

CHAPTER 5

Understanding a World in Motion: Nahua Epistemology

After analyzing Nahua ontology in some detail, we now turn our attention to Nahua epistemology. This chapter analyzes Indigenous epistemological believes and practices. How and to what extent can human beings, seen from the perspective of Nahua culture, acquire knowledge about the world and reality?

1 Epistemology

As (re)constructed from the sources, the Nahuas apparently acknowledged different degrees of knowledge about reality. The largest part of reality was experienced by everyone through the corporeal senses and interpreted with normal everyday consciousness. Objects and phenomena of exceptional beauty and brilliance presented reality's inner structure in an intensified form and made it easier for human beings to grasp and comprehend this structure. Finally, some deeper-lying and more complex structures of reality could only be perceived by specially gifted people with the help of nonordinary senses.

1.1 *Experiencing Reality with the Senses*

Reality as seen by the Nahuas was immanent, material, temporally and spatially concrete, and characterized by permanent change. Human beings had an immediate experience of this reality through the corporeal senses; it was (at least potentially) visible, audible, tangible, and in other ways sensorially perceptible (see López Austin 1988b: 383). The cosmic forces and qualities in their many forms, including the "deities," were part of this perceptible reality. Even Yohualli Ehecatl was tangible and sensorially perceptible, for example, through the qualities of the night wind.

Based on this general ontology, the Nahuas spent considerable time studying reality to comprehend the laws that governed the natural and the human worlds and to predict potential force changes in human life cycles, the seasons, or everyday living. For this purpose, they observed nature, recorded their experiences, and combined the insights they gained with mathematical and artistic operations. In this way, the Nahuas built an extensive body of knowledge about the world they lived in. They knew about the regularities of change as well as

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about the irregularities and contingencies, which they tried to control and manipulate as best as they could (see López Austin 2008b: 30). In contrast to modern European science, the Nahuas perceived the cosmos as animated, as containing agentive moving forces as well as beings with consciousness, needs, intentionality, willpower, and far-reaching agency. Many of the irregularities and contingencies were explained with reference to agentive beings. In their efforts to understand the world they lived in, the Nahuas were particularly interested in the complex interrelationships of the forces and semblances of qualities across the several layers of reality. Therefore, they closely observed the appearances and behavior patterns of the beings and entities around them, reading these for indications of the underlying structure of the relationships of the forces that manifested in these appearances.

Mesoamericans apparently experienced the layers of reality—shapes, forms, colors, sounds, object features, personalities, emotions, behavior patterns, and activities—as realizations of the same fundamental quality. What is more, they also closely linked the experiences gained with the different sensory organs with one another in a "near-synaesthetic fashion" (Houston and Taube 2000: 261). Judging from the surviving media, culturally coded cross-modality was prevalent, "so that something seen by the eye as an object or sign conveys parallel sensations or, more precisely, such signs signal the *presence* of those sensations that ordinarily can only be received by the ear or nose" (Houston and Taube 2000: 263, emphasis in original). Accordingly, the pictorial signs "used to denote sound, smell, and sight are notably similar, and typically feature gently curving pairs of volutes" (Houston and Taube 2000: 289). The substance of sensations, even of sound and odor, was not defined as "empty nor ethereal" but as a highly tangible phenomenon that invested "vitality and meaning in the spaces it traversed and occupied" (Houston and Taube 2000: 264). Moreover, the Nahuas evidently did not distinguish between sensation and "higher-order cognition," such as interpretation leading to judgment and decision. All these cognitive acts were grouped under the "act of knowledgeable perception" (Houston and Taube 2000: 264). The different sense organs were regarded as animistic entities with a form of individual consciousness susceptible to influence by the cosmic forces.

Sensory impressions, however, were sometimes distorted, like the images in Tezcatlipoca's smoking mirror, and required interpretation by specialists. Dream experiences, for example, sometimes offered insights into the structure of reality transcending the sensory experiences of waking states. While dreaming, the sense faculties were significantly expanded into regions that ordinary consciousness could not reach (López Austin 1988b: 383). As discussed previously, dream experiences were considered real and provided the dreamer with

highly relevant knowledge about reality. Since this knowledge expanded rational thought and included other human faculties, it was not always easy to comprehend.

In addition to dreams, the night, in general, offered an alternative perspective on reality that differed from daylight experiences. In the night, nothing was necessarily as it appeared to be. One could meet beings from different cosmic spheres wandering through the night, for example, the dead or human beings who had lived in the cosmic ages before the Fifth Era. To interpret night experiences, people needed more than daylight rationality. The boundaries between the worlds were blurred not only in the night but also in some spatial zones, particularly in peripheral areas such as the mountains and woods (see Martínez González 2011: 503–513).

Dreams, the night, and specific places thus offered ordinary people glimpses of an expanded vision of reality. This was also true for objects and phenomena of exceptional beauty and brilliance that presented reality in an intensified form that facilitated comprehension of reality's inner structures.

1.2 *Experiencing Intensified Reality*

Since Nahua ontology was monistic and the immanent cosmic forces permeated everything that existed, "sacredness" was more "a question of intensity" than of qualitative difference (López Austin 1993: 139). Some things in the world were regarded as "particularly awesome, marvelous, fearsome, astonishing, dizzying, worthy of veneration, esteem, and adoration" (Maffie 2014: 111). Linguistically, combining word stems with the compound *teotl* marked them as something either extraordinarily good or bad. Sahagún, in his Spanish prologue to book eleven of the *Florentine Codex*, explained this use of *teotl* as a modifier and gave as examples the terms *teopiltzintli*, a very handsome child, and *teopilontli*, a very mischievous or bad boy. Similarly, natural phenomena like the sun, the ocean, or frightening animals were characterized by using the modifier *teotl* (Sahagún 1982: 87). Based on Molly H. Bassett's thorough analysis, the terms in book eleven containing the compound *teotl* generally refer to things extremely exclusive, valuable, beloved, and possessing a particularly strong *tonalli*. Seen from the European perspective, this exceptional and strong character could be both positive and negative, as in the example of the mischievous boy. Both natural entities and manufactured (ritual) objects could be attributed like this (Bassett 2015: 89–113).

Based on the interpretation of Nahua ontology, this use of *teotl* in a compound might have expressed the idea that the cosmic forces were more apparent in the respective entities and, consequently, the underlying structures of reality especially noticeable to the human observer. These entities presented a

form of intensified reality strongly radiating inherent forces outward and influencing everything in their surroundings. According to Maffie's similar conclusion (2014: 112), human beings could perceive reality through these entities "more clearly, as though the breath on the mirror has dissipated."

The most basic category of things presenting reality in such an intensified way were those of natural beauty and grace, like butterflies, flowers, precious stones, the eagle and the jaguar, and bright birds and their iridescent plumage. Also worthy of special contemplation were aspects of the natural world containing strong powers, such as flowing water, the flames of a fire, or the light and heat of the sun (see Clendinnen 1991: 216). Human beings could accentuate the natural beauty of things through art and ritual and thus strengthen its radiating reality. Creating art from natural objects more strongly revealed the underlying interrelationship of all existing things. In this way, intensified reality could be exhibited in paintings, sculpture, or architecture, like the Templo Mayor, as well as in the *teixiptla*, a material or human representative of the deities, and through rituals. Hence, the arts became a medium for human beings to find the really real, to "retrieve the original unsullied sacred vision from the blurred and shifting images before them" (Clendinnen 1991: 215). This was also possible because things arranged and well ordered disclosed more fully not only the essential cosmic forces but also the continuous balancing of complementary forces and their integration into the whole. As Maffie (2014: 101–103) argued, things were more genuine, authentic, and true in their well-arranged form in contrast to things poorly balanced, which emphasized only one aspect of the complementary forces.

Corresponding to this general idea of intensified reality, the Nahuas particularly loved things that radiated extraordinary, brilliant, blooming, flaming, shining beauty. As Burkhart (1992) concluded from her analyses of pre-Hispanic and early colonial poetry and songs, the Nahuas pursued a defined "cult of brilliance" focused on sparkling light, fragrant flowers, and beautifully composed songs. Ontologically, the songs not only *expressed* the beauty of flowers but were also materializations of the same intensified *teotl* quality because both were the "ultimate aesthetic achievement" of their respective realms (plant life and the use of language). "Thus flowers and songs are equivalent; together they embody the Nahuas' aesthetic of the sacred, the symbolic transformation of the human world into a garden full of flowers and singing birds" (Burkhart 1992: 90; see also Knab 1986: 46). Flowers played an important role in linguistic and visual imagery and materially as offerings. This practice continued well into colonial times, with flowers being offered to Christian saints and painted and sculptured onto the walls of the newly built churches (Burkhart 1992: 90). The pictorial glyph for *song* combines the plain volute for *speech* with

flowers. Sometimes, the glyph depicts specific plant species, most importantly hallucinogenic plants. This may have been pointing to "a sacred reality immanent in the worldly materiality of the glyph. It suggests a final, sweeping embrace that might have operated in this volute, a hallucinogenic embrace of song, flower, and paint as avatars of sacred truths" (Tomlinson 1996: 275).

The image of the garden most fully expressed the cult of brilliance focusing on light and flowers as presentations of intensified reality. The garden was

> a transformational aspect of the here and now, a sacred aspect of reality that one called into being by manipulating this garden imagery in ritual contexts, particularly through song. In this symbolic garden, one came into direct contact with the creative, life-giving forces of the universe and with the timeless world of deities and ancestors. The garden is a shimmering place filled with divine fire; the light of the sun reflects from the petals of flowers and the iridescent feathers of birds; human beings—the souls of the dead or the ritually transformed living—are themselves flowers, birds, and shimmering gems. One's individual identity dissolves as one becomes part of the sacred ecosystem. This garden is not a place of reward for the righteous, existing on some transcendent plane of reality separate from the material world. It is a metaphor for life on earth, a metaphor that ritual transforms into reality by asserting that, in fact, this is the way the world is. (Burkhart 1992: 89)

This garden imagery is expressed particularly intensely in the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*, which are filled with references to birds and sweet blossoming flowers "clothed in dew, laden with sunstruck mistbow" (song 1, translation by Bierhorst, 1985b: 136–137). The first song of the *Cantares*, in particular, elaborates on the garden image with the singer taken by birds to "a valley, a land of plenty, a land of flowers" (Bierhorst 1985b: 136–137). The singer is allowed to pick some of the flowers and take them back to his friends on earth. In the last verses, he sings: "Let me go make music with the sundry precious birds. Let me enjoy the good flowers, the sweet flowers, the heart pleasers, that intoxicate with joy and sweetness, intoxicate with sweet joy" (Bierhorst 1985b: 136–137).

The garden image is also prevalent in the Nahua-Christian devotional literature of the first century of colonization. The most prominent exemplar of this literature is the *Psalmodia Christiana*, written most probably by Nahua students in the Franciscan college of Tlatelolco in conjunction with Friar Sahagún. Following Burkhart's analysis, the Franciscans easily adopted the Native garden imagery for their teachings and supported its use in Nahua-Christian songs

for three reasons. First, they were reminded of the image of the Christian heaven as a paradisiacal garden "with the terrestrial Eden of Genesis serving as a prefiguration, or type, of the eternal, heavenly paradise" (Burkhart 1992: 89). Second, they were familiar with contemplating the beauty of nature, because in Franciscan nature mysticism this was the "starting point for the mystic's ascent toward union with God" (Burkhart 1992: 91). Finally, the garden imagery appealed to them because they envisioned the New Jerusalem, which they had set out to build in New Spain, as an earthly paradise (Burkhart 1992: 89–91). In the eyes of the Franciscans, the Native garden imagery closely matched Christian visions and its use would therefore help to convert the Natives into faithful Christians. The Nahua authors of the songs, on the other hand, cherished the garden imagery more than other images from Christian symbolism because it spoke to their aesthetic and emotional sensitivity and enabled them to retain their own perspective on reality.

Neither Franciscan missionaries nor Nahua converts, however, apparently realized the fundamental ontological differences between the two concepts of garden imagery. The Franciscans perceived the garden as an aesthetic metaphor for a transcendent, nonmaterial place where the soul would rest in eternity. The Nahuas recognized the garden as the quintessential expression of material reality and earthly life characterized by its evanescence. While the saved Christian souls believed they would finally transcend the finite and transitory nature of their bodies, the Nahuas hoped to dissolve the self into the earthly reality of the cycle of life and death (Burkhart 1992: 89–91). It is not that the Franciscans did not attempt to counteract misunderstanding; to indicate that they understood the relationship between the earthly and the heavenly garden as metaphorical, the Franciscans used the Nahuatl term *teoyotica* (in the way of *teotl*). Problematically, the Nahuas did not understand *teoyotica* as an indicator for a metaphor but simply as a reference to the immanent structures of reality. Consequently, the use of this term tended to reinforce the Native ontology rather than overcome it (Burkhart 1992: 94). The early colonial Nahua-Christian literature strongly shows the clash of the Franciscan dualist ontology, which separated transcendent reality from the material, with Nahua monist ontology, which considered reality as essentially immanent.

In conclusion, the Nahua garden imagery, which represented their love for everything extraordinary that blossomed lavishly, shone brilliantly, and radiated deep beauty, was not a metaphor referring to a transcendent realm of reality. Instead, it expressed the belief that the underlying structures of reality were intensified in precious things, both in naturally beautiful objects and in those made beautiful by human art. This intensified form helped humanity to better perceive and comprehend reality, since it expressed most fully the over-

arching balance in the continuous movement between the complementary forces in the cosmos.

1.3 *Experiencing Reality with Special Senses*

The Nahuas used the ordinary senses to observe nature and to observe intensified reality in objects with extraordinary qualities in particular. In addition, they also knew situations and techniques that expanded everyday waking consciousness. By breaking the barriers of ordinary perception, realms of reality that were normally imperceptible and "suprasensible" (Aveni 2002: 5) but not transcendent or in any other form separate from the world were believed to open up. The senses of expanded consciousness rather revealed a clearer vision of the underlying structures of immanent reality, that is, of *teotl* realized in the many different qualities of the world and of the resulting interrelationships between the several forms in which the same quality existed.

As discussed previously, dream experiences were one way most people could expand ordinary consciousness, even if they usually needed help interpreting their visions. In addition, the Nahuas knew several techniques for intentionally creating states of trance and ecstasy: bodily practices such as fasting, blood sacrifice, physical penitence, and prolonged dancing, as well as ingesting cocoa, psychotropic mushrooms, or alcohol in the form of *octli* (see Clendinnen 1990: 130). In her comparison of pre-Hispanic and colonial forms of "ways to the sacred," Clendinnen (1990) discovered many of these pre-Hispanic techniques for inducing trances. Strongly regulated, they were most frequently used in the large public ceremonies of the *veintenas* and in the secure and disciplined environment of the temples (Clendinnen 1990: 118). After the conquest, the Spanish stopped the Nahuas from using these traditional techniques. However, as Clendinnen argued, the Nahuas found new channels for trance and ecstasy that were legitimate under colonial rule, most importantly extensive flagellation and consumption of alcohol.

Jansen and Pérez Jiménez showed that Postclassic Central Mexican religions knew about shamanic trances and performed them frequently. In their interpretation, the Feathered Serpent served as a complex and powerful symbol of these trances and visionary experiences and represented "the breath and spiritual essence of unseen Gods and the trance of priests, a marker of the liminal sphere in which humans enter in contact with the Divine" (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: 4).

The sources tell us that the Nahuas had shamanic experts, people with special talents and training for entering into trances. These were known as *tlatlacatecolo* (sg. *tlacatecolotl*, "human horned owl" or "owl person") or *nanahualtin*

(typically translated as "sorcerer"). These shamans[1] were believed to embark on shamanic travels through the normally unperceivable realms of the cosmos, including the heavenly layers and underworlds, by entering these realms though caves, lakes, springs, or hollow tree trunks as a means of passage. On these journeys, they possessed the ability to see the influences of the *tonalli* on different time units as well as their clients' past and future destinies (López Austin 1988b: 67). It was also believed that these "magicians" (another translation of the Nahuatl designation, see Sahagún 1975: XII, 21) could talk to the forces of the cosmos in their personified form. For this purpose, they used the special language of *nahuallatolli* in shamanic trances and other ritual settings; López Austin (1988b: 346; see also 1967b) translated the term *nahuallatolli* as the "language of the hidden." Sometimes shamans not only talked to the "deities" but were also so strongly permeated with particular divine forces that their identity turned completely into these forces. This form of "possession" also occurred to deity impersonators in rituals and—to a minor degree—to normal people when they were overwhelmed by particular feelings or filled with artistic or sexual ecstasy (López Austin 2008b: 34). In conclusion, the Nahuas knew techniques to expand the experiences of the ordinary senses and to acquire deeper insights into the underlying structures of reality. Some people trained in these techniques were believed to possess special talents, as discussed in the following two sections on knowledge experts and people with special insights.

2 Knowledge Experts: Wise (Wo)Men and Scribes

The surviving sources mention particular knowledge experts in several roles and tasks. Among them were the *tlamatinime*, typically translated as "wise men," the *amoxhuaque* (possessors of books), the *tlacuiloque* (painters/scribes), the *tonalpouhque* or *tlapouhqui* (diviners, counters of the day signs), and the *tlapixcatzin* (guardian, caretaker) responsible for teaching song (León-Portilla 1963: 19, 22, 1992c: 40, Boone 2007: 21). In addition to physicians, curers, and midwifes, the countless temples had many types of priests. Judging by descriptions in the sources, these different roles and tasks were not clearly delineated but overlapped in many cases. For example, the priest who impersonated Tlazolteotl for a specific ritual is characterized as "the soothsayer, the wise one, in whose hands lay the books, the paintings; who preserved the writings, who possessed the knowledge, the tradition, the wisdom which hath been uttered"

1 I follow Michael Winkelmann's (2017) understanding of the concept of the *shaman*.

(Sahagún 1970: I, 24). Some of these wise (wo)men lived attached to temples, noble houses, or the *calpulli* schools, others apparently worked autonomously. Everybody in the society, regardless of their social position, turned to them for counsel and advice (Boone 2007: 28).

The majority of the cultural knowledge was recorded in painted books and was referred to with the concept of *in tlilli in tlapalli*, directly translated as "black and red [ink]" (the predominant colors of Nahua writing); *in tlilli in tlapalli* more broadly means "wisdom" or "the customs of the ancient ones ... a way of life" (Sahagún 1969: VI, 258). *In tlilli in tlapalli* had many cultural associations: Tezcatlipoca taught the black and the red; Quetzalcoatl, as the patron of the *calmecac*, wore black-and-red-striped face paint; and, according to the legend, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl disappeared to the land of the black and red (*tlillan tlapallan*) (Montes de Oca Vega 2009: 231). Quetzalcoatl was also the patron of the arts, which were typically called the *toltecayotl*, that is, the arts created by the Toltecs, believed to be the inventors of civilization (Sahagún 1961: X, 165–176). *Toltecayotl*, in fact, referred to cultural knowledge and wisdom in general as inherited from the Toltecs, including all forms of handicrafts and art, architecture and urban planning, oral rhetoric and writing, medicine, astronomy and the calendar, righteous and refined living, as well as prudence and wisdom—in short, everything that the Nahuas considered civilized life. Thus, the concept of *toltecayotl* comes quite close to the European idea of "civilization" (León-Portilla 1980c: 18–19).

Cultural knowledge was taught in the many schools, where children were trained in martial arts, history, and law; calendric knowledge; astronomy and astrology; hieroglyphic writing; orations, songs and dances; religious knowledge and ritual practice; and virtuous behavior (Durán 1971: 293, Sahagún 1978: III, 65–67). They were also taught to read the written recordings of Nahua cultural knowledge with the technique of *amoxotoca* (following the way of the book) and to memorize, with the help of mnemonic devices, their culture's history and lore (Durán 1971: 293, León-Portilla 1963, Klor de Alva 1992: xxii). We do not know much about it, but future priests and knowledge experts probably had more thorough and lengthy training at the schools and temples than the young destined for other professions (see Boone 2007: 4, Young 2000: 29–30).

The *tlamatinime* (sg. *tlamatini*), the "people who know things," were the most prestigious and respected of all learned people in Nahua society. Evidently, the title *tlamatini* was also used as a general designation for all knowledge-expert roles and referred to both men and women (Boone 2005: 20–21). The *tlamatinime* were respected as the "moral and spiritual guides and leaders who figuratively carried the Aztec people on their backs" (Boone 2007: 23). They feature prominently in the Mexica migration story, in which the Mexica

found themselves helpless after their intellectual leaders left them. According to the story, the Mexica were rescued from this misery only because four *tlamatinime* had remained, who remembered the cultural knowledge and way of living necessary for survival. The *tlamatinime* were also given a prominent role in the manuscript *Coloquios y Doctrina Cristiana*, attributed to Sahagún. The Coloquios recount the 1524 meeting of the first twelve Franciscan friars in Mexico with the *tlamatinime* of the Mexica. In this meeting, both parties confronted the other with their respective cosmovision and religious perspective on the world (Sahagún 1986, Klor de Alva 1980b, see Díaz Balsera 2005: 15–50). The text says the following things about the *tlamatinime*:

> And these, oh our lords, / indeed, they are there, they still guide us / these who carry us, these who govern us, / in relation to these being served / indeed, these who are our gods, these who have their merit / that of the tail, of the wing: / the ones who offer things, the ones who offer incense, / and those named the feathered serpents. / These are knowers of the word, / and their charge, with which they trouble themselves, / by night, by day, / is the act of burning copal, / the act of offering incense, / thorns, *acxoyatl*, / the act of blood letting. / These see, these trouble themselves, / with the journey, the orderly course of the heavens, / according to how the night is divided. / And these continually look at it, / these continually relate it, / these continually cause the book to cackle, / the color black, the color [red] / is in the painting they continually carry. / Indeed, they are the ones who continually carry us, / they guide us, they cause the path to speak to us. / They are the ones who put it in order, / such as how a year falls, / such as how the count of the destinies-feasts follows its path, / and each one of the complete counts. / They trouble themselves with it, / they have their charge, their commission, / their duty which is the divine word, / and we are those / indeed, who but have as our sole task, / (what is called) divine water, fire…. And we will be able to cause you to have a full heart, / because we guard it, / the divine book, the divine word, / there where it lies visible, it lies painted / it lies arranged, / all that is His precious word, / this one the Possessor of the Near, Possessor of the Surrounding. (Klor de Alva 1980b: 108–110, 130; lines 769–803, 1115–1121)

Boone (2005: 10–19) reconstructed several distinctive functions and roles of the *tlamatinime*: book owners; historians, orators and poets; calendar priests, astronomers, and diviners; and physicians, midwives, and sorcerers. Similarly, Graña-Behrens (2012: 23–24) distinguished four function categories: priest,

soothsayer (confessors and mediators between humans and deities), sorcerer, and sacred-book owner.

Sahagún described the wise men as exemplary counselors, teachers, and curers:

> The wise man [is] exemplary. He possesses writings; he owns books. [He is] the tradition, the road; a leader of men, a rower, a companion, a bearer of responsibility, a guide. The good wise man [is] a physician, a person of trust, a counselor; an instructor worthy of confidence, deserving of credibility, deserving of faith; a teacher. [He is] an adviser, a counselor, a good example; a teacher of prudence, of discretion; a light, a guide who lays out one's path, who goes accompanying one. [He is] reflective, a confessor, deserving to be considered as a physician, to be taken as an example. He bears responsibility, shows the way, makes arrangements, establishes order. He lights the world for one; he knows of the land of the dead; he is dignified, unreviled. He is relied upon, acclaimed by his descendants, confided in, trusted—very congenial. He reassures, calms, helps. He serves as a physician; he makes one whole. (Sahagún 1961: X, 29)

The sources are unclear whether the *tlamatinime* were also scribes or mainly possessors and interpreters of the books. In either case, the scribes (*tlacuilo*, pl. *tlacuiloque*) were listed among the craftspeople in the *Codex Mendoza*, the *Mapa Tlotzin* (Aubin 1886), and the *Florentine Codex* (see Boone 2000: 24–25). Sahagún described the manuscript painter in the same chapter with the carpenter, the stonecutter, and the mason but also with the singer, the wise man, and the physician (Sahagún 1961: X, 27–30). According to Sahagún, the *tlacuilo* is an artist drawing with charcoal and painting with colors who needs positive character traits such as being "honest, circumspect, far-sighted" and "pensive" (Sahagún 1961: X, 28).

In addition to this information, only some "scattered allusions" to the painters exist in a few sixteenth-century sources (Robertson 1994: 25; see also Lockhart 1993a: 326–327, 576). Most probably there were both male and female scribes, as depicted in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (see Figure 6; see Rabasa 2011: 2–3; see also Baca 2008: 70). Children born on the day sign *Ce Ozomatli* (1-Monkey) were favored to be singers, dancers, scribes, and artists (Sahagún 1979a: IV, 82). The goddess *Xochiquetzal* was the patroness of painters as well as other craftsmen, such as silversmiths, sculptors, embroiderers, and weavers (Durán 1971: 239).

In sum, the Nahuas assigned many roles and tasks to their knowledge experts. Although we know that the Nahuas greatly appreciated and respected them, we unfortunately know little about them.

2 People with Special Insights

Some people in Nahua society were believed to have special talents for expanding everyday consciousness and thus for acquiring deeper knowledge about the underlying structure of reality. The sources mention different designations covering several overlapping roles and tasks. López Austin (1967a) listed some of these roles in the category of physicians/magicians: the *tlaciuhque* (diviners, astrologers), the *titici* (healers, midwifes), the *tlatlacatecolo*, and the *nanahualtin*. Nicholson (1971: 438–443) pointed out that some of these worked for the state and the community (he called them "priests"), whereas others worked independently and in private consultation ("magicians"). The following sections, in particular, discuss two categories of people with special insights, the divine ancestor (or *hombre-dios*), and the *nahualli* shaman.

2.1 *Divine Ancestors*

Mesoamerican historians have been extensively debating the identity of the legendary and controversial figure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. The main bone of contention has been whether Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl—who features significantly in myths about the Toltecs and who rose to new prominence after Cortés was identified with him[2]—was a real historical person or a mythological figure (see most importantly Nicholson 2001b). In 1973, López Austin published a thought-provoking new theory explaining the bewildering identity of Quetzalcoatl alternating between a god and a man in the mytho-historical sources. Following López Austin, this identity is an expression of the widely spread Mesoamerican idea of the *hombre-dios*, which merged the human (male or female) and the god. According to this belief, some persons received a special "divine" force at birth making them exceptional recipients of the power of one deity. With the help of ritual preparation, such as fasting and self-sacrifice, these religious specialists became full personifications and representatives of the respective deity. In this form, the *hombre-dioses* could mediate between the human community and its tutelary god and guided their communities as political and religious leaders. In addition to this political and religious

2 For a discussion of Cortés's identification with Quetzalcoatl, see Carrasco (2000) and Nicholson (2001a).

leadership, the *hombre-dioses* acted as the deity's protector, as carrier of the sacred bundle, and as priests and impersonators of the deity. Over the course of history, these persons became divine ancestors in the mytho-historical recordings of the respective ethnic group.

The belief in *hombre-dioses* is well documented for several colonial centuries and appears to have persisted up to the present day. According to James Taggart, many "contemporary Nahuas, particularly in the northern Sierra de Puebla, claim to be human-gods, describing themselves as 'lightning bolts' (*ticoameh*, 'glowing serpents') with clairvoyant powers and with serpent-animal companion spirits" (2001: 361). In López Austin's interpretation, the *hombre-dioses* were also *nanahualtin* able to transform not only into the deity but also into the spirit companion (López Austin 1967b: 118). Thus, the roles of *hombre-dios*, *teixiptla*, and *nahualli* were blended into one another.

2.2 *The* **Nahualli** *Shaman*

In a recent and extensive study, Roberto Martínez González (2011) analyzed a large corpus of available pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary Mesoamerican sources with regard to the concept of *nahualli* or *nagual*. As a result, he carved out a Mesoamerican *núcleo duro* for the concept (Martínez González 2011: 13–15). In early colonial times, a sect of *nagualistas* (Spanish name for *nanahualtin*) might have existed that resisted the Spanish conquest in a similar way as colonial partisan Martin Ocelotl (Martínez González 2011: 324). In contemporary Mexico, the idea of the *nahualli* continues to be popular as a symbol for pre-Hispanic culture. It is not only prevalent in records of everyday experiences, newspaper stories, and novels but was also adopted by new spiritual and shamanistic movements and by Aztec revitalization movements such as the Sixth Sun Foundation in the United States (Martínez González 2011: 9, 481–496).

With regard to pre-Hispanic Mexico, several early colonial sources mentioned the *nahualli*: pre-Hispanic painted codices and dictionaries, testimonies of the conquistadores and texts of the missionaries, the Indigenous chroniclers, court papers, and the writings of Ruiz de Alarcón (1984) or Núñez de la Vega (1702). In addition, Sahagún referred to the *nahualli* in several places in the *Primeros Memoriales* and in the *Florentine Codex* (Martínez González 2011: 16–24). The *nahualli* is most widely known from the story Durán told about Motecuhzoma I sending a group of *nanahualtin* to search for Aztlan. Similarly, the designation *nahualli* is used in many of the sources for people with the ability to transform into an animal (Martínez González 2011: 15, 129, 131, 248–256). In scholarship, the differences between nahualism and tonalism have been vigorously debated (see, e.g., López Austin 1988b: 362–375).

Contemporary Nahuas typically refer to the animal companion of the *nahualli* shaman with the term of *tonal* or *tonalli* (Martínez González 2011: 126–131, 166–167, 516). The etymology and meaning of the term *nahualli* is obscure; it might have been associated with the skin of an entity, its ritual covering, or its costume (Martínez González 2011: 88).

The role of the human *nahualli* overlapped with those of the wise (wo)men, priests, curers, and diviners (Martínez González 2011: 320–324, 386–387). The *tlacatecolotl* was apparently a malevolent type of *nahualli* shaman, sending sickness and death to people (Martínez González 2011: 246, 348–349). Most typically, the shaman's function was to control the weather, ensure plant fertility, divine and cure, protect the community, and maintain the overarching balance of the cosmic forces (Martínez González 2011: 505–507).

Human *nanahualtin* acquired their animal companions by virtue of the *tonalli* quality of the day of their birth or ritual bathing. Beings born under the influence of the same *tonalli* were believed to share a destiny, or more precisely, a form of coessence with each other. Although every human being had a coessence with other entities in the world, apparently not everybody had an animal companion. The sources are contradictory in this matter. Most probably, everybody had an animal *nahualli*, but only a few chosen people could identify it (mainly in dreams) or transform into it. It might also have been the case that all people knew their *nahualli*, but only a few could transform into it. Finally, it is also possible that all people knew their *nahualli* and could transform into it, while only some had a particularly strong *nahualli*. Or, vice versa, only a few people actually *had* a *nahualli*. Be that as it may, we know that few people were acknowledged in their role as shamanic human *nanahualtin* (Martínez González 2011: 107–111, 165–166). Whereas several human shamans could have the same animal species as their counterpart, their actual companions were nevertheless different persons (Martínez González 2011: 164). The animal *nanahualtin* were hierarchically organized, and human shamans with higher social status typically had more powerful animal companions (Martínez González 2011: 94–96, 503). Apparently, some human groups also had particular animal *nanahualtin*, for example, jaguar warriors and ethnic or professional groups, with the eagle being most prominent among them (Martínez González 2011: 95–101).

Whereas the animal was not identical to the human *nahualli*, and both typically acted separately from each other, their destinies were closely related. If something bad happened to one of them, the other was typically affected; the death of one had serious repercussions in the life of the other (Martínez González 2011: 106). If the shaman transformed into her or his *nahualli*, both of them temporarily merged into one being so that they were identical. This often

happened in dreams or drug-induced states of altered consciousness. The night seems to have been the best time for these transformations, since the night changed both the quality and form of human sensory impressions and displaced rational daylight consciousness (Martínez González 2011: 140–142, 513).

In sum, the human *nahualli* was regarded as a person with the power to manipulate the forces of the cosmos who had a special talent for gaining insights into realms of reality closed to ordinary people in their everyday consciousness. Most probably, the shamans also acted as knowledge experts in other roles, for example, as physicians, diviners, priests, or wise (wo)men.

3 The Inspiration of Knowledge and Its Expression

Some of the Nahua knowledge experts lived a life as "intellectuals," studying nature, the movement of the stars, or the history of their community. Others were (also) teachers or engaged in direct therapeutic and counseling work. In addition to these experts, artists and craftspeople also acquired and expressed cultural knowledge. The arts in Nahua culture not only provided aesthetic enjoyment and represented social status but also served as an important medium for understanding and expressing the fundamental workings of reality.

Artists and craftspeople of all kinds were regarded as direct and true descendants of the Toltecs. According to the *Leyenda de los Soles* and the codices from the *Borgia Group*, all wisdom had initially been created by Quetzalcoatl, the divine principle of creation inventing time, space, and culture (Carrasco 2000: 91, 102, 2014: 59–63). The continuing creation of life and death in the Fifth Era and the constant realization of *teotl* were regarded as processes akin to the artistic creation of "flower and song" (according to the songs in the *Romances*, see, e.g., folios 35r–35v, Bierhorst 2009: 148–149).

Not every human being could become an artist and true Toltec. Only those born on specific days of the calendar, particularly on *Ce Ozomatli* (1-Monkey), received the *tonalli*, the talent, and the personality regarded as necessary for this profession. Furthermore, the artists needed to hone and cultivate these gifts given at birth throughout their lifetime (León-Portilla 1963: 169, Clendinnen 1991: 214–215). Based on these requisites, the artists could then, in the actual act of creating, receive inspiration from cosmic forces. The many different cosmic forces were believed to be responsible not only for strong human emotions or sexual desire but also for artistic creativity and inspiration (López Austin 2008b: 34). In Nahua culture, anything unusual was attributed to the momentary influence of cosmic forces.

This idea of divine "possession" explained "the influence of time, how moods changed, virtuous exaltation, an inclination to sin, artistic development, and madness. All of this was attributed to the internal presence of the gods" (López Austin 1997: 40–41, see also 1993: 143). The artists felt the influence of these forces in the heart in particular, that is, in the *teyolia*, the animistic entity of the heart. According to the *Florentine Codex*, true Toltecs were those who had a *ioteutl*, a "deified heart," who continually conversed with their own heart (*moiolnonotzani*) and who divined the things with their hearts (*tlaiolteuuiani*)[3] (Sahagún 1961: x, 28, translation by López Austin 1973: 124). The actions "to foretell without omens," "to conjecture," and "to invent," and the attribute "to be very wise" were all expressed with the Nahuatl phrase "to deify the heart" (López Austin 1988c: 245). Bad artists, in contrast, covered their hearts (*iolloquiquimil*) and lacked understanding (Sahagún 1961: x, 28, López Austin 1988c: 217). The bad feather artist even had, instead of a deified heart, "a turkey hen sleeping inside" (*iolloquimilli totolin iitic cochticac*) (Sahagún 1961: x, 25, translation López Austin 1988b: 232).

The idea of "imagination" was expressed in Nahuatl with the term *yolteohuia*, literally translated "I act on things with the deified heart" (López Austin 1988c: 216).[4] A priest of Quetzalcoatl was called a *tlateumatini*, "someone knowledgeable of the things of *teotl*" (Maffie 2014: 108). The artists, along with the diviners, the deity impersonators, and the *tlatoque*, carried strong cosmic forces like a "divine fire" in their *teotl* hearts (López Austin 1988b: 231–232). Because of the sheer intensity of this fire, it could be dangerous for people in close proximity, and nobody should look a deity impersonator straight in the eye (López Austin 1973: 124). To preserve the ability to perform his duties well, the deified heart of the *tlatoani* needed constant nourishment in the form of rituals and therapeutic measures, such as smelling sweet fragrances (López Austin 1988b: 400). Judging from these linguistic expressions and rituals, the heart was believed to be an important receptor of the *teotl*'s cosmic forces and, therefore, of knowledge about reality.

Based on this idea of the deified heart as the receptor of artistic inspiration, Bierhorst's controversial interpretation of the *Cantares Mexicanos* gets a new twist. The songs frequently name several Nahua *tlatoque* as their protagonists. León-Portilla (1992a) interpreted this fact as a reference to the authorship of the respective songs. Bierhorst challenged this interpretation and offered a

3 León-Portilla (1961: 149–150, 169–170) translated *tlayolteohuiani* as "continually putting a divine heart within things."

4 The *tlayolteohuiani* (spelled *tlaiolteuuiani* by Sahagún) is accordingly someone acting on her or his imagination.

new one: According to Bierhorst, the (postconquest) singers of the songs invoked the names of famous rulers and heroes who had died long ago so that these could serve as the singers' artistic muses. As a result, the singer sang with the voice of the invoked ruler and took his role, as in a theatrical play. Bierhorst (1985b: 16–34) believed that the singers actually invoked the *ghosts* of the respective rulers to descend from the heavens in a ritual similar to North American ghost dances. This latter part of Bierhorst's argument has received much critique from other scholars because the sources about Nahua culture provide little evidence to support it. My suggestion is to follow Bierhorst's general idea that the songs invoked deceased rulers but to change the invoked subject. In doing so, not actual ghosts did descend to the singers but their "spirits," that is, their *tonalli* and their *teyolia*. This interpretation rests on the evidenced believe that a person's particular *tonalli* and *teyolia* remained in existence in the cosmos after death. I suggest that the singers of the *Cantares Mexicanos* appealed to these forces to descend on or into them so that these helped to deify the artists' hearts and inspire their artistic creations.

Regardless of the interpretation of the *Cantares*, Nahua artists were believed to be inspired with insights into the underlying workings of reality through their hearts. Subsequent to this inspiration, artists expressed the acquired knowledge in their works and thus made it available to others. The Nahuatl term *tlacuilolmachiotl*, used for paintings, contained the verb *machiotia*, which means "making things visible and knowable" (Leibsohn 2007: 400). Consequently, pieces of art and writing made the fundamental *teotl* quality of the depicted entity clearly visible. Many Nahua statues and material objects show a strong attention to botanical details. Most probably, the essence of non-animated things like plants or shells was believed to be visible to the human eye in their outer appearance. Nahua animal statues, in comparison, appear rather clumsy to the modern Western eye, and surface details are much coarser. This difference may be due to the idea that animal essences were not only visible in their skin and outer appearance but also in their movement and behavior patterns (see Clendinnen 1991: 225–226). Movement and behavior, however, is expressed more precisely in moving presentations than in statues, for example, by human deity impersonators.

On the whole, the different types of art, such as feather mosaics, painting, or poetry and song, all made tangible the underlying structures of reality. This is most probably one of the reasons why the painted glyphs for several art forms were similar. Speech rolls, for example, were colored in the deep blue-green of jade, reminiscent of the iridescent brilliance of quetzal plumes, and blossomed with beautiful flowers. Some things in the physical world naturally presented an intensified version of reality because of their extraordinary beauty

and radiance. Artists, however, could intentionally create this kind of beauty by arranging things into a well-ordered state that strongly expressed the overarching balance of the complementary forces of the cosmos. In this way, art became a medium to express knowledge about reality or, more precisely, to make the underlying structures of reality more tangible for human senses. While working on a piece of art, the smoke on Tezcatlipoca's mirror gradually cleared and the breath on the mirror dissipated, until finally, from the continuously moving and changing images of earthly life, an unclouded view of reality was revealed.

CHAPTER 6

Interacting with a World in Motion: Nahua Pragmatism and Aesthetics

The last two chapters have considered Nahua ontology and epistemology in a highly abstract way. The available sources suggest that practical and aesthetic forms of knowledge may have played a much more important role in Nahua culture than abstract philosophical reasoning. Consequently, we now turn to Nahua pragmatism and aesthetics. Using the term *pragmatism* does not imply the Western philosophical tradition as defined by such classical representatives as Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Instead, the term is used here to refer to a general action orientation in Nahua culture, where people devoted much time and effort to their interactions with the cosmos. It is my impression that the frequent performance of rituals was motivated by pragmatist reasoning convinced of the ritual efficacy of influencing the cosmic forces for human benefit. Having said that, Nahua culture did not include a "pragmatism" understood as the opposite to "aesthetics." Nahua rituals were multisensorial and sensational events stimulating all manner of body senses and experiences, and they included many aesthetic, sensorially experienced media. In my discussion of these media, I focus primarily on the costumes and material objects and argue that these were understood as essential and consubstantial materializations of the deities.

The Nahua world was a world in motion, with humanity participating in a continuous movement of forces. People's identities were essentially defined by this motion and their destinies were shaped by it. People also intentionally attempted to interact with the forces and to manipulate their movement to produce beneficial effects in their lives. The first sections of this chapter examine the scope of human agency in these interactions and the duties people felt obliged to fulfill to ensure the continued existence of the cosmos. Then, we explore Nahua rituals as the most important means of interacting with the cosmos and fulfilling human duties. Afterward, we turn to Nahua aesthetics by analyzing the sensational effects of large-scale Nahua ritual performances and the usage and conception of material objects such as statues, ritual attire, clothing, and sacred bundles. This leads to an interpretation of the Nahua concept of the *teixiptla*. Since this concept is a cornerstone for interpreting Nahua semiotics, we need to reflect carefully on its notion of representation.

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1 Human Agency: Seeking Balance

Contrary to traditional depictions of the Aztecs as a pessimistic, fatalistic people bowing to the unchangeable forces of destiny, the Nahuas appear to have believed in their far-reaching agency to influence their collective and individual fates. To this end, Nahua individuals ideally cultivated their talents and strategically interacted with their fellow human beings. The Nahuas also enforced and rewarded the disciplined compliance with strict codes of conduct. One of the most important ways to stimulate positive outcomes and ensure a thriving future was the performance of a large range of specialized rituals that influenced the movement of the cosmic forces, since these were held responsible for all events. Generally, the most beneficial rituals for human beings were those that generated and supported the overarching balance of the complementary forces. To "smooth out" disruptions in the equilibrium of forces is also one of the key functions of contemporary Nahua shamans, as the Sandstroms discovered (A.R. Sandstrom 1991: 319; see also A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 99, 268). Both human beings and capricious deities were held accountable for any transgressions against the overarching balance of complementary forces. In contemporary Nahua cosmovision, the behaviors of people and spirits are deeply intertwined. Accordingly, the trouble-causing wind spirits are believed to generally "infest the entire universe" but are attracted to a village through all the human actions breaking the social norms, such as gossiping, becoming angry, speaking badly of others, swearing, stealing, cheating, or lying (A.R. Sandstrom 1991: 252; see also A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 99, 268).

1.1 *Human Transgressions*

Human behavior had considerable effects on the movement of forces and could cause instabilities in their principal balance. Just through everyday living, meeting natural needs, and following natural inclinations, human beings disrupted bodily, social, and cosmic balances. Furthermore, human beings had agency to intentionally transgress the code of conduct that commanded a balanced life without excesses. Thus, the Nahua concepts of *tlatlacolli* (something damaged) and *tlazolli* (filth) referred to the idea of human beings failing to balance surrounding forces or allowing excessive desires to overcome their internal balance, leading to disintegration, pollution, and decentering (Monaghan 2000: 33). If one person produced a serious disequilibrium of forces, for example, through morally aberrant behavior, this imbalance also affected the cosmos at large (López Austin 1997: 46, Burkhart 1989: 132). Generally, no feeling or act in itself was regarded as morally evil, only its overindulgence or deprivation (Burkhart 1989: 131, 150–159).

To prevent this from happening, the Nahuas aspired to a well-balanced and centered life between the extremes of abstinence and excess (Burkhart 1989: 130). They also established rigid rules of behavior within a tight social system of control and order (see Clendinnen 1991: 45–54, 149–152). Implanting discipline played a significant role in child education. Whereas breastfed babies and toddlers were typically caressed and coddled a great deal, older children were reared with restraint and severely punished for misbehavior (see Berdan and Anawalt 1992: folios 56v–61r). According to Clendinnen's interpretation, the feast of *Izcalli* presented a strong turning point in children's lives, an "abrupt shift from the indulgence and security of children's infant years to a notable harshness in their later treatment" (Clendinnen 1991: 192). Every four years, small children old enough to walk and dance were presented to the major temple and initiated into religious service at the feast of *Izcalli*. At the temple, they were separated from their parents and exposed to several frightening and painful rites, such as the piercing of their ears with bone awls and being held over a fire dense with incense. Hence, the temple became "a place of excitement, glamour, and terror" (Clendinnen 1991: 191). After being kept awake continuously for two days, the children were returned to their homes and made drunk with pulque. On this occasion, the adults of the family also indulged in large amounts of pulque, which was probably a frightening experience for the children, since drunkenness was strongly restricted in Nahua life. The feast was immediately followed by five days of *nemontemi*, a time of danger and reduced activity. Considering the rigor of these rites, they most probably had strong, if not traumatic, effects on children. If so, these rituals presented a major shift in children's lives, initiating them into the harshness of Nahua life, a life in which strong discipline was required to generate and maintain the individual, social, and cosmic balance considered necessary for human survival.

1.2 *Deity Transgressions*

According to Clendinnen's interpretation, the Nahuas experienced life as fragile and full of contingencies. This concerned not only physical life and health but also social identity, which was similarly tenuous and impermanent, especially for warriors, who were particularly vulnerable. Their social status depended almost exclusively on their success or failure on the battlefield and, as such, on both personal talent and happenstance. A vivid symbol for this combination of personal responsibility and contingency was the person presenting Tezcatlipoca in the *veintena* of *Toxcatl*. Every year, one exceptionally beautiful male was selected based on his conformity to a long list of physical markers. Acting as the *teixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca, he enjoyed one year of luxurious life full

with physical pleasantries and surrounded by beauty and art. At the height of his glory, however, he was ritually sacrificed and replaced by the male chosen to serve as the new representative of Tezcatlipoca the following year (Clendinnen 1991: 104–110, 145–148). Thus, the *teixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca vividly personified the ambivalence between personal excellence and good fortune and the fragility and evanescence of earthly life. As Clendinnen suggested, the Nahua's love for gambling might also be a root metaphor for their understanding of destiny and fate. The Nahuas played many games whose outcomes did not only rely on strength and skill but on pure luck, representing the forces of life beyond humanity's control (Clendinnen 1991: 144–146).

The Nahuas experienced living in the cosmos of the Fifth Era as slippery and dangerous. Human beings were always in danger of losing their balance and suffering, in danger that misfortune would befall them, that is, *aompayotl*, "a condition of something out of place" (Maffie 2014: 105). Misfortune and contingency were explained with the struggle of the complementary pairs of forces moving through the cosmos. Plant fertility in the natural circle of the seasons, for example, could be endangered by an imbalance of cosmic forces, leading to extensive drought or floods, plant diseases, or pest infestation (see Broda 2008: 37). The cosmic forces could also "erupt perilously into the human world" by directly affecting the human body, experience, and emotions (Clendinnen 1991: 213). Since the human being stood in complex interrelationships with the cosmos, the "divine" was felt immediately and materially in everyday life (Gruzinski 1993: 169–174). Different deities not only affected human beings in many ways but were also thought to directly and intentionally attack the human body and trigger sickness, disease, and death (López Austin 1988b: 351–354). The cosmic forces circulated through the world, invading some bodies and left others. Their power worked through adhesion and contagion; they could be exceptionally strong and contaminate everything in their surroundings (López Austin 1997: 33). Furthermore, human beings could intentionally encourage and induce the intrusion of forces upon themselves. Strong means for this were intoxication with alcoholic drinks or trances triggered by ritual body manipulations, fighting, and dancing (Clendinnen 1990). These procedures, however, needed to be carefully controlled because a high concentration of particular forces in a human being was considered dangerous (Clendinnen 1991: 50–54).

The forces, in their anthropomorphic conceptualization, were also regarded as responsible for many "anomalies in the order" (López Austin 1993: 110). As personalized deities, they were given agency and a personal will that inspired them to act quite capriciously and thus to provoke disorder (López Austin 1993: 110). Within this cosmovision frame, everything unusual and irregular could be

explained by reference to the volition and capriciousness of the gods. This was the "Tezcatlipoca factor," with Tezcatlipoca representing the destructive and degenerative forces that "at any moment erupt in our lives, subverting being and order and so sabotaging our endeavors, the random and unexpected, also associated with dust, filth, tlazolli" (Maffie 2014: 167).

By and large, human beings needed to protect themselves from the disordering power of the deities. They did so through many forms of counteracting behavior and balancing rituals, both on individual and community levels (see López Austin 1988b: 66).

1.3 *The Problem of Fatalism versus Agency*

How much agency did the Nahuas believe they had to influence the fate and destiny of individuals, society, humanity, and the cosmos? Following traditional interpretations of the Aztecs, Nahua lives were dominated by a fatalistic religious ideology, particularly by the fear that the Fifth Era might end, which drove them to perform innumerable human sacrifices (see, e.g., Caso 1958). Similarly, the Nahuas felt themselves at the mercy of the gods in a "harsh and joyless" world "ruled by capricious gods who determined the fate of man on the earth on which he lived. These were to be accepted unquestioningly and without complaint" (Sullivan 1986: 17). Finally, the Nahuas believed in an irreversible fate, since according to their cyclical notion of time, history was only the endless cyclical repetition of events that had already happened. Recent reconstructions of the Nahua concepts of time and destiny suggest, in contrast, that the Nahuas attributed to themselves much more agency to influence their lives and the cosmos. We also know from ethnohistorical sources that some Nahua rulers intentionally manipulated the calendar for political reasons (Hassig 2001: 3). This shows that religious ideology was not their sole motivation for acting but that sociological factors and political strategies were also involved.

Some depictions of the Aztecs, however, deny them this capacity. According to Tzvetan Todorov (1984), the reason why the Aztec Empire fell so quickly at the hands of only a few Spaniards was their inferior semiotic system. Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés drew on the flexible semiotic system of a literate society, which enabled him to act strategically in the political and military realm and, as a result, to establish "a superior military and political information network that he manipulated to ensure conquest" (Carrasco 2000: 223). The last Nahua king, Motecuhzoma II, instead drew on a ritualistic, fixed oral system of knowledge, leaving the individual no flexibility to act (Todorov 1984: 74–77, 81–84). Thus, Motecuhzoma II was unable to communicate adequately with Cortés and to improvise and act effectively in the unfamiliar situation of

a political threat (Todorov 1984: 70–73, 87). According to Todorov (1984: 64–68), Motecuhzoma II was overly concerned with divination and reading the signs and omens predicting the predestined future within a cyclical running of time. Rather than acting strategically, he merely looked to the skies and waited for things to happen.

There are many flaws in Todorov's argument. One of the most fundamental ones is his biased choice and reading of the historical sources. Todorov's interpretation rests primarily on sources written by Spaniards, who were interested in presenting their own superiority over the Aztecs. His additional superficial reading of the Indigenous account of the conquest in book twelve of the *Florentine Codex* lacks any linguistic analysis and historical contextualization. Implementing the latter two clearly shows how Nahua authors several decades after the conquest retrospectively attempted to explain the defeat by pointing out its predetermined inevitability (Lockhart 1994: 229–247). More recent analyses of the conquest (Carrasco 2000, Restall 2003, Hassig 2006, Brienen 2008) also reveal a complex historical context in which Motecuhzoma II's decisions about how to react to the Spanish invasion were influenced by many social and political factors. Furthermore, the customary reading of signs and omens did not generally lead to any fatalism. Quite the contrary, it motivated people to intervene.

If we take a closer look at ethnohistorical sources, we quickly realize that the Nahuas were intelligent people trying to cope with life's contingencies and unpredictabilities. Judging from the level of reflexivity in some of the surviving sources, there is no reason to think that the Nahuas were *not* conscious of different levels of behavioral reasoning, extending from politics to cosmovision, or that they were *not* using all the faculties of human cognition. Even within the perspective of their cosmovision and religion—which are typically identified as the ideologies restraining the Nahuas' agency—the Nahuas were believed to have considerable agency over their individual lives, their society, and the cosmos at large. Contrary to Todorov, who regarded the Nahuas as superstitious, and contrary to Western approaches that perceive societies that perform a large range of religious rituals as premodern and ineffective, I argue that the Nahuas regarded their rituals as a highly effective means of influencing the cosmos and its future—even if they (assumingly) knew that their endeavors, as all human endeavors, could also fail.

The most revealing source for any interpretation of the Nahua sense of destiny and fate is their handling of the *tonalpohualli*, the calendar used for divination. Since little information exists about how the Nahuas interpreted the *tonalamatl*, scholars have disagreed on the degree of its determinacy. Soustelle believed that the individual's fate was "subjected to the strictest predestination"

(1962: 112). Although the Nahuas attempted to correct the fate of a child born on an unfavorable day by deliberately holding the naming ceremony on a more auspicious day (see Boone 2007: 30), this act did not raise "much hope of avoiding the inexorable operation of the signs," according to Soustelle (1962: 112). León-Portilla (1963: 118–120) parted slightly from Soustelle's impression of determinacy by pointing out that people born on specific days had some influence on the outcome of their fate through self-control.

Later scholars ascribed much more agency to individuals. Boone (2007: 30), for example, concluded that the destinies of the days did not "dictate the future absolutely" but revealed only certain inclinations and tendencies. According to her interpretation, people could significantly influence what actually happened on each calendar day and in their lives through their actions and ritual performances. Regarding personal destiny, the day a person was born and the day of the naming ceremony only provided them with certain talents, personality traits, and inclinations. All these predispositions, however, were subject to modification during a lifetime. Beneficial qualities and talents could be cultivated and honed and negative tendencies contained and counteracted (Boone 2007: 31). This left much room for individual and family agency to influence a person's destiny. The first Spaniards translating the concept of *tonalli* understood this to be a fixed and unchangeable fate beyond one's control (Monaghan 1998: 138). Sahagún (1979a) was one of the first chroniclers to describe the divination on the *tonalpohualli* in this way. He compared it to simple horoscope handbooks and interpreted it as a rather fixed system determining only three sorts of day fates: auspicious, inauspicious, and indifferent/variable. Most scholars since then have followed Sahagún in this description of the destiny of particular calendar days. However, as Keber (2002a) showed, the mantic meanings of the *tonalamatl* were much more complex, and the impression of a rigid and simple categorization appears to be a colonial projection. Similarly, Boone (2007: 30–31) demonstrated that Nahua cosmovision regarding the *tonalli* qualities of time periods left much agency to human beings to work with them to their advantage.

Based on this knowledge about the *tonalpohualli*, we might say that the Nahuas believed they possessed a relatively high degree of agency over their lives. Rituals played an important role in influencing the qualities of days and destinies, in impelling the deities to act in a beneficial way, and in counteracting imbalances in the struggle of complementary forces. Nevertheless, many things were out of people's control, even if they tried hard to manipulate and control their destinies.

The Nahua New Fire Ceremony is a telling example for this belief in destiny and agency as well as for their sense of cosmic duty. Every fifty-two years, a

temporal cycle combining the *tonalpohualli* with the *xihuitl* was completed in the *xiuhmolpilli*, the "binding of the years." On this occasion, the Nahuas performed the elaborate New Fire Ceremony. According to Nahua cosmovision, the Fifth Era could end at any single completion of the fifty-two-year cycle, however, the Nahuas did not know which one. Consequently, by performing the New Fire Ceremony, they hoped to prevent the end of the era. The question is how they conceptualized their own role in this birth of a new cycle. Was the destiny of the cosmos already predetermined, and was the successful kindling of the new fire in the breast of a freshly sacrificed human victim only a sign for this destiny? Or did the continuation of the cosmos depend on the skills of the priest who could—or could not—ignite the first new fire (see Clendinnen 1991: 238)? Most probably, the Nahua understanding of the efficacy of this ritual was more complex and lay somewhere in between the two poles of predetermination and human responsibility. The Nahuas neither believed in predetermination nor that everything was possible. The cosmos and the timed movement of forces through the Fifth Era worked according to a certain framework that made the occurrence of particular things more probable at particular times (and places). Furthermore, the Nahuas did not take the continuance of their world for granted, nor did they trust that the struggling complementary forces would find an overarching balance by themselves. Rather, they experienced the evanescence of earthly life and the many contingencies ruling their daily lives. However, they believed in a certain degree of human agency to influence the passage of time and in the efficiency of their rituals to manipulate the forces of the cosmos in a favorable way. The birth of a new calendar cycle was certainly believed to be beyond humanity's control, but the New Fire Ceremony nevertheless exerted considerable influence on the forces responsible for the continuance of the Fifth Era.

2 Human Duties

According to Nahua cosmovision, humanity also had certain obligations within the cosmic cycle of energy and fulfilled its duties primarily through performing rituals. This sense of obligation was based on two central beliefs: First, the deities were thought to tire of the constant struggle with their opposing partners. It was humanity's duty to continually feed and nourish them so that the movement of the forces did not stop and the Fifth Era did not end. Second, the deities had initialized the first movement of the sun through the sky and created humanity through their autosacrifice. Humanity needed to pay back this primordial debt to the gods through their own sacrifice. In this section, we look at these concepts in more detail.

2.1 *Debt Payment and Reciprocal Alimentation*

Of all the creatures in the world, human beings were believed to have the strongest agency in influencing the forces and the closest relationship to the deities, with their actions intricately intertwined. Deities and human beings could communicate with one another; the deities could listen to humans, react to their pleas and sacrifices, and satisfy their needs. Sometimes the deities were conceived as being similar to human beings in their character and moods. They could feel and act benevolently or maliciously toward humanity or individual human beings, be compassionate or cruel, generous and charitable, or avaricious and vindictive (López Austin 2008b: 27). The Nahuas performed many songs and rituals to draw the deities' attention to human needs so the deities would pity them, or to placate the deities' often capricious moods, so that the gods acted benevolently toward humanity (Monaghan 2000: 32, Bierhorst 2009: 42–45).

One factor essentially defined the relationship between humanity and the deities: the understanding that human beings were in the deities' debt. This was a primordial and principally unrepayable debt rooted in the very creation of humankind. According to the *Leyenda de los Soles*, the humankind of the Fifth Era was created from the ground bone ashes of human ancestors from previous eras, with the deities sacrificing their own blood to animate these ashes. In addition, the Fifth Era, with the movement of the sun and moon, had been created by the autosacrifice of the deities at Teotihuacan. These actions of the gods set an example for humanity and obliged them to nourish the sun and moon with their own sacrifices. The deities' primordial sacrifices left humanity with a deep debt. Human beings, the *macehualtin*, stood in a relation of *tlamacehua* to the gods, that is, a relation in which something "is deserved by the god's penance." In an idea of reciprocal action, human beings were thus obliged to perform *tlamacehualiztli*, "the offering of blood and life to the gods" (Monaghan 2000: 38). Sacred offerings were also termed *nextlahualiztli* (act of payment, someone's debt payment), indicating a business transaction (López Austin 1988b: 74, Arnold 1999: 81). Sometimes the deities were believed to demand the repayment of the humans' debts by sending diseases and disaster to humanity, who reacted promptly by performing rituals (Martínez González 2011: 292).

Ritual activities such as burning incense, penance, and autosacrifice were believed to discharge humanity's debt and nourish the gods. In a cycle of reciprocal alimentation, the survival of humanity depended on its nourishment by the gods, and the movement of the deities through time and place depended on their nourishment by humanity (López Austin 2008b: 35). Despite this fundamental reciprocity, the deities nevertheless had more powers than human

beings. It was a sort of "covenant" relationship, "a covenant of mutual obligation, phrased in an alimentary idiom" (Monaghan 2000: 38). Each of the needy deities had its particular requirements, which had to be met in specialized ritual offerings (López Austin 2008b: 30). For example, Tlaltecuhtli, imagined as a giant earth mouth, needed a large number of blood sacrifices. Tlaloc was fed in rituals at particular places, such as mountaintops, springs, and lakes (Arnold 1999: 37–38, 53). The sun, in particular, needed the energy of sacrificed human hearts to continue its movement through the skies (López Austin 1988b: 79–80). In general, sacrificing human hearts and blood was one of the major means of nourishing the major deities.

2.2 (*Human*) *Sacrifice*

Sacrifices and offerings of many kinds were the most important elements within the large range of rituals the Nahuas regularly performed. The many Nahuatl terms typically translated as "sacrifice" covered several clusters of association. Some of them had a "notion of arranging, of laying out in formal order, or of making a gift or presentation to someone" (Clendinnen 1991: 74). Others referred to the drawing of blood in front of the deities and their statues and images and were associated with the concepts of *debt payment*, *levy*, *tribute*, and *obligation*. Finally, some terms named the particular human victims chosen to be sacrificed in front of the gods (Clendinnen 1991: 74).

The most common sacrifice in addition to incense burning was autosacrifice, in which maguey thorns were used to pierce one's earlobes, tongue, extremities, and genitals. In many cases, straw or threads of unspun cotton were then drawn through the pierced holes and the bloodied threads later offered to the deities (Sahagún 1981: II, 170). On certain occasions—most often during one of the *veintena* festivals or for the coronation ceremony of a newly elected *tlatoani*—human beings were killed and sacrificed to the deities. The human sacrifices took many forms; certainly the most common was extracting the heart and offering it to the respective deity. In addition, people were decapitated, flayed, thrown into a fire, shot with arrows, cast from high places, or drowned in lakes.[1] In the case of flaying, priests and deity impersonators wore the victim's skin during the subsequent ceremony. Sometimes parts of the flesh of the victim's body were eaten in ritual meals.

The people chosen for sacrifice fell into different categories (Clendinnen 1991: 87–101). The first major category was foreign warriors captured in the

1 Much information about human sacrifice is found in Durán's two works (1971: 80–81, 91–97, 174–175 passim; 1994: 140–143, 156–157, 191–192 passim). See also the *Florentine Codex*, book two in particular (Sahagún 1981: II, e.g., 1–3, 8, 42–43, 51–52, 194–198).

many wars the Mexica led against other polities. They were sacrificed, in particular, at the *veintenas* that marked the four regular periods of tribute payment (*Tlacaxipehualiztli*, *Etzalcualiztli*, *Ochpaniztli*, and *Panquetzaliztli*). The second major category was "prestige victims": small children offered to Tlaloc, "bathed slaves" offered by wealthy merchants, or extraordinary people chosen to act as deity impersonators, for example, as the *teixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca in the feast of *Toxcatl*. Being chosen as a victim was apparently a highly ambivalent destiny, full of honors and rewards but also horrors and ultimate death (Clendinnen 1991: 101–110).

The topic of human sacrifice among the Nahuas has provoked many heated discussions among Mesoamerican scholars (and the public). The most controversial points are the extent of human sacrifices in the Aztec Empire, the reasons for performing them, and the seeming contradiction between the cruelty of the sacrifices and the Nahuas' aesthetic sensibility, distinguished manners, and love of philosophical reflection. All these debates were, in the end, affected by personal reactions toward this bloody feature of Nahua culture. While the Spanish chroniclers typically reported extremely high numbers of human sacrifices among the Aztecs—Durán (1994: 339) lists 80,400 victims for a particular occasion—modern estimates based on archaeological data instead suggest a number of 20,000 per annum.

Explanations for performing human sacrifice differ greatly according to the scientific approach. In the 1970s, Michael Harner (1977) and Marvin Harris (1977) theorized that the Aztecs drew on cannibalism because of a serious protein deficiency in their diet. Later scholars, in contrast, saw no indication of this protein deficiency in the existing evidence and showed that the Aztec diet was far from protein-deficient (see Berdan 2014: 242). Approaches from religious studies typically attempt to explain the perceived obligation for human sacrifice by referencing the internal logic of Nahua cosmogony and cosmovision. Most prominent among these latter interpretations is Davíd Carrasco's 1995 article "Cosmic Jaws: We Eat the Gods and the Gods Eat Us" and his 1999 book, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization*. Based on descriptions of cannibalistic rituals and on the prevalence of jaws, orifices, mouths, and eating gestures in Nahua material culture, Carrasco proposed the theory of reciprocal alimentation between humanity and the deities as a contextual explanation. According to this theory, the Nahuas had realized that "life was inescapably tied to the laws of decomposition and putrefaction, while at the same time humans and gods, in order to survive for 'a little while here,' were constantly in the hunt for vital forces embedded in the bodies of gods, humans, and plants" (Carrasco 1995: 435). Hence, human sacrifice was regarded as a form of energy recycling in the cosmos, of nourishing the gods

with the energy human beings provided. Because this energy was believed to be particularly strong in the heart, extracting the heart served as one of the most important means of feeding the deities. With the ritual killing of victims and the offering of their hearts, their *teyolia* energy was released and given to the respective deity. Additionally, human blood contained precious *tonalli* energy, which revitalized "the regenerative powers of the Fifth Sun-Earth Ordering" (Maffie 2014: 307). The Nahuas thus nourished the cosmos, hoping that it "would reciprocate by recycling its *tonalli* energy into human and agricultural vitality and fertility" (Maffie 2014: 277).

Approaches from sociology or political anthropology typically refer to the demographical and political significance of the sacrifices legitimizing the Mexica's dominance in Mesoamerica, demonstrating their political power and intimidating the citizens of conquered polities, along with their own polities' commoners (Berdan 2014: 243). Many of the sacrificed victims were warriors from foreign polities who were captured alive during the frequent military confrontations in Postclassic Mesoamerica. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan, at the peak of their political dominance, had created a strong ideology legitimizing their political expansion efforts. As "people of the Sun" (Caso 1958), they claimed to be responsible for nourishing the sun to keep it moving through the skies. They met this demand through constant warfare aimed at capturing distinguished enemy warriors for their sacrifices. Consequently, dying on the battlefield or on the sacrificial stone was idealized in much of the surviving Nahua literature, including the *Cantares Mexicanos* (Bierhorst 1985b: 27–30, 35–38). Dead warriors were praised as precious flowers (*xochitl*), and death by war was called *xochimiquiliztli*, "flower death" (Lee 2008: 183). From the mid-fifteenth century onward, the Triple Alliance had some sort of a political arrangement with neighboring polities in the Puebla-Tlaxcala region for engaging with each other in those kinds of "flower wars" (*xochiyaoyotl*). According to the Alliance's own statements, these combats not only served as training fields for the warriors but also as a means of providing each of the parties with warriors for human sacrifice (Durán 1994: 402, 1971: 93). Some scholars, however, interpret this narrative of flower wars as a "propagandistic smokescreen invented by the Mexica to rationalize their failure to conquer Tlaxcalla" (M.E. Smith 2012: 177; see also Berdan 2014: 158).

3 Interacting with Rituals

In Nahua culture, one of the most important means of interacting with the cosmos and influencing human living conditions was through performing

rituals. The Nahuas devoted much time and many resources to ritual activity and—judging by the sheer number of performances—were convinced of the efficacy of these rituals, which directly changed the cosmic balance of forces. This section examines the several roles of ritual specialists, along with the most important rituals as presented in the sources, and then discusses academic ritual theories.

3.1 *Ritual Specialists*

Nahua society had a large number of professional religious specialists. In addition to the wise (wo)men, scribes, and shamans, the sources mention many other types of ritual specialists. Nicholson (1971: 439) grouped them into priests of the official state cult serving "the objectives of the social group as a whole" and ritual specialists serving "more private ends." However, the boundaries between these etic categories imposed from the outside are quite blurred.

Many Nahua specialists worked in the health sector and were concerned with healing, counseling, and advising. The male or female *ticitl* was a physician, herbalist, and midwife who set bones, stitched wounds, healed with stones, helped women give birth, provided potions from herbs, trees, and roots, and generally helped to restore people's health (Sahagún 1961: x, 30, 53). The different types of diviners served as counselors and advisers for all people in Nahua society. The most important of the diviners was the *tlapouhqui* or *tonalpouhqui*, the soothsayer and reader of the day signs. This wise (wo)man owned several books, most importantly the *tonalamatl*, the book of days. The *tonalpouhqui* was summoned after the birth of children to divine their fate and to set the most auspicious day for their naming and bathing ceremony. The *tonalpouhqui* was also asked to find the most auspicious time to begin major enterprises, be it the celebration of marriages, larger journeys or mercantile expeditions, or the sowing of new fields in the spring and the harvest of fruits later in the year (Sahagún 1961: x, 31, 1969: vi, 917). Another type of diviner was the *tlaolchayauhqui* or *tlaolliquitepehuaya*, who read the patterns of scattered maize kernels. The ancestor couple, Cipactonal and Oxomoco, were regarded as the prototypical diviners (see Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1991, folio 19; see also the first image in book iv of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún 1979a: iv, folio 3.1).

The *nahualli* shaman was generally considered "a wise man, a counselor, a person of trust—serious, respected, revered, dignified, unreviled, not subject to insults. The good sorcerer [is] a caretaker, a man of discretion, a guardian. Astute, he is keen, careful, helpful; he never harms anyone" (Sahagún 1961: x, 31). The "bad sorcerer," in contrast, used his powers to harm people, a "doer [of evil], an enchanter. He bewitches women; he deranges, deludes people; he

casts spells over them; he charms them; he enchants them; he causes them to be possessed" (Sahagún 1961: X, 31). The Nahuas knew many names for different types of evil *nanahualtin* (Nicholson 1971: 442; see also Martínez González 2011: 246, 348–349). According to the *Florentine Codex*, Motecuhzoma II sent a group of these malevolent sorcerers (*in nanaoalti in tlatlacateculo, in tetlachivianime*) to the invading Spaniards to do them harm and to stop them from attacking the Aztec Empire (Sahagún 1975: XII, 21).

In addition to these types of curers, diviners, and shamans, the Nahuas supported a large group of male and female priests who were responsible for performing two types of rituals: the large-scale monthly public *veintena* celebrations and the countless daily rituals performed in the temples. Regrettably, the sources remain silent on these priests and their lives, most probably for two reasons: First, the missionaries zealously attempted to erase this part of Nahua culture and, second, the last surviving priests presumably went underground after the destruction of all official religion and carefully protected their knowledge from the Spanish. Sahagún (1981: II, 27, 29, 206–215) only mentioned that preconquest Nahuas knew of many different roles and tasks for the priests and guardians of the large number of distinctive deities. Similarly, Durán stated that "there were so many titles and dignities among the priests that I would have to dedicate a special chapter to them" (1994: 156). He also reported that the priests were organized in a strict hierarchy, with clearly defined positions and offices, among them high-ranking dignitaries with a variety of respectful titles, those of lower ranks, and priestly novices (Durán 1994: 155–156). After taking three or more captives in war, some of the warriors also became priests. The sources mention several specific priestly roles: the offering priests, the *quaquacuiltin* (old offering priests), and the fire or incense priests (Sahagún 1981: II, 44, 80, Durán 1994: 277). Durán listed the *tecuacuiltin* (images in the round/statues), the *cuauhuehuetque* (old eagles, war veterans), the c*hachalmeca* (sacrifices from Chalman), the *tlenamacaque* (fire/incense priests), the *calmecahuehuetque* (elders from the *calmecac*), the *mozauhque* (penitents), and the *tlamacazque* (mature men) (Durán 1994: 156, translations by Garibay as provided by Doris Heyden). Apparently, the large group of priests was supported by temple offerings and gifts, state tributes, and probably by tributes from lands directly dedicated to particular temples (Berdan 2007: 253).

Many of the priestly actions were concealed from the public (Clendinnen 1991: 129). Sahagún (1981: II, 13, 21, 31) mentioned that the priests were part of the official *veintena* ceremonies and played many musical instruments, including horns, conch shells, or trumpets, and carried out rites such as mock-battles, making merry, or running up and down the pyramid. The priests generally performed "severe penances, like going naked at midnight to carry branches to the

mountains" and offered sacrifices so that the rains would come and fertilize the fields (Sahagún 1981: II, 27, 29). Many of the prayers and formal orations recorded in book six of the *Florentine Codex* were priestly prayers, for example, the prayers to Tezcatlipoca expressed by this deity's guardians (Sahagún 1969: VI, 1–5).

In the pictorial sources, the priests are clearly recognizable by their outer appearance and costume. Sahagún (1979b: VIII, 81, 1981: II, 81) described them as chewing tobacco and carrying tobacco pouches and incense ladles, as well as having small cotton bags with incense hanging on their backs on cord necklets. The fire priest at the *Huey tecuilhuitl* ceremony, who was responsible for slaying the deity impersonator of Xilonen, was "well arrayed [and] adorned. He bore an eagle claw device upon his back; it went surrounded by quetzal feathers. His holder was of eagle down [with] quetzal feathers. His flint knife was of gold. He had his rosette on his back; it was of paper workmanship" (Sahagún 1981: II, 105). Durán (1994: 171) portrayed a high priest fully dressed for a rite with tall feathers in his headdress, "his arms covered with golden bands from which hung large, shining green and blue feathers" and carrying "in his hand the great knife of black [obsidian], the knife called *ixcuahualli.*" On the occasion of the king returning from war, the priests were dressed in "tunics with little gourds hanging down their backs; these served also as ties for a kind of dalmatic. They wore their hair in a braid that hung down the back, much the way women braided their hair. All were painted black and carried flaming incense burners in their hands" (Durán 1994: 355). Priests had characteristic hairstyles, wearing the hair tangled, loose, and unkempt or, in some situations, braided with colored cords and topped by headdresses of paper or feathers (Sahagún 1959: IX, 61, Durán 1994: 65–67, 91, 234, 427). Frequently, the priests' faces and bodies were painted with black soot (Durán 1971: 91, 105, 114).

The priests lived in the priests' house and in the *calmecac*, where young men were also trained in priestly duties (Sahagún 1979b: VIII, 81, 1981: II, 36, 1978: III, 61). Children were assigned to the *calmecac* or to the *telpochcalli* while still in the cradle:

> If they assigned him to the calmecac, it was said they put the male in the calmecac to be a priest, to be a penitent, to live cleanly, to live peacefully, to live chastely, to abstain from vice and filth. If it were a female, the same was also said: she would be a priestess, she would become an older sister, she also would live chastely, she would not come in touch with vice and filth, she would live among the continent, the virgins, the so-called older sisters, who resided in the calmecac, who were guarded, who remained interned. (Sahagún 1969: VI, 209)

The priests who remained living in the *calmecac* as adults and worked as priests made strict vows to live a chaste, honest, devout, god-fearing life of moderation (Sahagún 1978: III, 67). Clendinnen pointed out that this was a life full of hardships. Novices were exposed to extremely hard tests of endurance, which only a few passed, with brutal public punishments for those who failed (Clendinnen 1991: 130–131). Those who passed were "athletes of self-mortification: in prolonged fasting, vigil, and the laceration of ears, thighs, shins, tongues, and penises for the drawing forth of blood" (Clendinnen 1991: 128).

3.2 *Domestic Rituals*

The Nahuas performed many small-scale household rituals in their everyday lives. Sadly, we know little about the details of these daily acts, which were most likely largely performed by women. Most of the surviving sources focus on the large-scale public *veintena* performances and few scholars thus far have studied domestic rituals. Only divination has caught some recent scholarly attention (e.g., Quiñones Keber 2002a, Boone 2007).

The many types of curers and healers worked on different levels of the cosmos. They performed incantations to counteract the spells of harm-seeking sorcerers as well as rituals to appease the deities and balance the cosmic forces. They manipulated clients' bodies with physical therapy and administered medicines created from plants, roots, and trees (Ortiz de Montellano 1990: 161, 181; for medicinal uses of plants, see Hernández 1959). Healers knew many ways to make a medical diagnosis. For example, children were held over obsidian mirrors or water surfaces, with the resulting vision indicating the cause of the illness and predicting the probability of the child's recovery (Berdan 2014: 245). Similarly, cords were knotted and unknotted to ascertain the likelihood of a patient's recovery, quails were decapitated and the movements of their bodies observed; insects were also placed into a quadrant and the direction of their movements interpreted (Nicholson 1971: 440–441).

Judging from its prevalence in the sources, divination was one of the most popular rituals influencing the decisions of people from all walks of Nahua society. Diviners were consulted to determine the most auspicious time for all kinds of occasions. The Nahuas used many different methods to identify and understand the underlying structure of reality veiled from everyday vision, to make prognoses of things to come, and to determine the most promising actions. They interpreted dreams and read omens such as celestial events, apparitions associated with Tezcatlipoca, or the appearance and actions of particular animals, for example, a rabbit, red spider, or weasel entering one's house or crossing one's path. Shamans also interpreted visions induced by fasting, autosacrifice, and ingesting alcohol and hallucinogenic plants (Nicholson 1971: 440–441).

To reach these interpretations, divination books were consulted, although none of the books for deciphering dreams has survived to this day. The *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1979a), however, contains much information on the reading of omens and signs. The most complex form of divination was the interpretation of the *tonalpohualli*. The divination manuscripts contain a large amount of information on the qualities of different time units presented either in general ways for multiple purposes or in directional or topical almanacs. Divination from the *tonalamatl* appears to have been a highly complex, nonmechanical procedure analyzing the complex interplay of many different mantic forces, as painted in the codices, that influenced the quality of a day (Quiñones Keber 2002a: 272). This ritual performance relied heavily on the extensive knowledge of the diviners reading and interpreting the *tonalamatl* for clients.

Archaeological household excavations have unearthed extensive evidence of small-scale domestic rituals, suggesting the high relevance of these activities in everyday life. The largest part of this evidence comprises clay figurines of primarily female deities (M.E. Smith 2012: 240, Berdan 2014: 246). Additionally, many ritual objects were found, predominantly incense burners that were most probably used on a daily basis at household altars (Berdan 2014: 244). Incense was offered to deity figurines and statues both in temples and at home and was directed to the four directions (Sahagún 1981: II, 194). Sahagún (1981: II, 195–196) reported several other household rites, among them the casting of food offerings to the hearth deities before any meal and the pouring of libations before drinking pulque. Children were stretched for better growth, and objects such as loose cotton threats bound over the breast for improved health (Sahagún 1981: II, 202–203).

Both laypeople at home and priests in the temples performed many other rites. Sweeping was an omnipresent and indispensable activity that was carried out in private lodgings, on the town streets, in the ceremonial districts, and in the temples (Sahagún 1981: II, 199). A common ritual was the "eating of earth," in which people used one finger to touch the ground and then the mouth. This was done whenever somebody arrived at a highly respected place, for example, in a temple, in front of a ruler, or at the hearth of one's own home. The "eating of earth" was also performed as a kind of oath to validate the truth of one's own statement (Sahagún 1981: II, 195). In addition, the many forms of fasting and abstinence—from food, bathing, and sexual encounters—were sometimes complemented by sleep deprivation and all-night vigils (Sahagún 1981: II, 199–200). Both laypeople and priests subjected themselves to many forms of autosacrifice: cutting the ear lobes, the tongue, the thigh, or other fleshy parts of the body with obsidian blades or maguey spines, and then drawing straws or

cords of cotton through the wounds and offering the forthcoming blood to the deities (Sahagún 1981: II, 197, 198). Offering the deities human blood, as well as small animals, plants, fruits, vegetables, drinks, and cooked meals, was customary at all levels of society.

Some of the Indigenous pictorial manuscripts have recently been interpreted as ritual prescripts or protocols for such kinds of offerings. Particularly noteworthy are the codices *Cospi*, *Fejérváry-Mayer*, and *Laud*, which contain complete sections on rituals involving complex countings and arrangements of offerings. For a long time, scholars had no idea how to interpret these sections, until analogies to contemporary offering countings and arrangements were detected (Boone 2007: 159–169).

In many cases, there are no clear boundaries between domestic and public rituals. The small-scale rites mentioned here were often part of larger ceremonies, such as the *veintena* festivals. Apparently, all public performances also had domestic components, with people fasting, feasting, and presenting offerings before, in between, and after the public ceremonies. Household rituals also "were adapted to, were coordinated with, and mirrored the broader ceremonial world" (Berdan 2014: 243–244).

3.3 *Public Performances*

In addition to the abundant domestic rituals, the Nahuas cultivated many public ritual performances. Among them were elaborate rituals for the founding of new polities, including territorial marking, burials of deceased rulers, or installation rites for new *tlatoque*. The Nahuas also played the famous Mesoamerican ritual ballgame, *ollamaliztli*, which most probably symbolized or enacted the cyclical completion and renewal of the Fifth Era (Maffie 2014: 198; see also Whittington 2001).

One of the better known public rituals is the New Fire Ceremony, called *xiuhmolpilli* (binding of the years). It started with extensive preparations a few days before the particular night of the *xiuhmolpilli*; all fires in the country were extinguished, and houses and streets meticulously cleaned and swept. On the night of the *xiuhmolpilli* itself, some groups, such as children or pregnant women, were protected with specific rituals, as it was believed they were particularly vulnerable to the strong forces at work. In the middle of the night, a procession of fire priests walked to the ceremonial center on top of a particular nearby hill. There, a warrior captive was ceremonially slain and his heart sacrificed. The main fire priest was responsible for lighting a new fire within the open chest of the victim. The populace in the valley were relieved when they saw this new fire because this was regarded as a token that a new fifty-two-year cycle had indeed begun. The priests then carried the new fire with torches to

all temples and dwellings, where every hearth fire was kindled anew (Durán 1994: 445–446, Carrasco 2014: 105–109). This ritual was possibly only performed once in the described elaborate form, namely in the last turn of the calendars before the Spanish conquest in the year 1506/1507. If this is true, only smaller rituals were performed on this occasion in the centuries before, and the historical accounts of the Mexica merely projected the relevance of this ritual backward (Hassig 2001: 16–18).

The public performances given the most scholarly attention are the *veintena* ceremonies, the eighteen monthly festivals of the *xihuitl*. These festivals must have been highly impressive spectacles, as the Mexica were known among their neighbors for the complexity and intensity of their performances (Clendinnen 1991: 288). The information on the *veintenas* in the sources, however, is rather limited. Abbreviated signs indicating the different festivals are found in several sources, among them the codices *Mendoza*, *Telleriano-Remensis*, and *Vaticanus A* (Nicholson 2002: 67–70). More detailed pictorial depictions showing representations of deities, deity impersonators, ritual celebrants, and paraphernalia, accompanied by alphabetical descriptions, are given in Durán's *Historia* (1994), in the codices *Magliabecchiano*, *Tudela*, *Telleriano-Remensis*, and *Vaticanus A 3738/Ríos*, and most importantly in the second section of the *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl*, in Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales*, and in book two of the *Florentine Codex*.

Several problems arise when comparing the different sources and the alphabetical descriptions with the pictorial accounts. First, many details, such as ritual places, patron deities, dates in the year, and the festivals' names differ across the sources; some information is even contradictory. Second, the sources influenced by Spanish authors apparently intentionally synthesized and essentialized the variability of diverse local traditions into a coherent set of annually repeated unchanging rituals (DiCesare 2008: 4). Most probably, considerable local variation existed, even though the rising political and cultural influence of the Mexica over Mesoamerica had brought an increasing standardization of ritual practices (Nicholson 2002: 99). The relatively uniform depiction of the *veintenas* in the surviving sources may also be the result of the colonial influence of European calendric imagery (Nicholson 2002: 65).

Mesoamerican scholars have been debating whether the pictorial depictions of the *veintenas* are a precolonial or postconquest genre. Some believe that precolonially they served as ritual prescripts, manuals, or handbooks for the priests to organize and direct the complex public performances (Nicholson 2002: 65, 96). Others argued that Nahua scribes painted the rituals of the *veintenas* prompted by the Spanish missionaries to do so, and deliberately omitted some details that they knew the Spaniards would not approve of (such as

cross-dressing or human sacrifices) (DiCesare 2008: 36). Finally, the paintings could also be records of particular performances in specific years, since many of the sources include glyphs with definite dates. In this case, performances in other years might have varied considerably (DiCesare 2008: 136). DiCesare convincingly showed that the Ochpaniztli festival depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl* could be dated to the particular year of *Two Reed* (most probably in 1506 or 1507), in which a major drought and other natural devastations swept the Central Highlands and caused serious famines. The Ochpaniztli celebration depicts many elements referring to these agricultural problems; these elements may have been present at all Ochpaniztli celebrations but could also be particular reactions to a concrete historical situation (DiCesare 2008: 123–153).

There were eighteen *veintena* festivals, one for each month of the solar year. The sources differ regarding which festival was the first performed each year and on which days of the month the main performances were held (Hassig 2001: 33). The *veintena* festivals were characterized by a combination of large public performances and household rites, such as fasting, self-sacrifice, feasting, preparing food offerings, or gathering fruits and vegetables. All together, it created "a rather seamless continuity of religious activity" (Berdan 2014: 244; see chapter one of the *Primeros Memoriales*, Sahagún 1993, and book two of the *Florentine Codex,* Sahagún 1981: 11).[2] Almost every monthly ceremony included temple offerings consisting of fresh harvest, prepared foods, flowers, capes, and small birds. Fasting and penances by both priests and laypeople was also prevalent, including autosacrifices and blood offerings.

The most spectacular sacrifices were those of human beings, which took many different forms. The slaying method and the treatment of the bodies typically depended on the *veintena*'s particular theme and the major deities worshiped. In many *veintenas*, special individuals were selected to act as impersonator of the respective deity—such as Tezcatlipoca, Chalchiuhtlicue, Xilonen, Centeotl, or Yacatecuhtli—and to be ritually sacrificed at the peak of their performances.

Typically, a large group of the populace participated in the staged public performances, with impressive processions moving to particular ritual places such as lakes or hilltops. Numerous musicians and singers staged elaborate ceremonies and accompanied skilled groups of dancers engaged in complex performances. People of all ages were involved, from experienced ritual participants and young men and women responsible for reenacting certain events and dances, to the children, for whom many rituals were particularly designed.

2 For systematized overviews of the festivals, see Nicholson (1971: table 4) and Berdan (2014: table 7.4).

Small children were also sacrificed in honor of Tlaloc to ensure sufficient rainfall for agricultural fertility. In some *veintenas*, particular groups, or *calpultin*, were responsible for specific parts of the ceremonies, for example, the craftspeople honoring Xochiquetzal or the *pochteca* honoring Yacatecuhtli.

Because of the sparse source information regarding details of the ceremonies, analyses of distinct *veintenas*, and particularly of their supposed meanings, are highly interpretative. Most problematically, the alphabetical descriptions often differ considerably from the pictorial depictions, as DiCesare (2008) convincingly demonstrated for the Ochpaniztli festival. Whereas most alphabetical accounts present Ochpaniztli as an agricultural harvest (or sowing) ritual, the pictorials emphasize quite a different theme: "human sexuality, midwifery, parturition, and healing and cleansing rites" (DiCesare 2008: 13). In the pictorials, the festival appears to be dedicated to the goddesses Toci and Teteoinnan, the maize goddess Chicomecoatl, and Tlazolteotl, and the "various items of sacred paraphernalia visualize epithets and metaphors directly describing cleansing and protective processes, incantations, and protective cosmic forces designed to rid the malefactor of pollution and reestablish balance and health" (DiCesare 2008: 90). Since the sweeping broom serves as the glyph for Ochpaniztli in many sources, this ritual activity rather than any agricultural reference was most probably regarded as the characteristic element of Ochpaniztli (DiCesare 2008: 38). DiCesare's results proved that interpretations of distinct *veintena* festivals should not rely solely on their alphabetical descriptions but should also consult the pictorial references and depictions. Having said that, our understanding of the festivals will presumably always remain limited because of the sparse information the sources provide and our imperfect ability to read the pictorial depictions.

3.4 *Theorizing Rituals*

Understanding the meaning of the *veintena* festivals will remain even more limited and speculative, be it their religious and mythological meaning, their aesthetic and symbolic meaning, or their cultural, social, and political meaning. Much of the academic literature characterizes the *veintenas* as a fixed set of annually repeating rituals with a kind of ahistorical and unchanging nature, an image most probably shaped by classical ritual theories (such as Lang 1887, Robertson Smith 1889, Eliade 1954). One prominent approach to interpreting the *veintenas* is to refer to the known Aztec or Mesoamerican myths (see, most poignantly, Graulich 1999 and 1997). This approach is based on the theory that rituals stand in close relation to the myths of the respective culture (see, e.g., Tylor 1871, Robertson Smith 1889, Frazer 1890, Harrison 1903). Another popular approach is to search for astronomical or agricultural references in the

veintenas. Following the latter approach, the *veintena* festivals are often presented as rituals predominantly concerned with agricultural fertility. A serious problem with this interpretation is the question of the leap year.

Scholars have been extensively debating whether Mesoamerican calendars knew leap years or not; even the early chroniclers were divided over this question (Graulich 1999: 64–68). Regarding the *veintenas*, the answer becomes immediately relevant: If the *veintenas* were reflections of agricultural concerns and the Nahuas did *not* know a leap year, how did they deal with the calendar getting slowly but progressively out of sync with the seasons year after year? Many of the scholars simply ignored this problem. Others, such as Olivier, acknowledged it, but held on to the interpretation of the *veintenas* as symbolizing agricultural concerns. According to Olivier (2003: 203–204), the Aztecs continued referring to the seasons in the rituals and to important issues such as sufficient rain at the right time of year, even if the symbolism no longer matched the actual seasons and timed agricultural needs.

Graulich proposed a different solution to the logical dilemma of the leap year. Convinced that the *veintenas did* contain seasonal and agricultural references and that the Mexica did *not* use a leap year, he attempted to reconstruct the potential first and "original" symbolism of the festivals. In his view, the festival of *Atlcahualo* (ceasing of water) makes the most sense if related to the end of the wet season and *Toxcatl* (our drought) if related to the dry season. If we fix these two festivals to the appropriate time of year, the rest of them perfectly match the actual seasons in the Central Highlands. Thus, Ochpaniztli (sweeping of the road) pointed to the winds introducing the coming of the rainy season, while *Quecholli*, Panquetzaliztli, and Toxcatl, festivals of the solar gods, coincided with the summer and winter solstices (Graulich 1992: 22, 1999: 74–75). Taking this match as the starting point, Graulich calculated the annual shift of the festivals due to the missing leap year. As a result, the "original" festivals must have been designed by cultural predecessors of the Mexica (most probably the Toltecs) in the late seventh century. In Graulich's view (1999: 80–85), the Mexica had simply adopted and carried on this tradition without worrying about the increasing incoherence between the agricultural symbolism and the actual seasons.

While Graulich's interpretation of the *veintenas* and his calculations are generally convincing, they imply that somebody invented a complete set of annual performances at some point in history. This fixed set was then carried on more or less unchanged by many generations and through the rise and fall of civilizations across more than eight centuries. This idea is only imaginable if rituals are understood as stable sets of activities the ritual participants valued exactly because of their unchanging nature and truthfulness to some original

culture. Recent ritual studies, however, have shown that rituals are, in contrast, highly dynamic and changing phenomena (see Michaels et al. 2010).

Another highly popular interpretation of Nahua rituals is based on Eliade's religious theory. According to Eliade, rituals are reenactments of a mythical, primordial past within a cyclical time conception. Rituals revitalize the present by returning to a sacred time of eternal transcendence (*in illo tempore*). They are performed preferably at places of frequent *hierophanies* (appearances of the sacred in the profane), most favorably at the *axis mundi* connecting the earth with the heavens (Eliade 1954, 1959, 1963). Applying this theory to the Nahuas, the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan becomes the *axis mundi* representing the sacred tree that holds up the skies and enables the flow of energy between the different layers of the skies and underworlds. Although Nahua cosmovision envisioned four trees at the cardinal points and none in the center, this interpretation nevertheless goes well with the fact that the Nahuas considered the Templo Mayor as a representation of Coatepec Mountain, the mythical place of Huitzilopochtli's birth and his victory against his malevolent sister, Coyolxauhqui. This myth was politically most relevant for the identity of the Mexica as warriors and legitimate rulers of Central Mexico. Applying Eliade's theory, the ritual enactment of this myth at the Templo Mayor fundamentally revitalized time itself and life on earth by returning to primordial times (Carrasco and Sessions 1998: 77–92, Carrasco 2012: 74, 2014: 91–98; see also, e.g., Navarrete 2011: 186–190).

Although the Nahuas had no Eliadean conception of cyclical time or of a primordial past characterized as a sacred, eternal transcendence, we know that the past in general played some role in their ritual performances. Thus, many of the *veintena* dances reenacted Mexica migration stories and historical battles (Scolieri 2013: 18). Furthermore, exemplary historical acts by previous generations were commemorated and used as linguistic metaphors (Umberger 1987) and as behavioral models (López Austin 1973: 159–160). Because of the scarcity of sources, we cannot say to what degree Nahua priests and politicians in charge legitimized their actions through ritual recursiveness to the past (Harth and Michaels 2003). In many cases, people had concrete social and political motivations to perform rituals, such as the impression and intimidation of enemies or subjected polities and their rulers. They also reacted to very local events and needs ranging from political issues to agricultural problems (DiCesare 2008: 163; see also Hassig 2001).

Clendinnen proposed an alternative interpretation of Aztec *veintena* rituals by emphasizing the social and emotional effects of the performances. By invoking strong emotions and moods, the rituals provoked not only addictive sensory stimulations but also the extinction of the carefully crafted Nahua self.

Thus, the large-scale performances were also subversive to the strong social distinctions of Aztec society. According to Clendinnen (1991: 239, see also 244), the efficacy of the *veintena* rituals lay foremost in their being "aesthetic, expressive, interrogative, and creative" by bringing into action a countless play of references.

Many ritual theorists have been overly worried about the problem of ritual efficacy. Do rituals work primarily on a symbolic level or is their efficacy aesthetical or performative? Are ritual utterings rational or symbolic, expressive, illocutionary, or meta-communicational (Austin 1962, Searle 1969, Rappaport 1979, Habermas 1981)? Does the intentionality of the ritual celebrant influence the efficacy of the respective ritual (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994)? How do ritual participants themselves conceptualize ritual efficacy (Quack and Töbelmann 2010, Sax, Quack, and Weinhold 2010)? Considering all these questions, it seems important to emphasize that the Nahuas apparently considered their ritual performances as instrumental and highly effective—even if any particular performance could fail to produce the expected effects. Using the arguments Epstein (2010) proposed on the rationality involved in divination, it is my impression that the Nahuas had rationally convincing reasons for performing specific performances and reasonable explanations and justifications of the ontology and efficacy of the practice in general. The expected outcomes of the rituals were, among others, the nourishment of the earth and sun necessary to ensure sustaining humanity in return, the continuing movement of the Fifth Era and the start of a new calendar cycle, or the counteraction of any imbalances of cosmic forces. The sweeping up of straw and dirt was actually considered to counterbalance the destructive forces of *tlazolli* on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Similarly, the drawing of blood with straw and the subsequent burning of the bloodied straw transferred the *tlazolli* of the ritual celebrant first to the straw and then through fire to its proper place. Heart sacrifices transferred the *teyolia* energy of the victim to the deities and fed it back into the cosmic cycle of energy. As Maffie (2014: 195) argued, this act worked in Nahua imagination like a blood transfusion between human beings. As a result, performing a heart sacrifice was a rational act chosen because of its necessity for human survival.

As a concluding remark, the many different levels of rituals and points of departure for their interpretation should not be played off against each other. Most probably all of them were present in one way or another, and the Nahuas themselves may have been aware of at least some of them. There is no reason to believe that Nahua intellectuals and rulers were *not* aware of the potential social and political effects of the large-scale performances; rather, they most likely intentionally used these. Therefore, we should avoid applying to the Nahuas a concept of rituals separating acting and thinking, a concept

that typically reserves the act of thinking to the academic (modern, Western) scholar while it attributes acting (without thinking) to the others, in this case to Nahua ritual celebrants (see Bell 1992). The problem with many of the approaches discussed is that they have a tendency to single out only one of the many potential levels of ritual meaning. In the case of the Nahuas, they also do little justice to the immense complexity and intricacy of their ritual performances. In addition, it is also reasonable to apply our recent knowledge about the multifaceted dynamics of rituals (Harth and Michaels 2003, Michaels et al. 2010) to the culture of the Nahuas and to dismiss the idea that their rituals were fixed sets of activities that remained stable and unchanged over the course of many decades or even centuries. As DiCesare concluded, the many different sources illuminate

> the fundamentally open-ended, changing, and changeable nature of central Mexican calendrical celebrations. These elaborate public dramas were dynamic and malleable, shifting and responding to ethnic, local, environmental, and temporal needs, and although they were enacted to engage the divine, they functioned in service to the needs of the humans. (DiCesare 2008: 153)

Thus, in contrast to the images of Nahua rituals as rigid and inflexible cultural systems—an image that has been painted since the time of the first Spanish chroniclers—"innumerable possibilities for celebrating the annual, cyclical local feasts" must have existed (DiCesare 2008: 153). Contemporary Mesoamerican and Central Mexican rituals are, without a doubt, spontaneous, creative, and ever-changing. If they were not, contemporary ritual celebrants claim, they would contradict common sense, since every situation requires a different ritual reaction and activity (Monaghan 2000: 32). Many indicators in the sources on precolonial Mesoamerica point to the fact that this was not so different five hundred years ago.

Nahua public rituals were performances in the literal sense, containing a large number of different activities enacted by many individuals and several groups of people. They were large-scale events affecting participants in a comprehensive way, stimulating not only different human senses but also many experiences of pleasure and—even more—of pain. These issues are discussed in the following section.

4 Involving the Senses and Aesthetic Media

Nahua religion was a heavily sensorial matter stimulating all kinds of body senses and experiences. The *veintena* festivals must have been particularly impressive in this regard, since they were multimedial events catching the attention of all the bodily senses, from vision and hearing to smelling, tasting, touching, and body composure and movement. There were many things to see: the deity impersonators with their impressive regalia, the beautifully adorned ritual celebrants, the priests painted black and with tangled hair, the colors of the flowers and offerings, the groups of dancers performing complex choreographies, the deity statues carried through the streets, the fires sending smoke to the skies, and the lights of the torches at night. There were so many things to hear: the songs and instrumental music, the sounds of warriors (mock) fighting, the cries of the sacrificial victims or their silence as they fulfilled their destinies in mute composure, the sounds of many voices talking and whispering or pausing in awe and holding their breaths, and the ambient noise, which must have been extreme. The smell of masses of incense and of food recently prepared, the aroma of the many flowers offered to the deities, the pungent stench of human blood and burned flesh, the perfumes of nobles and the body scents of freshly washed commoners, or the sharp whiff of sweat emanating from the victims, warriors, and dancers. The flavors of all sorts of lavishly prepared food and drinks and, on some occasions, of pulque; the rare taste of human blood and flesh in ritual meals. The body contact with many other people standing and moving in masses, the touch of the deity impersonators and their regalia, the handling of flowers and offerings, the feeling of preparing the deity doughs and images with the hands. The body movement in elaborate dances and the long walks in processions to the countryside and up hillsides.

The *veintenas* were also characterized by sensory deprivation, abstinence, and fasting, which stood in stark contrast to the sensory overstimulation, indulgence, and feasting. They were distinguished by the contrast between the pleasures of dancing, singing, and feasting on the one hand and the pains of autosacrifice and human sacrifice on the other hand. Most probably our imagination captures only faint shadows of how participating in the festivals actually felt. Generally, the sensory impressions must have been much stronger than we think, since only traces of the sensory stimulation survived in the written sources and archaeological remains. Temples, for example, were painted in bright colors, statues clothed in brightly colored costumes, and everything was filled with perishable offerings like flowers and food. Even the rudiments of the songs, which are carried down to us only in their alphabetical transcriptions, strongly evoke a “daze of images of sound, scent, colour, movement, touch”

(Clendinnen 1991: 222). Some scholars have characterized Nahua ceremonies as (generally) solemn, following Durán's description of one ceremony as being full of solemnity (Batalla Rosado and Rojas 2008: 170; see also Navarrete 2011: 191). This sounds like a projection of modern concepts of rituals as being grave, earnest, and serious and of a modern habitus of being quiet and still when confronted with "the sacred." It is much more likely that the Nahuas played with the complete range of atmospheres and moods in their different ceremonies, with some of them being solemn and others playful and ecstatic, joyful or painful, and with many of them most probably quite chaotic and overwhelming.

The visual was apparently an important category in Nahua rituals, which strongly contrasted the visible and the invisible (Leibsohn 2007: 396). While colonial Christianity exhibited its images everywhere, "native divinities were usually concealed in the darkness of sanctuaries, far from the crowds, their visibility periodic and subject to rules whose infraction was the equivalent of a 'sacrilege'" (Gruzinski 2001: 36). Vision held a high position in the Nahua cultural hierarchy of the senses. The major role of visually perceptible arts and crafts contributing to the nobles' beautiful clothing and jewelry and to the elaborate costumes of ritual celebrants points toward this fact (Leibsohn 2007: 395). Brundage was so impressed by this importance on visual perception that he believed it "played the same role in Aztec religion as does dogma in the history of western religions" (1979: 52). Indigenous manuscripts contain many eye glyphs, and "human eyes, and by extension, human vision, were bound into a series of metaphoric and metonymic relationships that implicated representation in sight" (Leibsohn 2007: 398). Molina's dictionary includes a multitude of terms that refer to seeing and, by extension, terms linking vision with insight and knowledge (see the analysis by Leibsohn 2007: 400).

The pictorial writing system by itself strongly emphasized the act of seeing. While it tells us little about the thoughts, ideas, and motivations of the protagonists, it strongly presents visual aspects of individual identities, places, or situations. The Central Mexican pictorial sources place particular emphasis on the attire, ceremonial implements, adornments, and paraphernalia of deities and deity impersonators, sometimes depicted elaborately, sometimes abbreviated. A simple broom, for example, could evoke the complete range of qualities associated with Tlazolteotl (DiCesare 2008: 90). These rich associations with qualities, emotions, activities, cognitive concepts, and cosmic relationships can be quickly perceived and imagined by a literate Indigenous reader of pictorial writing and much more easily than if they had been recorded in alphabetical writing (see Boone 2000: 86).

The attire of Nahua deities expresses their qualities and plays a major role in their identification. It is depicted vividly in the painted manuscripts (see, e.g., Sahagún 1997: 93–114) and used in rituals to characterize and materialize the respective deity. The apparel decorating statues and human deity impersonators consisted of specific mundane and ritual objects; animal parts such as skins, furs, beaks, and claws; particular body paintings and jewelry; and a characteristic costume that included garments, capes, and headdresses. The costumes were made from different materials; in addition to several types of cloth, paper was used for many items, including streamers (*amatetehuitl*), neck ornaments (*tlaquechpaniotl* and *amacuexpalli*), or caps (*amacalli*) (Arnold 1995: 32–33). Incense bags were sometimes made from paper and decorated with representations of the jaguar, ocelot, or duck. Paper streamers and banners were also carried in processions and by the children who would be sacrificed at the festival of Atlcahualo, who were accordingly called "human paper streamers" (*tlacatetehuitl*) (Arnold 1995: 37).

Statues were made from many different materials, primarily wood and stone, but also paper, rubber, or particular types of dough (Heyden 2005). Some deity statues were elaborately carved and presented numerous attributes of the respective deity. The surviving statue of Coatlicue, for example, has fanged faces at the elbows and clawed feet, wears a stony skirt of interwoven serpents and skulls, and has a necklace of flayed hands and sacrificed hearts.[3] In general, Nahua deity statues do not present realistic depictions of human body parts such as muscles. They might appear to modern eyes as "hieratic 'poems in stone'" (Horcasitas 1980: xviii) or as naked and clumsy (Pohl and Lyons 2010: 34). However, they were rarely used without apparel, which formed the actual "center of interest" (Townsend 1979: 23), and lavishly decorated with jewelry, precious feathers, flowers, and specific objects (Clendinnen 1991: 288). This Indigenous practice was carried on far into colonial times, with the only difference that the statues presented Christian saints rather than Indigenous deities. Some churches even had a sort of dressing room for its saint. The Catholic Church tried in vain to erase this custom but gave up this mission in the seventeenth century (Clendinnen 1990: 127, Farago 1995: 15). The practice has continued in Mexico to this day; when I visited the church San Juan Bautista in Cuauhtinchan in spring 2013, its Jesus statue was wearing a wig and a skirt.

In the case of both deity statues and ritual deity impersonators, their costume and paraphernalia were not regarded as an addition that merely referenced their identity, it was perceived as an important part of the deities

3 "Foto del Día," Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Gobierno Mexicano, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.inah.gob.mx/es/foto-del-dia/6645-coatlicue>.

themselves. Some scholars have struggled with this conception. Brundage, for example, essentially differentiated between the deity and its regalia by declaring that the regalia was "adored *as if* it were the god himself" (Brundage 1979: 52, emphasis added). According to his interpretation, the masks of the deities were believed to contain power only because the power of the respective deity had been transferred to it.

Roberta H. and Peter T. Markman made a similar distinction between the deity and its costume in their work *Mesoamerican Masks of the Spirit* (1989). Inspired by the Joseph Campbell school of religion, they understand masks as universal symbols for the relationship between matter and spirit, between the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible (P.T. Markman and R.H. Markman 1989: xix). It is my impression, however, that the Nahuas regarded neither the mask nor other parts of the deity paraphernalia as a symbol or as something separate from the deity. Rather, these material objects were direct presentations and parts of the deity. The object's material features were materializations of the deity's essential qualities and character traits. In many cases, this consubstantiality was easily visible to human eyes in the material object's surface appearance or "skin" as well as its form, color, and texture. For the Nahuas, the skin was an important carrier of the essential nature of a living being or material object, be it the actual skin of a human being or animal, or clothing and paraphernalia as some kind of "outer skin" (Monaghan 2000: 26, 29). If shamans transformed into their animal *nahualli*, they literally covered or cloaked themselves (*nahualtia.nico*) with the skin of their animal counterpart (Martínez González 2011: 176–178). This understanding of the skin as a carrier of the essential nature of a living being is a basic cornerstone of the concept of the *teixiptla*, the deity impersonator, as discussed in the following section.

The Nahua concepts and practices around the sacred bundle contain a similar idea. Sacred bundles appear to have been extremely important in Nahua religion, even though the alphabetical sources contain only scant information about them, most probably because of their secret character (Bassett 2015: 163, Olivier 2007: 285; see also Olivier 2006). Nevertheless, the sacred bundles are frequently depicted in pictorial images: the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*, for example, shows no less than fourteen sacred bundles (Olivier 2007: 284). The Indigenous term for the sacred bundle, *tlaquimilolli*, defines it as something wrapped or bundled in which the wrappings envelop, shroud, and conceal the contents (Bassett 2015: 162). The Nahuas seemingly thought that to open the bundles involved great danger for ordinary mortals (Olivier 2007: 287). The bundles contained parts of human remains, such as bones and ashes; stick bodies; precious stones; specific objects, such as flints or mirrors; and woven garments or animal hides (Bassett 2015: 165, 178). The *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan*

No. 2 further depicts arrow shafts, eagle feathers, and down (Olivier 2007: 286). These contents were wrapped up with covers from cloth or animal hides. Enwrapping the relics of primordial ancestors and tutelary deities, the bundles were similar to cremation bundles and contained the remnants of the dead persons or objects representing them: their skin, ashes, bones, heart energy, and possessions (Bassett 2015: 172–173, 191). In many cases, the objects essentially materialized an important aspect of the respective deity. As such, the bundle was regarded as a physical manifestation of the deity and a "(re)collection of the god's constitutive qualities" (Bassett 2015: 165). The bundle of Tezcatlipoca, for example, most probably contained an obsidian smoking mirror, which was associated with his identity as master of transformations and divination (Bassett 2015: 183–188).

According to Nahua belief, the sacred bundles had been born immediately after the creation of the Fifth Era and the autosacrifice of the deities (Bassett 2015: 173). They are depicted frequently in the Mexica migration accounts and play a leading role in the events (Bassett 2015: 163–164). Whenever the Mexica settled at a new place—even if they knew they would stay only a short time—the first thing they did was build a protective temple for the sacred bundle (Bassett 2015: 165). Because the bundles were materializations of the deities, they were also believed to have sense perception and the ability to communicate with humans. Huitzilopochtli directed the Mexica on their migration path in his form as a sacred bundle. He appeared in his full, anthropomorphic figure only if more direct action was required of him (Bassett 2015: 178, 181). The highly valued sacred bundles served as a source for counsel as well as a devotional focus for the community (Bassett 2015: 173). Apparently, they participated in many rituals and received sacrifices and offerings (Olivier 2007: 295–297). They also played important roles in the New Fire Ceremony and in state rituals, such as the foundation of a new polity, the inauguration of a new temple, the accession of rulers to the throne, and the training of human *teixiptlame* (pl. of *teixiptla*) (Bassett 2015: 165, Olivier 2007: 301).

In sum, the *tlaquimilolli* were important material manifestations of the deities. As such, they were similar to the *teixiptlame* but emphasized their materiality rather than their aspect of being living entities. Whereas a *teixiptla* typically acted in public, the *tlaquimilolli* was closely guarded and protected from the public in the temples, and many rituals involving them were performed in secret (Bassett 2015: 190).

5 The Concept of the *Teixiptla*

The *teixiptla* is a crucial aspect of Nahua religion and played a prominent role in the public *veintena* performances. A close understanding of this Indigenous concept, including its notion of representation, will enable us to interpret Nahua semiotics in general.

The *teixiptla* is typically translated as an "image," "delegate," or "representative" (Molina 1880, Siméon 1977) and has two main derivatives, the personalized *ixiptla* (representative, impersonator, substitute) and the abstract *ixiptlayotl* (representation, image, likeness) (Bassett 2015: 56). The term's components are the *ixtli* (eye, face, surface, personality), the root **xip* referring to peeling and flaying and to the skin or a cover, the prefix *te* referring to a person possessing the other components of the word, and the suffix *tla* causing something to be or to be characterized by what the source stems of the word imply. In its entirety, *teixiptla* could be directly translated as "someone's surface-flayed thing" (Bassett 2015: 132) or, more freely, as "something being characterized by someone's flayed skin personality" (for comparison, see the translations by López Austin 1973: 119, Martínez González 2011: 290, Maffie 2014: 113). The possessor is, in most cases, a particular Nahua deity; therefore, the *teixiptla* is something being characterized by this deity's personality as present in the flayed skin.

Originally, the term most probably designated a person wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim, a person thus characterized by this flayed skin. The skin itself was considered one of the most important parts of the human victim. It transported the energies and qualities of the different animistic entities, which had become strongly present in the skin through the victim's sacrificial death. In a further elaboration and expansion of the concept, the "skin" also included face paintings, headdresses, clothing, costumes, and paraphernalia. Consequently, not only were the people wearing the literal and flayed skin of sacrificial victims considered as *teixiptlame* but also those wearing the particular costumes and indexical markers of the deities. These "inner" and "outer" skins came to physically represent a particular deity by manifesting the set of qualities that the deity characterized (Bassett 2015: 133–138).

Therefore, the *teixiptla* is something like a "localized embodiment" of the deity (Bassett 2015: 130, 133) or, more precisely, a localized manifestation of the deity and a concentration of its qualities and forces. It made the qualities materially manifest, visible, and tangible to human beings, who depended on their sense perceptions to understand these particular qualities. Thus, the skin and the ritual costumes and adornments "functioned in this system as multivalent visual descriptors, evoking a variety of realms, including cosmic and

natural phenomena as well as complex epithets and metaphors" (DiCesare 2008: 55). The depictions of the anthropomorphic deities in the pictorial paintings served as vehicles for displaying the relevant "skin" of the respective deity (DiCesare 2008: 58, 159). In this way, the human *teixiptla* was a human glyph, "for both *ixiptla* and 'painting' were intended to manifest the divine presence" (Gruzinski 2001: 51).

Teixiptlame came in many different forms. The deity manifested locally in statues and objects of wood or stone, in straw bundles, or in figurines made from dough (DiCesare 2008: 55, Bassett 2015: 130). In some *veintenas*, a sort of dough made from amaranth seeds (*chicalotl*) and formed into an anthropomorphic figure played an important part in the ceremonies (Sahagún 1978: III, 6). In addition, more abstract *teixiptlame* included vegetables like maize cobs or painted glyphs like day signs (Clendinnen 1991: 251). One of the most important forms of a *teixiptla* was the living human being. This could be a *tlatoani* or a high priest presenting a deity in a particular ritual for a certain period of time, after which the deity representative returned to their normal human identity. In many cases, individuals with special features were chosen to act as *teixiptla* and ritually sacrificed at the climax of this performance.

In all this, the efficacy of the ritual depended on the process of manufacturing an object *teixiptla* respectively on the transformation from a normal human being into a deity impersonator. The Nahuas expended considerable time and effort in these acts and every detail carried meaning (Gruzinski 2001: 51, Clendinnen 1991: 257, Bassett 2015: 157–158). The sources contain little information on how these transformations exactly worked. For human *teixiptlame*, the moment in which a person donned a flayed skin or a costume may have been the moment of essential transformation. For object *teixiptlame*, creating the eyes by inserting highly reflective stones might have been similar to Hindu eye-opening ceremonies, as Molly H. Bassett (2015: 145–153) suggested. The eyes were an important medium of the *teixiptla*, as they transported the deity's energies in concentrated form (López Austin 1973: 124). In any case, the transformation of a person or object into the new identity of the *teixiptla* was considered paramount. Only through this transformation was the *teixiptla* seen and experienced as the respective deity and receive the agency to actively see and act (Bassett 2015: 132–141).

Most scholars have imagined the *teixiptla* as a container to be filled with divine energy or as a "living receptacle" (López Austin 1988b: 357) to be possessed by a deity or its qualities and energies. This interpretation ontologically discriminates between the container and the content, between the human being as representative and the deity as the represented, between the signifier and the signified. It imagines the deities as existing independently of their

impersonators or even as being essentially transcendent and merely incarnating themselves in the material world. However, as argued earlier, the Nahuas conceptualized the deities as personalizations of essentially immanent forces and qualities. Regarding the *teixiptla*, Boone (1989) suggested in her analysis of the images of Huitzilopochtli that the Nahuas did not imagine their deities as existing as spiritual entities independent from their material form, the *teixiptla*. Similarly, Gruzinski emphasized that the Nahuas did not "distinguish between divine essence and material support. It was neither an appearance nor a visual illusion harkening back to elsewhere, or a beyond" (Gruzinski 2001: 51). In contrast, the concept of the *teixiptla* suggested an essential "immanence of the forces surrounding us" by presenting a localized, intensified form of the respective deity (Gruzinski 2001: 51). Following this line of interpretation, Maffie concluded:

> The metaphysical relationship between teotl and teotl's ixiptla, therefore, is one of strict *identity*. Ixiptla and teotl are numerically one and the same. Teotl's medium of presentation is itself. There is neither ontological nor constitutional distinction between representation (signifier) and represented (signified). (Maffie 2014: 114, emphasis in original)

Although the *teixiptla* is thus identical to the respective deity, the deity is not limited in its existence to the temporarily existing *teixiptla*. Rather, the *teixiptla* is a temporal and local concentration of the deity, which could simultaneously be present in multiple *teixiptla* figures and in other material beings and entities (Clendinnen 1991: 249).

Translating the concept of the *teixiptla* as an "image" is highly misleading, as Gruzinski convincingly showed in his analysis of colonial misunderstandings (2001: 64–65, 2002: 173). The Franciscan missionaries adopted the Indigenous term *teixiptla* to refer both to the painted anthropomorphic images of Christian saints and to verbal and visual metaphors used to describe the saints, such as the sun. In this way, they imagined the painted image and the sun as being *teixiptlame*—images—of a saint. The Natives, however, understood the saint and his painting as the *teixiptla* of the sun, that is, as the anthropomorphic form of the qualities and forces of the sun. According to Gruzinski's analysis, the Franciscans in early colonial Mexico understood images merely as didactic tools and mnemonic devices and as representations of the divine presence in the saint. As a result, while the Franciscans distinguished between the signifier and the signified, the Native concept of the *teixiptla* did not.

In my view, imagining the *teixiptla* as an "image" as well as an "embodiment," "impersonator," or "representative" of a deity, as expressed in most scholarly

literature, is consequently misleading. All these terms associate a substantial ontological difference between the image and what it depicts. The Indigenous understanding is apparent in the simple example of the maize *teixiptla*: the maize cob was not a representation of the maize deity but its very body. Xilonen was the goddess of the young maize cob; she was identical to the young maize cob and to the particular qualities and forces that made it what it was. Similarly, the human–maize analogy used in many sources most probably was not meant as a metaphor but was "simply a statement of a perceptually unobvious but unremarkable fact: that human flesh and maize kernels were regarded as the same substance" (Clendinnen 1991: 251–252). Thus, the *teixiptla* is not an image but "that which enables the god to present aspects of himself" (Clendinnen 1991: 253). The material form drew certain qualities of the respective deity to attention and helped human beings to sense, experience, and understand them. By sensorially experiencing the particular figures, costumes, and paraphernalia of the respective deity, human beings could recognize, realize, and comprehend the divine qualities that made these things what they were. In rituals, participants could directly and intimately experience deities and, what is more, even interact with them.

Comparing the *teixiptla* with other manifestations of the deities, it was the *teixiptla*, in particular, that made their intensive sensorially experience possible. A conceptual difference exists between the *teixiptla* and objects of intensified reality, such as precious stones, iridescent bird plumage, or extraordinarily graceful animals like the jaguar. To reiterate, some natural objects worthy of special veneration presented reality in an intensified way. Because of this feature, human beings could sensorially experience in them the underlying structure of reality and the particular qualities of *teotl* that they presented more clearly than other objects. Creating art and rituals, human beings could also accentuate the natural beauty of things and intensify their radiating reality. The *teixiptla* could be interpreted as such an object of art or aspect of ritual, in which the intensity and clarity of its qualities and forces was emphasized through its skin, costume, and paraphernalia. However, several differences exist between the two concepts. First, the *teixiptla* was—as Clendinnen (1991: 252) analyzed—never found in a natural condition but always made, shaped, and trained by human hands. Second, to become an effective *teixiptla*, the object or person in consideration needed to undergo a formal process of transformation from its former identity into the *teixiptla*. Finally, *teixiptlame* were only temporary (Clendinnen 1991: 252). Objects such as dough figures were eaten or returned to their normal environment. Human *teixiptlame* similarly transformed back into their normal existence or were sacrificed and their energy given back to the cosmos.

The difference between the *teixiptla* and the human *nahualli* and its animal counterpart is much harder to discern. Both concepts refer to the idea of coessence, to the idea of *teotl* realizing itself in different layers of reality with particular forms, colors, or textures. In addition, both terms refer etymologically to the motif of skin, covering, and costume (see Martínez González 2011: 290) and thus emphasize the surface as an important carrier of the essential nature of an entity. Deities could have *nanahualtin*, that is, manifestations in a particular, primarily animal form, and they could have *teixiptlame*, manifestations in object or human form. However, images or statues were never *nanahualtin*, only *teixiptlame*; similarly, sacrificial victims were always *teixiptlame* and not *nahualli* shamans. A priest in an animal costume could be the *teixiptla* of the respective animal and its deity, while the *nahualli* shaman who transformed into an animal is believed to have transformed into his or her *nahualli* (and not into the deity) (Martínez González 2011: 291).

The data in this matter is highly complex and the sources in some cases seem to be contradictory. Most probably, the Nahuas did not care to reflect on these issues and clearly distinguish between the two concepts. If they did, we simply do not have enough available evidence to understand the differences. We can only discern some tendencies: Whereas both Martínez González (2011: 291) and Bassett (2015: 66) argued that the *nahualli* is a subgroup of the *teixiptla*, I would assert that both are different forms that manifest certain qualities and coessences and emphasize different aspects. In many cases, the *nahualli* is an animated subject standing in a relationship of coessence with another animated subject in the cosmos. The *nahualli* is a subject independent from its human counterpart. I am not sure whether a deity's *nahualli* is also independent of the deity, since we have analyzed that the deities did not exist independently of their material manifestation. That means, while the deity is not independent of its animal *nahualli*—a construction that would imply the deity existed on a transcendent, spiritual level—the anthropomorphic figure of the deity is imagined as independent of its animal *nahualli*. Accordingly, the relationship between the two forms of the deity is imagined like the relationship between a shaman and its animal counterpart. The *teixiptlame*, in distinction, are essentially made, shaped, or trained by humans and only transform into something else in a particular place for a certain time period. Therefore, the *teixiptla* is not the coessential counterpart of the deity it presents but completely turns into the deity at that time and place and loses its former identity as material object or human being. Whereas the *nahualli* maintains its identity and thus presents natural relationships between subjects, the *teixiptla* transforms from its former identity into the sole manifestation of the respective deity, intensifying its qualities and concentrating them in an exact focus point.

There are also relevant functional differences between the *nahualli* and the *teixiptla*; maybe these were considered as much more important than ontological differences. The *nahualli* typically acted in shamanic contexts, with the shamans using the insights of their animal counterpart to better understand and manipulate reality, for example, in cases of their clients' illnesses. Similarly to the shamans, the *teixiptla* influenced the balance of cosmic forces but did so in a different way and with effects on a larger cosmic scale. In contrast to the *nahualli*, the *teixiptla* also acted primarily in large-scale public performances rather than in private contexts. *Teixiptlame* made the deities present for a large group of the population. In this way, one of the central functions of the rituals involving *teixiptlame* might have been to make the deities sensorially manifest and tangible and to give ordinary, non-shaman people a possibility to interact with them.

CHAPTER 7

Expressing Reality in Language: Nahua Linguistic Theory

In Nahua society, language was an important cultural medium for communicating, shaping thoughts and experiences, creating and forming knowledge about reality, and expressing this knowledge. Like people in any cultural system, the Nahuas also followed a specific explicit or implicit theory about the relationship between language and reality. This chapter sets out to analyze the relevance of orality in Nahua culture and to extrapolate the culture's mainly implicit language theory. To this purpose, I first describe the powerful oral tradition of the Nahuas and then deconstruct the scholarly invention of Nahua "literature," which was based primarily on the songs in two early colonial manuscripts, the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España.* Confronted with the highly complex structure of Nahua linguistic expression in these songs, I proceed by debating specific characteristics of Nahuatl that reflect a distinctive way of thinking. This leads us to examine in more detail Nahua imagery and its relationship to extralinguistic reality in contrast to European language theories.

1 Nahua Oral Tradition

1.1 *Rhetorics*

The Nahuas cultivated a strong oral tradition and placed great emphasis on elegant speech and rhetoric; Mesoamericanist James Lockhart underlined this fact, saying, "no culture ever took more joy in words" (1993a: 375). The oral tradition was known under the terms *tlatolli*, "word," "discourse," or "narration," and *tlatollotl*, best translated as "word-memory" or "discourse-memory," referring to the oral and written discursive configurations and to the speaking competence of (specialized) members of the community (Mignolo 2010: 142). Rhetorics were one of the most important forms of cultural expression among the Nahuas, and they were taught in both the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* schools. However, the *macehuallatolli*, the language of the commoners, differed considerably from the *tecpillatolli*, the elegant speech of the nobles (López Austin 1967b: 1, Marcus 1992: xviii). All nobles were expected to show great virtuosity in the strongly formalized speech, with the *tlatoani*, the "speaker," in the lead.

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The rhetoric of delivering speeches, reciting poetry, and performing songs were considered a precious art form. Accordingly, the speech scrolls in pictorial manuscripts were colored in a rich blue-green, the color "of the incomparably precious" (Clendinnen 1991: 220). Some one hundred samples of the most beautiful formal speeches and prayers—supplemented by a list of proverbs, riddles, and metaphors— were recorded by the Nahua intellectuals working with Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and transmitted to us in book six of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1969). Further speeches were transcribed in a manuscript written by Andrés de Olmos in 1535 (Olmos, León-Portilla, and Silva Galeana 2011) and in *The Bancroft Dialogues* (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987) written by Horacio Carochi in the early seventeenth century (see Sell 2010: 186). The most important and illuminating sources for the songs, however, are two early colonial manuscripts, the *Cantares Mexicanos* (Bierhorst 1985b) and the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* (Bierhorst 2009).[1]

The many different genres of pre-Hispanic Nahuatl generally elude European categories in style, format, and function (Lockhart 1993a: 374). The most important genres mentioned in the sources are the *cuicatl* (songs), the *tenonotzaliztli* (narratives about some [past] event or person), the *huehuenonotzaliztli* (narratives as told by an elder person) (Mignolo 2010: 143), the *teotlatolli* (the "divine" words telling "the deeds of the gods, the origins, cosmogony, cults and rituals"), and finally the *huehuetlatolli* ("the ancient discourse of wisdom including metaphysics and philosophy, theology, norms of behavior, and principles of education delivered by the elders in very elegant speeches") (Gruzinski 1993: 11; see also Sullivan 1986: 10 and León-Portilla 1985). The *huehuetlatolli* were held in particularly high esteem (see Navarrete 2011: 191).

In addition, the linguistic genre known as the *nahuallatolli* was the strongly ritualized language that shamans, diviners, and healers used in ritual invocations (López Austin 1967b). According to López Austin's understanding (1988b: 346), this was "the language of the hidden," addressing the unseen, yet utterly real and material, nature of entities sheltered from everyday perception. In its obscurity and rich complexity, this language was thought to reveal the essential quality of the entity addressed better than everyday language, and thus better able to manipulate these forces (Boone 2007: 4, Gruzinski 1993: 158–161). Because of its strong formulaic character, invocational power, and manipulative intention, the *nahuallatolli* is sometimes called a language of "magic." This European category, however, is more misleading than helpful for understanding this phenomenon of Nahua language theory, since it projects an assessment of its truth value (in most cases a negative one, seen from the perspective

1 Going forward, I use the shortened *Romances* for the latter manuscript.

of modern Western sciences). The Nahuas believed the *nahuallatolli* to directly address the essential nature of things. The shamans could "work" on this "invisible substance" using their own "invisible and well-developed animistic bodies" (López Austin 1993: 153). Transmitted to us in two seventeenth-century treatises transcribed by Ruiz de Alarcón (1984) and Jacinto de la Serna (1953), the *nahuallatolli* was almost untranslatable for these two Spaniards and largely remains so to this day (see López Austin 1967b).

1.2 *The Performative Context*

The oral presentation of the public genres of the Nahua oral tradition was typically part of multimedia performances. These included texts and images read and expounded on, along with singing, music, dancing, and ritual offerings in "highly complex, multidimensional constellations" (Navarrete 2011: 176). Some of the Europeans confronted with these performances in early colonial times noted these multimedia interrelations. Most of the remaining sources, however, simply project European categories separating text and speech from song, music, and performance. The manuscripts of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*, for example, contain only rudimentary cues to the musical and performative aspects of the songs. Consequently, the contents of these manuscripts were compared to European (written) "poetry" and "literature" (see Tomlinson 2007: 20–23). The Nahuas, however, did not separate "speech" from "song," even though they

> seem to have discovered in their experiences of language the potential for a graded series of manners of utterances. The gradations typically include such hard-to-delimit things as plain speech, self-consciously formal, rhetorical, or ritual speech, incantation, chant, formalized shouts and cries, and full-fledged song. (Tomlinson 1996: 262)

Accordingly, pictorial manuscripts display differences between rather plain and extremely ornate speech volutes. The distinctions in Nahua forms of expression have largely remained neglected by scholars thus far, most probably as a result of disciplinary fragmentation into speech, text, music, and dance (Tomlinson 2007: 3–4). While some scholars studied the few descriptions of Nahua music in the sources (see, e.g., Stevenson 1968), a reconstruction of its sound is almost impossible because there was no pre-Hispanic or early colonial musical notation (for relevant studies see Tomlinson 2007: 4). The sources, nevertheless, suggest that music played an important role in Indigenous culture. There are

> portrayals in pre-contact and early colonial picture codices of humans and gods singing and playing instruments; preserved instruments themselves, now mostly sitting mute in museum collections; countless reports of indigenous singing, dancing, and ceremony, some rivaling modern-day ethnographies in care and detail; even substantial bodies of song texts recorded in alphabetized native languages. (Tomlinson 2007: 10)

Among the early colonial sources, Toribio de Benavente Motolinía and Durán, in particular, refer to extensive singing and dancing, primarily in the context of religious rituals (Motolinía 1996, part 2, chap. 27; 1985, book 1, chap. 13 & 14; Durán 1994, vol. 2, chap. 11). Mark Pedelty (2004), in his history of the musical ritual in Mexico City, listed the following as the most important instruments: the *huehuetl* (a large log drum topped with a tight jaguar skin); the *teponaztli* (a hollowed-out wood slit-gong with two tongues); aerophones such as the *atecocoli* (conch shell trumpet); *tepuzquiquiztli* (wood and metal trumpets); *chichtli* (whistle flutes); *huilacapitztli* (ocarinas); *cocoloctli* (melodic flutes); ideophones such as the *tecomapiloa*; *ayotli* (turtle and tortoiseshell drums); *omichicahuaztli* (bone rasps); *chililitli* (copper disk gongs); *ayacachtli* (gourds or gourd-shaped rattles), and many other types of rattles (Pedelty 2004: 17–20). Despite the richness of surviving instruments, we hardly know how they were played and what type of musical system they used, even though some contemporary Mexican groups, such as Tribu, have been attempting to recover and revitalize the sound of pre-Hispanic music (Pedelty 2004: 25–36).

Similarly, little is known about Indigenous Mesoamerican dance, apart from the fact that the Nahuas widely used dance choreographies in their public rituals. According to Paul A. Scolieri's (2013) comprehensive study of Aztec and Spanish dance in the early colonial contact phase, dancing served several functions in Nahua culture: (1) the simultaneous dissolution and construction of social differences (mainly through costumes), (2) the dissolution of boundaries between the living and the dead (by priests wearing the flayed skins of sacrificial victims), (3) the enactment and embodiment of historical events, and (4) the ritual invocation and manipulation of the forces moving through the cosmos and the cosmic exchange of energy (Scolieri 2013: 3, 18, 85).

Several of the Spanish chroniclers mention the importance of dance in Indigenous Nahua culture. Their reports, however, contain little information on actual content, forms, or Indigenous interpretations of the dances. Since Motolinía recorded the most information on Indigenous dances, he was largely copied by later chroniclers (Scolieri 2013: 22, 44–55). Motolinía mentioned two different genres, the *macehualiztli* (dance without gesture, Scolieri 2013: 47) and the *netotiliztli*, the "social dance." He categorized the *macehualiztli* as

"sacred" and the *netotiliztli* as "profane," a categorization that is a European projection not based on Indigenous understandings (Scolieri 2013: 11). Motolinía also acknowledged dancing as a narrative tradition complementing the histories written in the codices (Scolieri 2013: 47). Sahagún referred to dance in many of the books of the *Florentine Codex*, describing valuable facts such as "the placement of the dance within the broader emplotment of ritual; the social identity of the performers; the location and time of the dances; the dancers' raiments, masks, and props; and the relationship between music and dance" (Scolieri 2013: 57). Sahagún also mentioned distinctive types of dances, such as "serpentine processions, diplomatic pageants, celebratory dances of youth, and a monarch's choreography of investiture, among others" (Scolieri 2013: 85). However, Sahagún did not record any background information about the dancers' training and preparation, different roles, or experiences or any social or religious function of the dances (Scolieri 2013: 59). Durán only reported that he was fascinated by the dancers living south of Mexico City; in his *Book of the Gods and Rites* (1971: 287–300), he indicates that the *Tlahuica* highly valued their *cuicacalli*, their school of music and dance for nobles, which was apparently dedicated to a particular god of dance.

Many of the Spanish missionaries were shocked by the cultural otherness and alienness of the forms and emotional expressions of Indigenous dances. At the same time, the Franciscans believed in gestures as a natural, cross-culturally understandable language and experimented for some time (unsuccessfully) with gestures to transmit basic concepts of the catechism across linguistic barriers (Moffitt Watts 1995: 142–148). Later, the missionaries channeled the Native taste for large, choreographed rituals and included dancing into the genre of colonial theater, which enacted Nahua variants of Spanish Christian plays (see Scolieri 2013: 127–149). According to the records, the first of these plays was performed as early as 1539 (Schroeder 2010b: 9). The Natives were so enthusiastic about these performances that the number of Indigenous musicians, singers, and performers virtually exploded (Clendinnen 1990: 115). In the first colonial centuries, the genre of the religious drama became ubiquitous and increasingly varied (see Burkhart, Sell, and Poole 2011). Particularly popular were Spanish plays enacting the reconquest of Spain from the Moors, most probably because these provided platforms to reinterpret and cope with the experience of the Mexican conquest (Clendinnen 1990: 118–119). The play *The Destruction of Jerusalem*, performed in Tlaxcalla in the early eighteenth century and evidently written by Natives, reveals a strong parallel between the fall of Jerusalem and the fall of Tenochtitlan (Burkhart 2010: 92).

To conclude, Nahua oral tradition was embedded in multimedia performances and not separate from other genres of expression. Apart from this fact,

the sources regrettably contain little information on this performative context of speech and song.

2 Reconstructing Nahua Songs

The most important sources for Nahua songs are the two early colonial manuscripts known as the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España*, which present a characteristic poetical variant of Nahuatl. Scholars attempting to prove the highly advanced developmental stage of the Aztec civilization typically proclaim these two manuscripts as the prime exemplars of Nahua "literature." Because the manuscripts transmit the songs alphabetically, they were easily (mis)understood as "nothing less and nothing more than … book[s] of poems" (Tomlinson 1996: 265). This premise, however, had far-reaching consequences for the translation of their linguistic contents; the analysis of their language, imagery, and form; and their interpretation in expressing the emotions of their authors. All this led to their fetishization "with a healthy dose of western aestheticism" and their installation in the canons of "literature" (Tomlinson 1996: 265). However, the two manuscripts are alphabetical transcriptions of orally transmitted songs rather than written "literature" and thus prototypically present linguistic semiotics.

2.1 *Inventing Nahua "Literature"*

Contemporary interpretations of the songs contained in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and *Romances* manuscripts have been deeply rooted in a long reception history of interpreting and appropriating Nahua culture. This history started with the first missionaries (such as Sahagún, Mendieta, de Olmos, and Torquemada) and continued with the Indigenous chroniclers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (such as Chimalpahin, Tezozómoc, and Ixtlilxochitl). Spanish missionaries as well as Indigenous authors, who had been trained in the mission schools, interpreted Indigenous culture and religion from the perspective of European categories and parameters. In later Creole inventions of a national Mexican identity, the hybrid cultural identity of the Indigenous authors served as a role model for a new Mestizo identity. The Creole Mexican nationalists of the late seventeenth century extolled their country by pointing to its glorious pre-Hispanic past and the new Mexican traditions uniting its Indigenous and Spanish heritage and argued vehemently against the (European) theory of climatic determinism (Lee 2008: 7–8). In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophers and politicians in Europe (e.g., Cornelius de Pauw and George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon) revived the theory of the

civilizational inferiority of Indigenous American cultures. Mexican Creoles such as Francisco Javier Clavijero hotly refuted their arguments. The Jesuits presented many examples taken from sources such as Ixtlilxochitl that show the civility and humanity of the Aztec civilization and the high level of the pre-Hispanic intellect (Lee 2008: 8–10, Brian 2010: 125).

In the nineteenth century, Prescott (1843) adopted a middle position in his famous history of Mexico—he interpreted the Spanish conquest of Mexico as the victory of Christianity over paganism and of civilization over barbarism. Nevertheless, he acknowledged the political, legal, religious, and intellectual achievements of pre-Hispanic Texcoco ruler Nezahualcoyotl. By doing so, he reproduced an interpretation of Aztec history that had been generated by Ixtlilxochitl and adopted by the Mexican Creoles. The legend of Nezahualcoyotl, in combination with the cult of the Virgen de Guadalupe, was a powerful *invention of tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that served to promote nationalist Mexican identity and ideology (see Bierhorst 2009: 20–22).

In all these centuries, the debates about pre-Hispanic Mexican history and culture were largely motivated by one goal: to prove either the inferiority or the equality of the Native American civilization (or colonial Mexican Mestizo culture) compared to Europe. Thus, pre-Hispanic Mexican cultures were not assessed on their own account but were constantly, and only, compared to European civilization, in general with respect to their evolutionary stage and specifically in comparing, for example, Texcoco with Athens or Nezahualcoyotl with King David.

The Mexican revolution in the early twentieth century inspired a new national interest in the country's Indigenous past among historians and anthropologists such as Manuel Gamio, Alfonso Caso, Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, Rubén Campos, and Ángel María Garibay Kintana. During this time, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia was founded and an indigenist policy promoted that argued for incorporating marginalized ethnic groups into the modern Mexican nation. Heretofore, pre-Hispanic culture had mainly been studied archaeologically, with widely publicized diggings at Teotihuacan or at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City. Catholic priest Garibay argued to expand this approach by studying the alphabetically written texts in the Nahua language, as those were being increasingly unearthed from the archives. Garibay, a Christian humanist and a prolific translator of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, admired the classical Greek tradition but also believed in the universal values of poetry. Following this inspiration, he devoted his work to reconstructing Nahua poetry using the model of Greek literature (Payas 2004: 545–547).

With the increasing awareness that something like an "American Indian literature" existed, Nahuatl studies expanded significantly in the 1960s. Drawing

on the few earlier studies about Nahua language and grammar,[2] an increasing number of students learned Nahuatl, and scholars published new grammars, dictionaries, and bilingual textbooks. Within the general project to unearth Nahuatl documents from the archives and to publish primary sources and their translations, the initial projects focused on Native accounts of the conquest of Mexico (Klor de Alva 1992: viii-ix; see León-Portilla 2007, Lockhart 1993b). In the so-called New Philology movement, Nahuatl scholar Lockhart and his students enthusiastically discovered and analyzed the colonial Nahuatl texts as historical sources, essentially changing Mexican historiography, since heretofore it had relied solely on Spanish sources (see Lockhart 1991b: 178, 183, 200, see also 1993a).

Within this context, Garibay's student León-Portilla found his calling for promoting Nahua literature as one of the most important components of the Mexican national tradition. The main impetus for León-Portilla's later work was apparent in his doctoral thesis, *La Filosofía Náhuatl Estudiada en sus Fuentes* ([1956] 1997). This book argued that the Aztecs had developed a fully fledged philosophy that has been transmitted to this day through the Nahuatl manuscripts. Over the years, this thesis exerted a tremendous influence in Mexico, both within and widely beyond academia. Building on his growing reputation, León-Portilla became a member of the Seminario de Cultura Náhuatl founded in 1957 (as part of the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), director of the Nahuatl study group Seminario de Literatura Náhuatl, and primary editor of the academic journal *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, which he and Garibay founded together.

In his later years, León-Portilla became director of the Academia Méxicana de la Historia (1996–2003) and Mexico's UNESCO ambassador in Paris. León-Portilla has published more than forty monographs and two hundred academic articles, many of them driven by a deep fascination and admiration for the philosophical and spiritual achievements of Aztec culture.[3] Promoting Nahua texts as nationally relevant philosophical literature, León-Portilla breathed political, national ideology. Consequently, his work soon became "official Mexican history and its ideologeme: the splendor of the Aztec past" (Payas 2004: 547). At the time of his doctoral dissertation, however, many historians and anthropologists had been so naturally convinced of Europe's civilizational superiority that they found the thought of a Nahua philosophy simply absurd (Wobeser 1997: 25–26, Klor de Alva 1997: 102–103). This intellectual background

2 See, e.g., Carochi and Lockhart (2001), Sell (2010), Garibay Kintana (1940), or studies by Eduard Seler, Francisco del Paso y Troncoso.

3 For short impressions of this motivation, see León-Portilla (1963: 92, 1980a: 4, 1992c: 189).

explains why León-Portilla dedicated his life so passionately and vigorously to proving that the ancient Aztec civilization was as advanced as the ancient Mediterranean civilizations. Arguing along these lines, nevertheless, kept him firmly within the European evaluative system, applying European categories onto Indigenous cultures—even with a positive result in his case.

Strongly influenced by his teacher Garibay, León-Portilla followed an essentially humanistic orientation. Accordingly, he compared Nezahualcoyotl with Plato and similar Greek philosophers and projected humanist values onto the Nahua king (see Bierhorst 2009: 22). In his view, the cultural accomplishments of philosophy and literature were relevant markers that a civilization had reached an advanced stage. This is why it was so important to him to prove that the Aztecs had developed both (see paradigmatically León-Portilla 1971b). Feeling deep sorrow for the loss of the Aztec intellectual tradition (see, e.g., León-Portilla 1996: 75), he was quite proud when his student Patrick Johansson and his examiners disputed solely in the Nahuatl language in Johansson's doctoral oral exam at the Sorbonne University in Paris:

> In this way, the language of Nezahualcoyotl resonated for the first time in these academic premises where so many illustrious men of France and the world had been examined and had participated in universitarian activities. (León-Portilla 1993: 7, translation mine)

León-Portilla, nevertheless, was not the first to attempt to prove the existence of an "Aztec literature." In the second half of the nineteenth century, Mexican writer and politician José Joaquín Pesado had previously sought "to incorporate pre-Hispanic literature into Mexican national literature by publishing pre-Hispanic poems translated into Spanish" (Lee 2008: 10). A similar, if more academic, motivation had inspired US ethnologist Daniel G. Brinton (1887) to translate parts of the *Cantares Mexicanos* in his book *Ancient Nahuatl Poetry*. Brinton compared the *Cantares Mexicanos* with "sacred hymns" from other esoteric religious traditions of the world. In this, he might have been inspired by the same academic spirit as Müller with his *Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910). Brinton published twenty of the "mystic chants" (1890: iii) of the *Cantares Mexicanos* in Nahuatl transcription and gloss and an English translation under the title *Rig Veda Americanus* in his *Library of Aboriginal American Literature* book series. This series intended to promote Native American oral and written traditions as "holy books" and included editions of specific Maya chronicles, an Iroquois book of rites, and a Creek migration legend. It is quite popular today to compare Native American lore with "holy books" from other cultures. Following this spirit, the Maya *Popol Vuh* is often named the "Mayan

Bible" (quote by Carlos Fuentes on the cover of the *Popol Vuh*, as translated by Dennis Tedlock, 1996) or the "Bible of America" (Brotherston 1992: 49).

At the time of Brotherston's publication, Latin American academics and politicians had been struggling a long time for political and cultural recognition of their countries. As early as 1884, Cuban freedom fighter José Martí had criticized American universities for teaching only European history and culture and excluding Native American traditions (see Baca 2008: 119). In the twentieth century, many American humanities programs typically followed the "Great Books" approach, a method that required students to read books from a long list of literary works considered the most important in Western intellectual history. The list covered almost exclusively Greek, Latin, European, and US (primarily male) authors, while non-European, non-white, and female authors were neglected (see Baca 2008: xv). Against this background, León-Portilla argued vehemently for ancient Mexican literature to be acknowledged and included in the educational curriculum of Mexican schools as a part of Mexico's literary (and philosophical) tradition. In doing so, he went far beyond Garibay's "classicization" of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* and their designation as "literature." He "Aztequized" these manuscripts as the true sources of the "ancient word" and gave them a "sacred, canonical status (which maybe they never had in their time) that should protect them from mishandling and misreading" (Payas 2004: 548).

León-Portilla believes that the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* are quintessential expressions of Aztec philosophy and spirituality. Strikingly, this belief is the result of an argumentative circle. León-Portilla devised the contents of these assumed "traditions," then selected those songs or parts of songs that, according to his view, expressed these contents most concisely. He continued translating the often obscure texts in such a way that his interpretation of them seemed the only logical one. This interpretation finally provided the foundation for his summary of these assumed traditions.

The canonization implied in this circular reasoning shows most strikingly in the selection of texts for his compilation *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality: Ancient Myths, Discourses, Stories, Doctrines, Hymns, Poems from the Aztec, Yucatec, Quiche-Maya and Other Sacred Traditions* (1980b). For this publication, León-Portilla apparently looked for a type of philosophy/spirituality appealing to him, assumed to have discovered it in some parts of the sources, translated the texts accordingly, and finally declared these exact parts of the sources (or, more precisely, his translations of them) as the most concise and most beautiful parts of this (more or less invented) Mesoamerican (philosophical-) spiritual tradition.[4] To this day, León-Portilla has been defending his life's work

4 See for his own description of the selection process León-Portilla (1980a: 35).

in stylizing a true, literate Mexican philosophical tradition and thus acknowledging the Aztec civilization as highly advanced. Feeling his work threatened, he vehemently and aggressively attacks all interpretations (and translations) of the *Cantares Mexicanos* that deviate from his interpretation.

Over time, the impulse to recover Nahuatl sources, to listen to Native voices, and to take their messages seriously has become a fossilized project to "reconstruct" an unwavering canon of Nahua literature. Along the way, the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* were stylized into "poetry" and "literature" understood in the European sense by ignoring and suppressing their musical and performative aspects and ritual contexts. Some arguments exist as to why the songs could be grouped in the European category of *poetry*, as Lockhart observed. They use a "refined language full of metaphor and allusion; they are rigorously structured in ways not found in ordinary speech or even in oratory; and their themes bear close resemblance to those we associate with European poetry" (1993a: 393). Nevertheless, they more closely match the categories of song, dance, and performance, and they lack parameters considered typical for European poetry, such as "meter, fixed line, rhyme, the primacy of the written form" (Lockhart 1993a: 393).

To acknowledge this otherness of the songs eluding European categories and to deconstruct the invention of "Aztec literature," however, does not necessarily include the songs' devaluation. The songs undoubtedly reflect a highly advanced Indigenous tradition of linguistic and performative expression. As such, it might be helpful to regard them as "world literature" after all, that is, to include them in a category that refers to culture-specific linguistic expressions of human experience and knowledge but that also transcends the more narrow European parameters associated with "philosophy" and "literature." At least, this is Bierhorst's (2009: 69–70) reasoning after being viciously attacked by León-Portilla. Thus, Bierhorst emphasized in his 2009 edition of the *Romances* that it was never his intention to denigrate Indigenous Mexican traditions, only to understand them better in their difference from European categories.

2.2 *The Manuscripts*

The manuscript called *Cantares Mexicanos* was rediscovered in the library of the University of Mexico in the second half of the nineteenth century (Bierhorst 1985b: 15). It appears to be a late sixteenth-century copy of a manuscript that was probably written between 1550 and 1570. The author of the original manuscript, who compiled some ninety Indigenous Nahuatl songs and added a few glosses to it, was most probably an acculturated Native (maybe Antonio Valeriano) familiar with Jesuit Nahuatl orthography (Bierhorst 1985b: 8–9).

The references to Indigenous songs by Torquemada, Ixtlilxochitl, Chimalpahin, and Carochi might have relied on this early manuscript (Bierhorst 1985b: 14).

The closely related *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España*[5] has survived as a seventeenth-century copy of a manuscript that was most probably attached as an appendix to the 1582 *Relación Geográfica de Texcoco* written by Juan Bautista Pomar (Bierhorst 2009: vii, 1, 163). It contains approximately thirty-six songs compiled around 1575 (Bierhorst 2009: vii). In contrast to the loosely assembled *Cantares Mexicanos*, the *Romances* are organized as an anthology of songs "that may be read with a sense of unity from start to finish" (Bierhorst 2009: vii). Its form is comparable to the Spanish cancioneros from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Bierhorst 2009: 2–5). About thirteen of the songs in the *Romances* also appear in the *Cantares* (Bierhorst 2009: 4). The stylistic unity between the songs of the two manuscripts points toward a common origin and school of compilation (Bierhorst 2009: 9). Interestingly, the songs display many poetical similarities with Sahagún's *Psalmodia Christiana* (Bierhorst 1985b: 12).

In one of the first academic analyses of the songs, Garibay proposed the thesis of their pre-Hispanic origin based on the fact that their linguistic and literary forms and the expressed ideas differ so widely from contemporary Spanish literature (see Lee 2008: 133). León-Portilla expanded this theory and never abandoned it, despite numerous arguments to the contrary. In León-Portilla's view (2011b: 200, see also 1996), the songs quintessentially express "el pensamiento y la sensibilidad prehispanicós" (pre-Hispanic thought and sensibility) because they repeatedly refer to many preconquest Aztec rulers and express pre-Hispanic subjects, such as wars, human sacrifices, Indigenous deities, and the unique pacifist philosophy of Nezahualcoyotl. The obvious Christian references in the songs are, for León-Portilla (2011b: 196, 205), only interpolations serving to disguise the pre-Hispanic material from Christian missionaries.

In 1985, Bierhorst published a new transcription, translation, and interpretation of the *Cantares Mexicanos* (1985a, 1985b) that fundamentally broke with Garibay's and León-Portilla's interpretations. Thoroughly reconstructing the historical context of the (original) manuscript, he declared it as clearly postconquest. He furthermore showed that the genre and contents are also essentially postconquest, even though they most probably incorporated pre-Hispanic ideas and forms (Bierhorst 1985b: 63, 100, 106–109). In his later

5 See Bierhorst's excellent website containing excerpts and analyses of the *Romances*: *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain*, University of Texas Libraries and University of Texas Press, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/books/utdigital/index.php>.

translation of the *Romances* (2009), Bierhorst softened the radical nature of his earlier arguments while upholding his conclusion about the postconquest origin of both the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*. In his view, both manuscripts obviously express postconquest sentiments and show a strong syncretism between the pre-Hispanic and the new Christian world views (Bierhorst 2009: 9–11, 70). Briefly summarized, Bierhorst concluded that the songs reflect a living tradition from the mid-sixteenth century "borrowing back and forth between singers, the reshaping of old material, new composition, and public performances" (2009: 10).

After heated academic debates about methodology and historical and poetical details, most Nahuatl specialists—with the exception of León-Portilla—now generally follow a moderate, middle-ground position. The postconquest origin of the songs is generally accepted, along with the unmistakably postconquest nature of specific contents, while the songs are also believed to preserve relevant aspects of pre-Hispanic oral traditions in both style and subject (Lockhart 1993a: 398–399, Gruzinski 2002: 150–179, Tomlinson 2007: 61, 82). In the end, it is difficult to distinguish pre-Hispanic from postconquest material and the analysis remains inconclusive. Recently, new pre-Hispanic Zapotec manuscripts have been discovered, which display many similarities to the *Cantares*. This may, after all, point to the existence of a strong and widely spread song tradition in precolonial Central Mexico that crossed ethnic and linguistic divides (Tomlinson 2007: 92). This tradition, however, appears to have completely died out after the 1580s—at least judged by its complete absence in all known surviving sources (Lockhart 1993a: 399, Bierhorst 2009: 11).

Regarding the performative context, Sahagún mentioned that some songs were performed on merchant feasts. Tomlinson (2007: 57–61) suggested that the songs with more obvious Christian connotations might have been staged in public, whereas the songs that included more pre-Hispanic material may have been enacted in a private context. In general, the songs were performed with music and dance embedded in larger rituals and feasts; both Motolinía and Durán mention that the singing was accompanied by drums and other musical instruments (Lee 2008: 136–142). Indeed, many of the songs in the manuscripts include notations for drum rhythms for the *teponaztli* and *huehuetl* drums. The reconstruction of the musical sound, however, is almost impossible because of our limited knowledge (Bierhorst 1985b: 72–80, Gingerich 1992: 360, Tomlinson 2007: 87–90).

In addition to the transcriptions of drum rhythms, many nontranslatable syllables and vocables are scattered through the song texts, in most cases attached as end syllables to words. Most transcriptions of the manuscripts omit these syllables under the belief that they would confuse readers' understanding

of the translatable contents (Bierhorst 1985b: 129, 2009: 44–45). Despite this, most likely the vocables were not meaningless. According to Tomlinson's interpretation, they were signs in a "liminal position between non-linguistic cry and semi-semantic word" (2007: 85). They might have provided "special rhythmic or melodic emphasis," and they most probably had an "exclamatory impact" and "substantial affective weight" (Tomlinson 2007: 83–84). As such, the vocables might have been nonlexical signs that expressed the singers' experiences on a different level than linguistic thought, perhaps expressing the same experiences more comprehensively or expressing other aspects difficult to convey in linguistic thought. Some of the songs also contain self-referential topics: the singer sings about song, describes songs, and reflects on the nature of songs. The vocables may have been a quintessential expression of this self-referentiality.

The translatable parts of the texts are in large part dramatic dialogues between several protagonists. These dialogues might have been sung by one singer alone adopting different roles or by various alternating singers (Bierhorst 1985b: 45–46, Lee 2008: 138–139). In terms of general structure, the texts fall into stanzas, strophes, and refrains and show many pairings of verses (Tomlinson 2007: 54–61). Independent, self-contained, nonmetrical verses of varied length were arranged symmetrically to form a coherent whole. Generally, they have little narrative element and no logical development of verses building on one another to reach a conclusion (Lockhart 1993a: 394–396). The songs use a "fairly restricted set of stock metaphors, phrases, sentences, and sentiments," which recur "constantly through the corpus, mixed and varied in kaleidoscopic fashion, going far toward defining the genre and identifying the register of speech" (Lockhart 1993a: 394).

The language of the songs is generally heterometric and heteromorphic, mainly using the traditional oral diction of Nahuatl, with some parts showing signs of the much leaner "missionary Nahuatl," as found in Sahagún's *Psalmodia Christiana* (Bierhorst 1985b: 42–47, 86–88, 2009: 2). Bierhorst (2009: 25–27, 44–45) noticed that the *Romances* frequently use verbs referring to summoning activities in the context of a strong incantational style, in which "figures of authority," that is, historical kings and military leaders, are called upon. These aspects are strongly reminiscent of the *nahuallatolli* genre, as Ruiz de Alarcón (1984) recorded. In total, the language of the songs is often exceedingly difficult to understand for non-Native readers/listeners, a fact that Sahagún had already mentioned (Bierhorst 2009: vii). The most striking linguistic characteristic is hypertrophism regarding single "words," for example, *tiquetzalzacuanxiuhquecholhuihuicomacan*, which Bierhorst (1985b: 47) translated as "let's make troupial-and-turquoise-swan-plumes twirl,"

or *mochipahualizichpochaçucenaxochicelticayotzin* as a salutation to Mary, roughly translated as "your pure and maidenly lily-flower freshness" (Bierhorst 2009: 11).

The manuscripts assign the songs to many different genres, the most frequent being *xochicuicatl* (flowery songs), *teuccuicatl* (songs of the lords), *yaocuicatl* (songs of war), or *huehuecuicatl* (old songs, or songs of old people).[6] Seen from the perspective of contemporary readers, the songs cover several main themes: ethnic pride, battle, martial glory, friendship, noble refinements, and the "divine." These themes were expressed largely through the lyricism of flowers, butterflies, birds, precious stones, and music and singing as well as references to the ephemerality of everything that exists (see Tomlinson 2007: 62–63).

Some of the songs, most prominently the first four songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, explicitly reflect on the nature of music and song. Roughly sketching this reflection, flower songs are created by the deities for human enjoyment to compensate for death by war or sacrifice in service to nourishing the gods. Poets travel between the skies and bring flowers down to the earth, where they create a temporal Flower Land (*Xochitlalpan*). Here, the Nahua nobles sing the flower songs while reflecting on the deaths of their comrades and their own future sacrifice, soothing their sadness (Lee 2008: 164–167, 172).[7]

Some of the references to the celestial origins of music in these songs are so similar to European concepts that they might have been interpreted as European influences (Tomlinson 2007: 63–64, 78–80). Many songs combine the subjects of song and music with warfare, sometimes suggesting that the song and dance floor are transformed into a battlefield (Bierhorst 1985b: 27–28). Echoing glorious battles from the past, many songs seem to promote warfare and the war between the Triple Alliance and Huexotzinco, Tlaxcalla, and Chalco in particular (Bierhorst 2009: 163). In doing so, many Nahua ancestors, dead rulers, and heroic warriors are remembered and called upon, sometimes associated with the Christian heaven (Burkhart 1989: 57). Occasional doubts and expressions of a general pain induced by the inevitable sacrificial death of noble soldiers on the battlefield appear only to emphasize the overall glorification of war in the songs (see Bierhorst 1985b: 28).

6 For more of these genres, see León-Portilla (1992a: 28). For a non-Indigenous classification of the songs that considers subjects, style, instrumental accompaniment, and origin, see Bierhorst (1985b: 92–96).

7 For detailed analyses of songs one and two and of the similar song seventeen, see Bierhorst (1985b: 137, 163).

2.3 *The History of Contested Interpretations*

Interpretations of the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* by scholars of Nahuatl have been extremely controversial, particularly in the last decades. The first chroniclers mentioned some of the songs and used them to "add immediacy and color" to their accounts (Bierhorst 2009: 12). Ixtlilxochitl, in particular, employed the songs to stylize Nezahualcoyotl as the ideal poet-king preparing for the arrival of Christianity and prophesizing the downfall of the Aztec Empire.[8] Laso de la Vega ([1649] 1998) adopted the songs' luscious garden imagery in *Huei tlamahuiçoltica*, his legend about the Virgen de Guadalupe, and transformed pre-Hispanic contents into "palatable, nonthreatening folklore" (Bierhorst 2009: 14). Since the *Cantares Mexicanos* manuscript was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, several scholars, including Brinton, Antonio Peñafiel, and Leonhard Schulze-Jena have discussed the songs in their work (see Bierhorst 1985b: 118–122). Garibay, however, was one of the first to translate and publish larger parts of them (1964, 1965a, 1968). Inspired by the goal of transporting the beauty and depth of the "poems," he translated them rather freely by borrowing from classicist models. Both Garibay and, later, León-Portilla interpreted the songs as quintessentially pre-Hispanic. Following this idea, they typically omitted and extinguished Christian elements and references from their translations.[9]

For León-Portilla, the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* are not merely an important part of the Mexican poetical and literary tradition; they present an authentic expression of pre-Hispanic philosophical-poetical reflections. In León-Portilla's view (see, e.g., 1980a: 44), the songs express a highly philosophical and spiritual sensitivity about the ephemerality of earthly life. Facing the evanescent nature of all things on earth, the minds of the melancholic poet-kings who wrote the songs is soothed only by the beauty of flowers called down with songs from the heavens and by the friendship among warrior comrades. In his interpretation, the songs even express a type of poetical aestheticism, that is, an epistemology in which only poetry might truly capture and express the nature of reality. It was exactly the manuscripts of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* that helped León-Portilla reconstruct a Texcoco school of philosophy that contrasted with Tenochca mystical militarism.

Before León-Portilla's 2011 edition and Spanish translation of the *Cantares Mexicanos* (2011a), John Bierhorst (1985a) had been the first scholar to publish a complete paleographical transcription and translation of the manuscript,

8 See the song segments known as *Nezahualcoyotl's Lamentations* (Brotherston 1972).

9 For a compelling analysis of this approach, see Payas (2004).

complemented by a dictionary, concordance, and grammatical notes. This publication clearly represents a major milestone in research about the *Cantares Mexicanos*. According to Lockhart's assessment (1991a), Bierhorst's transcription and translation were thorough, although he found Bierhorst's interpretation too imaginative and inventive (1991a: 120, 125–126, 130–131). In the case of Nahuatl songs, the transcription and translation are always closely linked with the interpretation, since the songs' language is, in many cases, quite difficult for contemporary readers to understand. This is due to the syntax and vocabulary, the complex use of vocables, ambiguous grammatical moods, veiled Spanish loans, and insufficient contextual information to assist in comprehending the contents (Lockhart 1991a: 122–124). These characteristics necessarily lead to differing understandings.

Bierhorst's reading of the songs presented an open challenge to León-Portilla's interpretation. Although Bierhorst did not specifically refer to León-Portilla in his edition of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, large parts of his historical contextualization and analysis of the songs' contents appear to have been written in direct opposition to León-Portilla. In Bierhorst's view, León-Portilla's "method compartmentalizes the two aspects of the genre, the aesthetic and the martial, treating the texts as a mass of fragments to be examined for scraps of history, on one hand, and, on the other, bits of found poetry that seem to touch on classic themes of friendship and mortality" (2009: vii).

In contrast to León-Portilla, Bierhorst interpreted the songs as expressions of a postconquest revitalization movement singing down the spirits of dead heroic ancestors. According to Bierhorst (1985b: 3–5, 22–23), the *Cantares* alphabetically recorded a particular song genre that flourished between 1550 and 1580 in the Central Valley of Mexico. Although this genre was based on pre-Hispanic rhetorics, song styles, imagery, and maybe even fragments of songs, it was in itself essentially postconquest. With Christian references representing their essential nature, the songs express an internal struggle between the old pre-Hispanic warrior ethics and the new Christian values and world views. As part of complex music and dance performances, the songs were actually a fully fledged ghost-song ritual in which the spirits of heroic warrior ancestors are called down from heaven by warrior-singers to remember glorious past victories. These rituals were performed as part of a revitalization movement comparable to the nineteenth-century Indigenous Ghost Dance movement in the North American Great Plains. The singers invoked a world freed from the dominance of the Spanish colonists—the named enemies of Mexico (the people from Tlaxcalla, Huexotzinco, and Chalco) merely served as rhetorical dummies for the Spaniards. This true content of the songs, however, was obscured in highly metaphoric diction to veil it from the Spaniards. Thus, the flowers and

songs summoned from heaven to earth were only metaphors for the ghost spirits of the ancestors who rained and whirled down, literally summoned down to earth through the song, music, and performance. The ghost spirits also served as muses for the singers, who identified with them (Bierhorst 1985b: 3–5, 22–23).

Considering the intractability of the material, Bierhorst's interpretation of the songs as ghost-song rituals is much less far-fetched than it might seem compared to León-Portilla's. At least it convincingly makes sense of the constant blend and fusion of flowers, songs, and heroic ancestors. Nonetheless, Bierhorst's interpretation is almost exclusively based on internal cues and comparison with North American cultures. The theory of ghosts descending from the skies has no grounding in our knowledge about the pre-Hispanic Nahua cosmovision. There is also no external evidence for a strong early colonial nativist revitalization movement that might have inspired the songs (see Lockhart 1991a: 122).

Lockhart furthermore criticized several details of Bierhorst's interpretation. First, he finds it improbable that the many references to Indigenous enemies of the Mexica are only stand-ins for the Spaniards. He rather thinks they are indeed expressions of pre-Hispanic rivalries (Lockhart 1991a: 127). Second, Lockhart finds Bierhorst too obsessed with the idea that the descending entities were actual ghosts, often forcing the translations to match this interpretation while almost ignoring the "rich vein of lyricism" in the songs regarding the subject of ephemerality (Lockhart 1991a: 130). In Lockhart's own interpretation (1991a: 129), the personae addressed in the poems are imaginative invokings of the ancestors "imagined to be speaking in their own time, not in the song-present" following the "primary purpose of the songs … to remember past glories."

In his later publications, Bierhorst took Lockhart's detailed criticism of his interpretation into account while simply ignoring León-Portilla's peripheral, yet fervent and passionate, categorical demolition of his approach. In his 2009 edition of the *Romances*, he presented more evidence for his interpretations and amended his two main arguments. First, he spoke of rebellious promotions of the old warrior ethics rather than of a revitalization movement. Second, he left open whether the ancestors were metaphorically in "mere essence," or indeed in "flesh" summoned through the power of music (Bierhorst 2009: 39, see also 19, 35).

2.4 *The Problems of Authenticity, Poetical Aestheticism, and Ephemerality*

The two most controversial interpretations of the *Cantares Mexicanos* (and the *Romances*), as presented by León-Portilla and Bierhorst, have inspired a heated

academic debate that has focused primarily on the issues of the pre-Hispanic authenticity of the songs, their potential expression of a poetical aestheticism, and the status of their reflections about ephemerality.

León-Portilla argued early on that the songs were not only quintessentially pre-Hispanic but, moreover, verbatim transcriptions of a fixed oral tradition and, as such, authentic representations of the "ancient word" (León-Portilla 1992b). His argument mainly rests on two claims. First, León-Portilla is convinced that the Aztec schools formally taught a verbally fixed oral tradition with the technique of *amoxotoca* (following the book), understood by him to be the reading of fixed semantic messages (León-Portilla 1992b: 333). In addition, the many similarities among a large variety of textual, pictorial, and archaeological sources speak to a stable cosmological knowledge (León-Portilla 1963: 37). Second, some of the early colonial sources contain mnemonic devices and phrases, like *niman ic* (then) as well as *in nican ca* or *izcatqui* (both: "here is"), which show that the authors were directly reading and transcribing a pictorial text. Following these two ideas, León-Portilla finds it logical that the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* are also direct transcriptions of the authentic "ancient word." Accordingly, he thinks that the Christian names and references—Dios, Jesucristo, Espíritu Santo, Santa María, and references to the Christian creation, the Great Flood, Christ's resurrection, and Pentecost—are only interpolations serving to disguise the "ancient word" from the missionaries. In his reasoning, the Nahuas inserted these interpolations into their texts like the ancient Latin and Greek authors did after the triumph of Christianity in the Mediterranean world (León-Portilla 2011b: 196–200, 205–207).

Bierhorst, arguing in contrast for the postconquest nature of the songs, is not convinced that the Christian references "have been tacked unto old songs at the last minute" (Bierhorst 2009: 9). According to his impression, they are far too integrated into the respective passages and show highly subtle syncretistic adoptions, for example, the association of Mary with the Indigenous floral garden. Bierhorst obviously dismisses León-Portilla's thesis of a fixed oral tradition that was carried on into the sixteenth century: "In view of the singer's sheer inventiveness, brilliantly displayed in the *Cantares*, it is unnecessary to believe that Native people were mindlessly parroting old songs they did not understand" (Bierhorst 2009: 10).

In the debate about the pre-Hispanic authenticity of the songs, one important point of contention has been the question of their authors. Following Ixtlilxochitl and other early chroniclers, León-Portilla interpreted the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century rulers and nobles mentioned frequently in the songs as the songs' actual *authors* and composers because they often speak in

the first person (“I, Nezahualcoyotl, say . . .”). Thus, León-Portilla (1992a) discerned fifteen major poet-king-authors, most prominent among them Nezahualcoyotl. Bierhorst (1985b: 3) “breaks with this tradition” and thinks that the actual singers of the songs only sang *in the voice of* their ancestors, taking on their roles in dramatic monologue (Bierhorst 1985b: 101). Following this idea, Rabasa (2005b: 132) identified many of these different protagonist roles, including female ones. Lockhart (1993a: 397, 597) agreed with Bierhorst that the rulers mentioned are *literary personae* rather than the authors of the songs. He also indicated that the notion of the individual authorship in itself is most probably a European projection. The Indigenous oral tradition not only blurred the roles of author and performer, but each author-performer used models and earlier sources to vary the songs in style and context within the framework of the genre (Lockhart 1993a: 398).

In sum, neither Bierhorst, Rabasa, nor Lockhart believe that the *Cantares Mexicanos* were authentic representations of the “ancient word” but rather authentic representations of a postconquest situation in which pre-Hispanic subjects and linguistic forms were combined with postconquest concerns and compositions. León-Portilla, nevertheless, was never convinced by these arguments and vehemently defended his position, typically by merely repeating his earlier arguments (see primarily León-Portilla 1992b, 1996, 2011). Unfortunately, he sees only two options: the sources either contain the authentic ancient word or only lies (see, e.g., León-Portilla 1996: 9). In doing so, he thoroughly misses the subtleties in the arguments of a younger generation fascinated by the creative syncretism of colonial culture and simply ignores the general methodological and epistemological queries brought up by postcolonial theories.

One of León-Portilla’s most favored theories is that the *Cantares Mexicanos* express a highly advanced spiritual-philosophical, poetical aestheticism. He based this interpretation mainly on the songs in folios twelve and thirteen of the *Cantares* manuscript, which contain a dialogue between several poet-rulers at Huexotzinco around 1490 (see León-Portilla 1992a: 165–184). In his view (based on the original interpretation by Ixtlilxochitl; see Bierhorst 2009: 7), these songs record how befriended kings met in the beautiful garden of the local ruler and philosophized about poetry as the only source of truth on earth. As a result, these songs express a poetic vision of ultimate reality and, even more, a philosophical epistemology around the concept of *in xochitl in cuicatl* (flower and song). The poet-kings regard *in xochitl in cuicatl*, or “poetry” as translated by León-Portilla, as the “only means for speaking true words on earth, words capable of bringing the truth to man in a world which is like a dream and in which everything is transitory” (León-Portilla 1971a: 450).

According to this interpretation, poetry became "a means for drawing closer to the deity" and for making "friendship and understanding possible among human beings" and was thus the "maximum consolation for princes and wise men." Moreover, poetry became "the only thing of value that man could leave, as a remembrance, on earth" (León-Portilla 1971a: 450).

In a further abstraction, León-Portilla stylized this interpretation of the two songs of the *Cantares* into a general Texcoco philosophy, in which to know the truth meant "to understand the hidden meaning of things through 'flower and song,' a power emanating from the deified heart" (León-Portilla 1963: 182). It was a "fruit of authentic inner experience, the result of intuition. Poetry is, then, a creative and profound expression which, through symbol and metaphor, allows man to discover himself and then to talk about what he has intuitively and mysteriously perceived" (León-Portilla 1963: 76). The content of these insights, in León-Portilla's view, revealed the "nature of the supreme deity, especially its omnipresence, and the knotty beliefs concerning the value of humanity in the eyes of the divine" (León-Portilla 1992c: 164).

Fascinated by León-Portilla's hypothesis, Willard Gingerich (1987) tested the validity of León-Portilla's hypothesis against the source material. He wondered how contemporary readers, far removed from fifteenth-century Central Mexico, might understand this way of being-in-the-world, these "notions of authentic inner experience, intuition, the divinization of things, and finally, truth, poetry, and knowledge" (Gingerich 1987: 87). Briefly summarizing the results of his analysis, Gingerich confirmed that the respective songs, and others in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*, show "ample evidence of a questing, questioning vision of human reality and human expression, and a solid tradition of literary modes, symbols, and poetic stance" (Gingerich 1987: 93). While he affirmed that these songs express an "aesthetic vision of the world," he doubted that it is a fully fledged "theory of knowledge" and epistemological statement (Gingerich 1987: 90).

Apart from Gingerich's positive reevaluation, León-Portilla's theory about Texcoco poetical aestheticism was largely criticized by his colleagues Lockhart and Gruzinski as well as by a younger generation of scholars, including Klor de Alva, Burkhart, Bierhorst, Brotherston, and, more recently, Gary Tomlinson. The cornerstone of the critique is León-Portilla's highly controversial translation that, in many cases, forced the text's rather obscure imagery to fit his interpretation (the same criticism that was voiced against Bierhorst). Apart from internal cues in the songs, other sources contain little evidence to suggest the existence of such a school of philosophy. Moreover, no other sources refer to similar cosmological ideas, and León-Portilla's image resonates strongly as a European projection.

Closely related to the debate about a pre-Hispanic poetical aestheticism is the discussion whether, and how, the songs reflect the issue of ephemerality. León-Portilla interpreted them as expressions of a deep spiritual concern and a yearning for a heavenly absolute and a true, everlasting, and transcendent reality in the face of the transitory nature and evanescence of earthly existence (see, e.g., León-Portilla 1980a: 44). In his view, this longing of the Texcoco philosophers was closely related to their doubt about the validity of the official Mexican mystical militarism. Indeed, the songs recurrently use the imagery of withering flowers and name the fleetingness and impermanence of human life. However, this theme closely fits into the dominant Nahua cosmovision with several cosmic ages, a cycle of creation and destruction, and in the character of the Fifth Sun as a constant movement of cosmic forces through the cycle of life and death. Furthermore, it matches Mexica conceptualizations of human sacrifice deemed necessary to nourish the earth and to ensure the continuing movement of the sun (see Lee 2008: 182).

In Tomlinson's view (2007: 65), to associate sadness about the transitory nature of life with a yearning for a transcendent reality represents a typical European projection. In Bierhorst's view (2009: 47–48), the subject of ephemerality was even directly related to the Mexica warrior ethics: For the warriors, the end of their life was always within close reach, a knowledge they needed to cope with. Accordingly, the songs named several coping strategies, ranging from pure pessimism to the invitation to enjoy life while you still can or, beyond that, even to the expectation of a life after death as flowers and butterflies (Bierhorst 2009: 65). The occasional allusion to something reminiscent of an eternal life, however, was most probably a Christian syncretism and appears primarily in contexts referring to Christ having died to give Christians eternal live (Bierhorst 1985b: 49). In my view, the impression of the fleetingness of life could very well have been a truly postconquest experience provoked by the downfall of the Aztec Empire and the rapid dying of a large percentage of the Indigenous population as a result of military conflicts, economic exploitation, and devastating epidemics (for the latter processes, see Stannard 1992).

I believe that the Nahuas indeed reflected on the fundamental dilemma between their wishes to live (well) and the reality of death and sickness. However, they did this within a general, immanent, and material cosmovision in which movement and transformation were essential parts of life and the very nature of everything existing, including the deities. Thus, the image of the flowers in their immediately and sensorially experienceable blossoming and withering beauty may have expressed Nahua cultural knowledge about the underlying structures of immanent reality, deeply connected to song and singing. "Where the fleeting sounds of song have recurrently suggested to the West its

supermundane entailments—its elevation above the somatic in the chain of being—they seem to have been conceived in Mexico instead as a link to other animate materials and affirmation of their transitoriness" (Tomlinson 2007: 65).

In conclusion, we should be careful not to project European thought patterns and sensitivities onto Indigenous material, particularly in the face of the linguistic obscureness of the songs transcribed in the manuscripts of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*. This danger looms largely in the main points of contention regarding these songs: the questions of their pre-Hispanic or postconquest authenticity and their interpretation as expressions of a poetical epistemology and of strategies for coping with ephemerality.

3 Thinking in Nahuatl

Classical Nahuatl has a characteristic form of expression that appears strongly in the texts of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* as well as in other sources. Classical Nahuatl is flexible and copious and so different from European languages that Europeans typically have great difficulty understanding it. The first Spaniards in Mexico who were interested in learning the language noted this fact (Gingerich 1992: 357). After the first century of colonization, European interest in this Indigenous language continued to dwindle until, in the nineteenth century, the ability to understand it was diminished and it was simply denigrated as a primitive language (Swann 1992a: xiii-xiv). Only in the second half of the twentieth century did scholarly interest develop and Nahuatl studies become established in Mexico. Nonetheless, only a handful of contemporary scholars can confidently declare themselves as experts who thoroughly understand its linguistic structure and subtleties.

Many forms of expression in Nahuatl elude common European grammar systems. Among them are words that take on several grammatical roles simultaneously, a nonrelation between the sequence of clauses and their syntactical function, and the use of transitive sentences in the third person without defining the gender of the person involved and without a formally recognizable distinction between the subject and the object of the sentence. In addition, Nahuatl speakers use a large number of sensory imagery that escape European understanding as well as honorific constructions that could be potentially ascribed to all constituents of a sentence, be it the subject, object, or verb. Furthermore, Nahuatl orthographies do not distinguish between short and long vowels, and thus it is ambiguous which of the respective words is meant (see Gingerich 1992: 361–363). Finally, but not lastly, most colonial texts rarely put

spaces between meaningful syllables that Europeans would recognize as "words," and a fixed orthography did not yet exist.

Because of these ambiguities and Nahuatl's general structural complexity, and because the Nahuas loved to speak in a rich, poetic, elegant, eloquent, and often formulaic diction, many Nahuatl texts are hard to understand and extremely difficult to translate (see, e.g., Swann 1992b). The oratorical style, which favored a "highly repetitious, often circular, incremental, and subtly varying mode of expression" is almost impossible to reflect in any English translation, while contemporary Spanish "with its still available wealth of florid and pettifogging (to American English tastes) rhetorical devices" offers at least a few more possibilities (Gingerich 1992: 365). Some English translators opt for publishing two translation variants, with the first closer to the poetical feeling and imagery of the original and the second departing more freely from the original to make understanding of the contents easier (see Karttunen and Lockhart 1987).

At the sentence level, the structure of Nahuatl differs considerably from European languages. For example, there are no subordinate clauses, only subtle subordination devices. Each element of the sentence contains a complete grammatical sentence structure within itself, and different units of meaning relate to one another mainly through cross-reference and parallelism:

> In Nahuatl, not only every verb but also every noun bears a subject prefix and potentially constitutes a complete utterance. The language proceeds by a series of phonological/syntactic phrases consisting of a nuclear word (verb or noun), its affixes, and some half-attached particles; these conglomerate entities are larger than our words and often smaller than our sentences.... Although Nahuatl can and does create supremely long and complex utterances, in such constructs the individual constituent phrases relate to each other primarily through cross-reference and parallelism; though many devices for unambiguous subordination exist, they are generally more subtle than their equivalents in European languages, and Nahuatl dependent clauses often seem less fully or unequivocally subordinated. The flow of language generally defies numerical symmetries and rotation schemes, but in Nahuatl double expressions are rife at all levels, bringing to mind the popularity of the 2, 4, 8 series in other domains. (Lockhart 1993a: 439)

One of the most fascinating devices of Nahuatl is a feature called "hypertrophism" (Bierhorst 2009: 11), in which many different ideas (and "words" in the European sense) are formed into complex compounds. These compounds

often combine subjects or objects with actions, colors, and materials, for example, *nicchalchiuhtonameyopetlahua*[*ya*], translated by Tomlinson as "I turquoise-sunray-polish it," or *chachalchiuhquetzalitztonameyo*, "the green-season-flower-songs turquoise-jade-shine" (Tomlinson 2007: 75). It is my impression that these extraordinary thinking patterns might be an expression of an underlying world view in which different layers of reality are seen as closely connected to one another. According to the idea of the *nahualli*, distinctive qualities realized themselves in the layers of reality that the human senses could experience, such as colors and visual appearance, the characteristics of certain materials, behavior patterns, the seasons of the year, or complex entities such as flowers and songs. From the surviving sources, the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* use hypertrophism most poignantly and apparently stretched this feature to the extreme. Sadly, we cannot say whether this diction was typical for pre-Hispanic oral genres and perhaps an indicator of their ancient nature or whether it was a postconquest "sign of nativism in response to stress" (Bierhorst 2009: 11). It could very well have been an *invention of tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that emphasized pre-Hispanic linguistic features in the face of their postconquest endangerment (see Tomlinson 2007: 76, Bierhorst 2009: 11).

The agglutinative, "conceptual parataxis" of Nahuatl appears not only at the individual sentence level but also in distinctive patterns of the larger structural organization in oratorical Nahuatl. In most cases, there is no linear narration, and verses are arranged around a theme, feeling, or character: "The individual strophes often seem, indeed, to orbit around the theme or set of themes of the song they make up rather than pursuing a progressive elaboration, narrative or lyrical, of the topics at hand" (Tomlinson 2007: 61). Lockhart characterized these structural features of Nahua thinking by comparing them with those of contemporary Spanish (Lockhart 1993a: 439). The table on the next page summarizes his results regarding general linguistic structure, poems, historiographical accounts (chronicles/annals), and art and architecture decoration.

Lockhart characterized Nahuatl's structural organization at the sentence and paragraph levels as a "cellular-modular organization" (Lockhart 1993a: 439). This type of organization was, according to his analyses (1993a: 419), not only present in the language, including thinking patterns and linguistic genres, but also in other parts of Nahua culture, such as the sociopolitical system, the material culture, and art and architecture. It created coherent wholes by arranging independent, self-contained parts either symmetrically, numerically, or in rotational order (Lockhart 1993a: 436). It is reflected in the shapes of individual households and the *altepeme*, arranging single living quarters modularly around a shared patio, households around a central plaza, and several

Spanish	Nahuatl
Language: – complex sentences – words relate through grammar – strong subordinations	Language: – each element bears a complete sentence structure – "words" relate through cross-reference and parallelism – subtle subordination devices – *difrasismos*
Poems: – linear (or cumulative) narrative, both logically and aesthetically	Poems: – pairing, numerical symmetry, and common theme – self-containing verses
Chronicles: – specific theme – organized in chapters – linear argumentation	Annals: – founded on experience of *altepetl* (different themes) – organized by year count – years form separate units
Art and architecture decoration: – emphasis on certain elements that are centralized	Art and architecture decoration: – panels and series of self-contained elements – repeated into symmetrical whole

altepeme around the central district of a town (Lockhart 1993a: 294–296, 437–438). The cellular-modular organization is also visible in the form of the quincunx frequently used in material remains and cosmological patterns. In fact, the quincunx is so widespread in all sources that Clendinnen (1991: 234–235) declared it as a central root metaphor of Nahua culture (see also Maffie 2014: 159–163). The concept of polarities, however—so important in the general cosmology pairing complementary forces—was rarely expressed in the material culture or in other cultural fields, including sociopolitical organization (Lockhart 1993a: 440–441).

The fundamental organization patterns, such as the cellular-modular type, are also present in Nahua painting and writing. Pictorial writing resembles Nahua language insofar as single images serve as a core expression and additional visual items are added by way of agglutination (see, e.g., the deities with their many items of attire). Pictorial writing has often been undervalued because it does not (and typically cannot) present language in its richness, particularly not the complexity of Nahua oral diction (see, e.g., Lockhart 1993a:

330). However, pictorial writing should not (only) be compared to alphabetical writing presenting language but to visual forms of expression such as graphs, tables, or image painting. In doing so, it becomes visible how pictorial writing expresses fundamental forms of cultural structural organization.

The Nahuatl language expressed these forms of fundamental structural organization rather strongly. As such, it is an important medium for analyzing the Nahua experience and sense of reality as well as Nahua ways of finding and establishing order in a world of chaotic sense impressions. The language of any culture both expresses the culture's perception of reality and simultaneously forms and shapes this perception. Nevertheless, we should refrain from simple theories of linguistic relativism or determinism (such as discussed regarding the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," more or less based on Sapir 1948, Whorf 1956). Based on the Nahuatl songs in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*, León-Portilla proposed the theory of a poetical aestheticism. In the following sections, I propose an alternative theory about the (implicit) language theory in Nahua culture based on their general cosmovision and ontology as analyzed in the previous chapters. To this purpose, I first discuss the ubiquitous use of imagery in the Nahuatl songs and its relation to reality in more detail by focusing particularly on the imagery of "flower and song."

4 Nahua Imagery

4.1 *The Use of Imagery in Nahuatl Songs*

Judging from the surviving alphabetical sources, the Nahuas had an inclination for imaginary thinking dense with symbols, metaphors, and sensory imagery, an imagery that often combined sense impressions synesthetically. Some Mesoamerican linguists assume that the Nahuas used imagery ubiquitously, particularly in their formal, ritual, and ceremonial genres (see, e.g., Montes de Oca Vega 2009: 225). This assumption rests on the theory that ritual speech typically shows unique characteristics, with dense symbolism being a frequently employed stylistic device. This theory appears to be confirmed by the fact that the invocational dialogues, as recorded by Ruiz de Alarcón (1984), indeed abound in imagery. However, the Nahuas also used rich imagery in other genres covering historical or political subjects, although to different degrees (see Haly 2004: 173), as well as in everyday speech.

Apparently, this stylistic device is a common feature in Nahuatl in general. We do not know whether Nahuatl-speaking people in their everyday speech acts were actually aware of the imagery used for simple objects and concepts.

Take, for example, the name *petlazolcoatl* for “centipede,” combining the term for “snake” (*coatl*) with the one for “an old, worn-out woven reed mat” (*petlazolli*). Did Nahuatl speakers actually think “this is a snake looking like a frayed-edged reed mat” when they saw a centipede? Or did they just use the learned sound *petlazolcoatl* without reflecting its etymology? Did only poets reflect on and play with Nahua linguistic imagery? Was it a “part of a singer’s extensive training to come to this consciousness and even compositional mastery of it” (Gingerich 1992: 361)? We will most probably never know, and there is a danger in using etymology to reconstruct what people actually thought. However, etymology might tell us something about what was taken for granted and about implicit, tacit knowledge about reality (Haly 2004: 124; see also the analyses of metaphoric thought by Lakoff and Johnson 2003).

For non-Native speakers, many of the images are extremely difficult to understand, since they evoke a cultural habitus, a cultural experience of life, and a world far from our reach (see Rabasa 2011: 184, Lockhart 1993a: 374–375). Some images, nevertheless, draw on cross-culturally understandable experiences, for example, the images of the beautiful plumage of the Quetzal bird referring to the concept of beauty, of a necklace of precious stones referring to lineage and descent, or of eagles and ocelots referring to brave warriors (León-Portilla 1980a: 39). Sahagún and his informants recorded some of the most important Nahuatl figures of speech in book six of the *Florentine Codex* and illustrated their literate meanings (Sahagún 1969: VI, 241–260). Among the short images were, for example, “smoke and mist” referring to fame and honor, “tail and wing” to the commoners of the society, “heart and blood” to the precious drink cacao, or “making oneself into a rabbit or deer” to people who have abandoned their home and disobeyed their parents. The image of *in tlilli in tlapalli* refers figuratively to writing, books, cultural knowledge, and wisdom. When the Nahuas said of Quetzalcoatl that he had distributed the black and red among humanity, they were referring to the idea that Quetzalcoatl was both a cultural hero and a role model living an exemplary life (Montes de Oca Vega 2009: 231).

Doris Heyden (1986: 36–47) analyzed a large set of metaphors from the cultural fields of rulership, illness and curing, and agriculture and the earth. Many of these images come in pairs, but there were also quartets, quadruplets, and “necklaces of multiple images, all hovering luminously about the neck of a concept or thing” (Gingerich 1987: 97). Some root metaphors were shared across several Mesoamerican languages, for example, “one day, one night” for time, “mother and father” for ancestors, “her hand, her foot” for a person, or “water and mountain” for a town (Montes de Oca Vega 2004). Metaphors linking natural, botanical, and biological with cultural and societal domains were

particularly prevalent (Heyden 1986: 35, Montes de Oca Vega 2009: 233), for example, the basic metaphor "man is a plant" with several subcategories, such as "man and plants grow in the same way" or "society is a plant" (Knab 1986: 46). According to the central analogy between maize and humans, the human baby was imagined to grow in the womb as the maize seed in the earth, weeping infants were named maize blossoms, young girls were identified with the tender green maize ear, and young warriors with the matured cob (Clendinnen 1991: 181–183, 251, Haly 2004: 133).

The Nahuas expressed these images not only linguistically but also visually in their pictorial writing. The most famous of these images are the combined signs "water" and "mountain" for the *altepetl* (see Figure 7), "arrow" and "shield" for *war* (see Figure 8), "water" and "fire" for *war* (see Figure 9), or "mat" and "stool" for *authority* (see León-Portilla 2011b: 283). The images were also depicted in abstract ways. For example, one image in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* beautifully depicts two cartouches, one filled with the blue water symbol and the other filled with swirling reds; both are framed by reeds, flowers, two trees, and a ballgame court (see Figure 10; Leibsohn 2009: plate 6, page 125). In these pictorial metaphors "every line, form, color, and design in every art expression relayed a message" (Heyden 1986: 40). Accordingly, the colors used in depictions of the deities (e.g., black and red for Quetzalcoatl), along with the deities' forms and their regalia, all carried meaning and often used images that were also present in the language.

The images were used not only as figures of speech or shorthand visual signs, they were also employed to express complex thoughts, actions, or events. An image in the *Florentine Codex*, for example, depicts a ruler sitting on a mat woven from snakes, which disentangle and go off into different directions (see Figure 11). According to Emily Umberger, this image probably shows a ruler who is losing control of his subjects, with the individual serpents representing "the different strands of society that only a powerful ruler could coordinate" (2007: 16). A different image shows a ruler crashing down from a hill like a drunkard. This may refer to a ruler being defeated, since defeated rulers were traditionally called by the new name *Moquihuix* (the drunken one) (Umberger 2007: 16). Complex metaphors also referred to important cultural myths. The myth of Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui, for example, was commonly used in historical narratives to express political and social success and failure (Umberger 2007: 14). European colonial transcriptions of these narratives mainly distort these types of allegories, and only images known in European imagery were left intact, such as comparing a ruler with the sun. Most of the images were either taken literally or omitted altogether (Umberger 2007: 11).

4.2 *"Flower and Song": Aztec Poetry?*

Although the early friars had noted the frequent use of imagery in Nahuatl, Garibay was the first to systematically analyze these stylistic devices. He noted the particularly frequent use of twofold word pairings, a phenomenon he called *difrasismo* (roughly translated in English as "two-phrases-device") (Garibay Kintana 1940: 112). The Nahuas used the stylistic device of parallelism in all their linguistic genres. They often juxtaposed linguistic items that were closely related in sense, such as *Tictlazotlaz in monan, in mota* (You are to love your mother, your father). Frequently, they strung together several synonyms, up to five in a row: *Amo nimile, amo nitlale* (I have no fields, I have no lands) or *Zan ehuac, onya, cholo* (He departed, went away, fled). The *difrasismo* is a subtype of these parallelisms and names two things regarded as characteristic for the respective concept, for example *in cueitl in huipilli* (the skirt, the blouse, for a woman) or *in atl in tepetl*, shorthand *altepetl* (the water, the mountain, for a settlement) (Launey and Mackay 2011: 128; see also Bright 2000: 207–210). Many Nahuatl nouns are compound words like *altepetl* that conceptually link two ideas to express a third.

Garibay assumed that the stylistic device of the *difrasismo* worked as a metaphor. That means, he thought that the two images forming the compound served as a poetical depiction of a third concept. According to this interpretation, the imagery of "flower and song" (*in xochitl in cuicatl*) actually meant "poetry" (Garibay Kintana 1940: 112). Thus, "flower and song" was used as a metaphor for *poetry*, comparing the latter with the first because of similar features (their beauty and their evanescent, fleeting, and immaterial nature). Because "flower and song" appears so widely in Nahuatl songs, León-Portilla believed that it is a root metaphor for Aztec culture and expressed the philosophical approach of a poetical aestheticism. According to León-Portilla, all *difrasismos* were reflections of the fundamental Nahua idea of dual pairings and most profoundly of the dual creator divinity Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl (Lord and Lady of Duality). This dual divinity represented primal creative activity and rested "beyond all time, beyond the heavens, in *Omeyocan*" (León-Portilla 1963: 99). Poetry, expressed through the *difrasismo* "flower and song," was a way to "comprehend the origin of all things and the mysterious nature of an invisible and intangible creator" (León-Portilla 1963: 99, see also 102). The Aztec philosophers, yearning for this absolute, eternal reality behind the evanescence of earthly life, intentionally used items from the immanent earthly reality, such as flowers and songs, to point metaphorically to this ultimate reality.

To my knowledge, León-Portilla has never explained the reasoning behind this interpretation. According to my analysis, he combined several observations with various assumptions.

First:
a. The *Cantares Mexicanos* use many *difrasismos*, that is, metaphors.
b. Metaphors are generally used (only) in poetry.
a + b = c. The *Cantares Mexicanos* are poetry.

Then:
a. The *Cantares Mexicanos* frequently use the images of flowers and songs.
b. The *Cantares Mexicanos* are poetry.
a + b = c. The *difrasismo* "flower and song" means "poetry."

Furthermore:
a. The *Cantares Mexicanos* reflect on the nature of flowers and songs.
b. "Flower and song" means "poetry."
a + b = c. The *Cantares Mexicanos* reflect on the nature of poetry.

And finally:
a. The reflection on poetry in the *Cantares Mexicanos* revolves around the themes of ephemerality and truth.
b. The ultimate *difrasismo* is the invisible and intangible creator couple.
a + b = c. Man can grasp ultimate truth (only) through poetry.

If we attempt to follow this reasoning, we quickly see—even in the first of these deductions but certainly by the last one—that León-Portilla's theory of a poetical aestheticism expressed in the concept of *flower and song* rests on many elusive assumptions. Before I offer my own alternative interpretation of Nahua imagery in general and of "flowers and songs" in particular, let us review how other scholars have interpreted the image of "flower and song."

Without subscribing to León-Portilla's presumptive reasoning, Lockhart nevertheless went with the interpretation of "flower and song" representing a term referring to a particular oral genre. In his view, however, the "flowery song" did not refer to the Western concept of *poetry* but to a "finer, more artificial and highly organized type of song … as opposed to ordinary extemporaneous singing" (1993a: 394). This genre combined several aspects of the European concepts of *poetry*, *song*, *dance*, and *theater* (Lockhart 1993a: 393–394).

In contrast, Bierhorst (1985b: 17) criticized the translation of "flower and song" as "poetry" as well as the idea that this image referred to a particular oral

genre. Rather, he regards "flowers" and "songs" as distinctive metaphors used to express specific ideas, most importantly, those of war in combination with music (Bierhorst 1985b: 40–41). In his view, the image of a singer summoning flowers down from heaven referred to the idea of the singer summoning the spirits of dead ancestors. While the individual images of flowers and of songs are often combined with one another and even used interchangeably, Bierhorst (1985b: 18) thinks both metaphors more accurately represent a person than an abstract concept. Accordingly, the singers travel in shamanic journeys to heaven, or to the house of the sun, where the flowers and the songs, that is, the spirits of dead ancestors, dwell. From there, the singers finally bring the spirits/flowers/songs down to earth (Bierhorst 1985b: 18–21). While this interpretation might seem a bit far-fetched, Bierhorst nevertheless pointed to one important fact: the danger of projecting European poetic conceptions of floral beauty. In Nahua imagery, the garden was an essentially immanent place characterized by blossoming and withering and not a metaphor for any transcendent, ultimate, and absolute layer of reality.

Gingerich offered another interpretation of the image of "flower and song," inspired by Heidegger's theory of poetry being the root of all languages. In his interpretation, the imagery of the Nahuas formed "an ambiance of stylized reference that clustered about the twin images" of the *difrasismo* "offering a fluidity of signification." The *difrasismos* "are not ornamental figures elaborately pirouetting about the real thing" but expressions of the idea "that no linguistic act can have the power to obtain directly the reality which it indicates, to capture absolutely the very being of that thing we call its reference" (Gingerich 1987: 100).

According to Gingerich, the Nahuas never followed the myth of the metaphysics of presence, in which "words bear an originating, primal, and ostensive one-to-one relation to reality." Rather, they were "acutely aware of the illusory and simplified quality of this everyday view of language as signifier/signified" (Gingerich 1987: 100). The phrase *ayac nelli in tliquilhuia nican*, "No one among us truly and finally speaks here" self-referentially expresses this theory (Gingerich 1987: 101). Following Gingerich's interpretation, the Nahua poets knew that *all* language is, in principle, a metaphor, that is, it only approximates reality by pointing to similarities. Many interpretations of Nahua poetry explain the frequent use of imagery by referring to aesthetical reasons: the Nahuas used metaphors because it made their speech more beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. Similar to León-Portilla, Gingerich believed in an epistemological reason for the frequent use of imagery: the poets thought that language was essentially incapable of capturing reality and wished to emphasize this fact by using multiple strings of images.

In conclusion, the images of "flowers" and "songs" are used so frequently in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* that they can confidently be declared as their core imagery. In many cases, they are not solely used in their compound as the *difrasismo in xochitl in cuicatl*; they also appear in many other combinations and are embedded in a general imagery of the garden and of brilliance. The image of "flower and song" as a compound is the most famous and debated of all Nahuatl images. In León-Portilla's theory of a poetical aestheticism, this image paradigmatically represents the idea that the Nahua poets used *difrasismos* as metaphors pointing to a transcendent layer of reality. Gingerich even believed that the Nahua songs expressed an epistemology that all language principally works like a metaphor. All these scholars understood Nahua imagery as a metaphor and thus applied European language theories and understandings of the linguistic device of *metaphor* to Nahuatl imagery. In the following section, I discuss this interpretation in more detail and propose an alternative understanding.

4.3 *Nahua Imagery: Metaphorical?*

European philosophy has a long tradition of language theories. These have not only influenced commonsense understandings but have also been projected onto non-European cultures, in most cases implicitly and without reflexive awareness. This is also true for Mesoamerican cultures regarding theories of linguistic expressions of truth, the meanings of languages, and the value of writing systems. Some dominant strands within the European philosophy of language have influenced Mesoamerican scholarship more than others. One of the most important is surely the discourse originated by Plato (in contrast to the one started by Aristotle). Roughly sketched, this discourse searched for an absolute truth expressed through rational thought and language. It disdained rhetorics, poetry, and the arts because these were believed to merely stimulate emotions and produce illusions. Based on these premises, metaphors were regarded as emotional, irrational, and misleading, while only rational language could express objective truth (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 187–188).

According to the European understanding of the metaphor, this stylistic device does not express literal truths about the world and is thus generally not used in science, mathematics, or philosophy. Rather, it expresses figurative truths and is used in rhetoric and poetics. A metaphor merely *compares* the thing it designates with something else from a different domain that shows similar (but not identical) features; it projects one experiential domain onto another one. As such, it draws attention to these features of the designated thing, but it is only an "as if" relation. Hence, if we say, "love is a journey," we do not actually and logically mean love is identical to a journey. Instead, the

emotion love is *like* a physical journey in certain aspects: there is a starting point and maybe an endpoint, the lovers need to move and travel through changing scenery (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 119–122, Barcelona 2003: 3–4).

This discourse strongly shaped the idea of linguistic objectivism, which gained authority in Western epistemology with the rise of the modern natural sciences. In the twentieth century, this philosophy influenced linguistics, analytical philosophy and logic, and the first generation of cognitive sciences (Johnson 1990: xi). According to the objectivist correspondence theory of truth that these approaches presented, reality exists objectively and is structured with natural properties, categories, and conditions. These categories are represented in our minds by linguistic signs. While the signs themselves and their sounds, if spoken aloud, are arbitrary symbols, their relation to reality is not. Rather, the signs directly correspond to the objective categories of the world. Rational linguistic thought operating with logical propositions is thus an internal representation of external reality and expresses literal truth about the rational structures of reality (Johnson 1999: 83–84, 1990: x, Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 98–102).

This theory of linguistic truth is related to a philosophical tradition that was later called the "metaphysics of presence" (initially by Heidegger and later by the poststructuralists). This ideology believes in a preexisting, transparent, and immediate reality revealing its essence to the individual mind, which realizes its meaning directly in language. In this perspective, humanity can (at least theoretically) find the "God's-eye point of view" through rational reasoning (Vásquez 2011: 225). Although the "metaphysical emphasis shifted from a divine presence in logos to an individual, reflective self-presence" after the birth of modern subjectivity, the spoken word remained the place where meaning was most directly revealed (Tomlinson 2007: 11). Because the linguistic sign is regarded as identical to its meaning, truth about reality is believed to be present in an individual's mind and realized through language.

Philosophers proposing the linguistic turn fundamentally challenged the correspondence theory of (linguistic) truth and the metaphysics of presence. In his later works, Ludwig Wittgenstein perceived language as a flexible instrument and realized that the meanings of words change with the context in which they are used. Beyond that, poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida even deconstructed the idea that texts contain any fixed and stable meaning. In his famous critique of the *logocentrism* of earlier language theories, Derrida (1967a) argued that neither reality nor meaning are preexisting but reside only in secondary forms of semiotic communication. Linguistic signifiers do not directly correspond to extralinguistic reality. Rather, reality is only created by the linguistic and cultural play of signifiers. In sum, the fundamental criticism

of language theories such as the correspondence theory of truth and the metaphysics of presence argued that there is no "natural" relation between language and reality given in any human communication. Although this criticism came from within the European tradition, it helps in discerning the many implicit projections of language ideologies on non-European cultures.

Regarding Nahua culture, these ideologies have most strongly influenced the evaluation of their writing system as well as the analyses of their linguistic expression. Accordingly, the linguistic obscurity of many Nahua texts and their strong "poetic" flavor using extensive imagery has long been interpreted as the expression of a prerational perspective on the world. Based on this evaluation, the Aztec civilization was judged as presenting a preliterate stage of human development, a stage from which Europe had long evolved (see Gingerich 1987: 101). It was this background against which Garibay and León-Portilla argued in their theories of *difrasismos*. In their vehement argument for the acknowledgment of Nahua "poetic" expression, they (implicitly) referred to the Aristotelian tradition. According to this discourse, poetry (including metaphor) was generally valued as enhancing knowledge about reality (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 188). Thus, Garibay and León-Portilla attempted to positively reevaluate Nahuatl imagery by understanding it from a Western aesthetical perspective as the heart of aesthetic, poetic beauty.

This reasoning, nevertheless, rests on the assumption that Nahua oratorical expression is "poetic" in nature and its imagery metaphorical. It also rests on an essential distinction between literally expressed linguistic truth and metaphorically expressed impressions about similarities. Even though Garibay and León-Portilla attempted to appreciate Nahua imagery as valid expressions of truth by referring to the Aristotelian tradition, they nevertheless implicitly perpetuated the correspondence idea. Only if we generally assume that only rational linguistic thoughts directly correspond to reality, we need to declare imagery as metaphorical cross-mapping because it does *not* correspond logically to an objectivist reality structured by rational properties, categories, and conditions. Accordingly, we need to declare Nahua imagery as "poetical," that is metaphorical, because we do not understand the logic behind the Nahua imagery in which flowers and songs are considered identical regarding their essential nature. What happens if we leave these assumptions behind?

5 The Relationship between the Spoken Sign and Reality in Nahuatl

Understanding the imagery of "flower and song" as metaphorical projects European philosophies of language onto Nahua culture. The Nahuas, however,

had their own ideas about the relationship between their language, the spoken sign, and reality (or truth). These ideas were not expressed explicitly in any of the surviving sources (at least not in a way we understand). Nevertheless, the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* contain some self-referential elements that may help us to reconstruct an implicit language theory. In addition, we may also draw on characteristics of the language in general and on reconstructions of Nahua cosmovision. Consequently, the results are decidedly interpretative. As such, my method is similar to the ones scholars before me used, but the results differ significantly from earlier interpretations of Nahua language theory.

In some ways, Nahua imagery works as a metonymy rather than as a metaphor. The metonymy is a "conceptual projection whereby one experiential domain (the target) is partially understood in terms of another experiential domain (the source) included *in the same common experiential domain*," for example *effect* for *cause* or *face* for *person* (Barcelona 2003: 4, emphasis in original). While the metaphor helps in understanding facts and circumstances by comparing them to a different fact or circumstance, the metonym uses one element as stand-in for another based on the real, natural relation between these two elements. In doing so, the metonymy typically focuses on an essential feature of the entity, as in the synecdoche *face* for *person*, in which a part is used to stand in for the whole (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 36). The contiguous relation between the metonym and the entity it refers to is, in most cases, empirical, either directly physical (*face* for *person*) or qualitative (e.g., causal in *effect* for *cause*) (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 37, 59).

Applied to the *difrasismo*, the two elements of the compound were not used to refer to a third concept by projecting their features onto a concept from a different domain by way of comparison. Rather, the two elements were metonyms for the third concept. In the case of the *altepetl*, a settlement was not *compared* to "water" and "mountain," taking features of both to explain a feature of a third concept, the *settlement*. Instead, "water and mountain" was a metonymy for the place where people have settled. More specifically, *altepetl* was used as a synecdoche referring to two parts (water and mountain) that are considered essential for the larger whole (the settlement). In this, all elements were believed to be part of the same experiential domain and their interchanged usage helped to understand their essential nature.

Accordingly, the relationship between flowers and songs was metonymical and based on contiguity, that is, flowers and songs were regarded as having a direct physical relationship because they shared the same essential quality. In terms of Peircean semiotics,[10] both flowers and songs were believed to be re-

10 I follow Robert A. Yelle's (2013: 28–29) reading of Peirce's semiotics.

lated by spatiotemporal contiguity. This relationship, rather than being a symbolic one based on similarity, was regarded as a natural, existential one. Like smoke being a natural index of fire or the turning weather vane being a natural index of wind, both flowers and songs were natural indexes of the cosmic quality characterizing their essential nature. The images of "water" and "mountain" expressed this assumed essential level of reality, fusing the qualities of "water," "mountain," and "place to live," and thus immediately evoking the sensory associations connected to a place where people can live. This interpretation of Nahuatl imagery as metonymy rests on reconstructing their general sense of reality, in particular the concept of forces moving through an immanent cosmos and essential qualities being realized in the many distinctive layers of reality.

In the first colonial decades, Europeans often misunderstood this metonymical, rather than metaphorical, understanding of imagery in Nahua culture. When the Franciscans used imagery to explain Christian ideas, they often added the Nahuatl term *teoyotica* (in the way of *teotl*) to "indicate that a metaphor was being drawn between an earthly and a heavenly referent." With this, they wished to "uphold the distinction between those two realms in accordance with Christianity's transcendental dualism" (Burkhart 1992: 94). For example, the Franciscans understood the image of physical dirt as (merely) a symbol and metaphor for the impurity of the soul. The Nahuas, in contrast, used the term *teoyotica* to emphasize the essential unity of the referents, in this case their idea of a direct relationship between physical and mental dirt. Thus, by adding the Indigenous term *teoyotica*, the Franciscans were reinforcing the Indigenous immanent cosmovision rather than dismantling it.

According to this Indigenous cosmovision, the Nahuas did not view the frequent maize–human being analogy in their cultural imagery as metaphorical, instead "they were speaking literally, simply describing the world as they knew it to be" (Clendinnen 1991: 287). The imagery was "a statement of a perceptually unobvious but unremarkable fact: that human flesh and maize kernels were regarded as the same substance" (Clendinnen 1991: 251–252; see also Haly 2004: 133).

This literal understanding also refers to the imageries of flowers and songs. Following the interpretation of Nahua imagery as a metaphor, León-Portilla translated many images in the *Cantares Mexicanos* with "as if" relations: "Friendship is scattered about *like* a rain of flowers from the precious tree" (León-Portilla, E. Shorris, and S.S. Shorris 2001: 83, emphasis added). Bierhorst similarly translated the same phrase as "Comrades are scattering down *as* plumelike popcorn flowers" (Bierhorst 1985b: 163, emphasis added). The original Nahuatl *moquetzalizquixochintzetzeloa*, however, contains no direct "as if" referent but identifies the components with one another (see Bierhorst 1985b:

162). As a result, a more direct translation would be "Friendship *is* (identical to) plumelike popcorn flowers scattering down." The idea behind this expression appears to be that both referents were regarded as identical to each other in their essential nature. Everywhere in the *Cantares Mexicanos*, the singer sings flowers into existence. At the same time, songs were flowers with their roots planted in the earth, as in the following lines: *ma niquitta cuicanelhuayotl aya ma nicyatlalaquiya ma icaya tlpc* (Let me see the song-root, aya, let me plant it; let it stand upon the earth), or *itzmolini ye nocuic celia notlatollaquillo* (my song grows, my word-fruit sprouts) (translations by Tomlinson 2007: 80). Tomlinson summarized:

> These examples and others like them suggest that, for the creators of the *cantares* and their original audiences, the producing of flowers through acts of singing and drumming was something other than an elegancy of poetic image, something tending more toward a perceived, palpable reality. *Song flowered*, to put the matter almost as directly as it might be rendered in Nahuatl. (Tomlinson 2007: 66, emphasis in original)

In sum, the specific elements used in Nahua imagery, such as "flowers" and "songs," were considered to stand in a metonymic relationship to one another and to be natural indexes of one another because of their spatiotemporal contiguity. In all these, the linguistic signs were assumed to mirror an extralinguistic relationship between entities in the "real" world. In other words, linguistic signs (the words *water*, *mountain*, and *settlement*) were assumed to stand in the same relationship to one another as the entities from the external reality stood to one another (the physical entities water, mountain, and settlement).

Based on this result, I propose to go one step further. I believe that Nahua language theory, at least in reference to some genres, did not merely assume that linguistic signs *mirror* reality, since this assumption rests on the idea that language represents a symbol system essentially separate from reality. Rather, Nahuatl, or some genres of Nahuatl, was most probably considered a natural language that assumed a direct relationship between the linguistic signs and reality. Thus, not only the individual images stood in a metonymic relationship to one another and potentially to a third concept (in the *difrasismo*) but also the language itself, most importantly its sound was considered a natural index of the same essential quality.

This idea is reflected in a Nahuatl term, *nahualtocaitl*, recorded by Jacinto de la Serna. While de la Serna translated the term as "metaphor," Heyden (1986: 35) argued that it should be translated as a "disguised, hidden name." The term stood in close relation to the genre of the *nahuallatolli*, the language of the

nahualli shamans believed to reveal the inner quality of an entity. Based on analyses by López Austin (1967b, 1993: 153) and Gruzinski (1993: 158–161), I think it is safe to say that the *nahuallatolli* was regarded as a natural language. As such, it was based on a strong "connection" between the linguistic signs and "that which they signify" and on the assumption of a "special relationship of fitness to their referents" based on iconicity (Yelle 2013: 61). It is my impression that the Nahuas regarded not only the late colonial genre of the *nahuallatolli* as a natural language but also assumed a natural relationship between reality and the linguistic imagery for their precolonial songs.

In Tomlinson's (2007: 51) view, the close relation and identification of flower and song in the Nahua songs express the idea and practice of a ritual "songwork" in which sound is considered as an essential part of reality. This ritual songwork was also based on belief in the efficacy of sound's constitutive powers to influence and create reality, the powers to bring flowers into life: "Time after time … the singer sings forth blossomings, showers, and festoons of incarnate flowers" (Tomlinson 2007: 64). As Maffie suggested, songs and spoken sounds were similar experiences to wind—both initiated *malinalli* change. As such, speech and song transmitted "creative and transformative energy from humans to the cosmos and hence *vertically* from earthly to upper and lower layers of the cosmos" (2014: 287). The depiction of flowery song volutes in the pictorial codices reflects this idea visually, powerfully manifesting "the integrated, materialized indigenous world" (Tomlinson 1996: 275). This created a "metonymic circle connecting words to song, song to world, and world to words" (Tomlinson 2007: 78, also 27). The act of singing was seen in unity with material things (Tomlinson 2007: 64).

In contrast to European correspondence theories, Nahua songwork was not based on the idea that abstract linguistic thoughts represent reality, with thought and reality being two separate domains mapping each other. Rather, according to the idea of a natural language, the spoken sounds of language form a constitutive part of (extralinguistic) reality itself. Moreover, even thoughts may have been considered part of that reality, because thoughts—similar to emotions and behavioral inclinations—were stimulated by the forces continuously moving through the cosmos. While the European cosmovision sees the human being or, more precisely, *his thinking mind* as essentially separated from the world, the Nahua cosmovision regarded the human being in close interrelation with the world. Human individuals were fundamentally shaped and formed in their identities by this very world, including their thoughts, emotions, behavior, physical well-being, and social status. Human beings in the Nahua cosmos were more than disembodied minds searching for rational linguistic truth, and they were more than individuals disconnected

from space and time trying to understand the principle laws of "nature" and of a world separate from them.

Following this general sense of reality, the quality that characterized flowers in their radiating beauty and ephemerality also characterized the human aesthetic achievement of songs. Flowers and songs were regarded as manifestations of the same underlying principle of reality and thus as contiguous. Correspondingly, the sounds of language, as well as the images of pictorial writing, were regarded as natural indexes of the respective principle of reality, as direct depictions and expressions of the sonic or the visual layer of reality. Rather than being arbitrary, secondary *representations* of mental categories that merely mirror reality, language and writing were considered as direct *presentations*. That is, they were not secondary depictions of reality, as representations are, in which the signified (the presented) and the signifier (the representation) are separate from one another, but primary depictions of reality, in which the signified and the signifier are considered as identical.

In European understandings of literal truth, for example in the correspondence theory or the metaphysics of presence, no one-to-one relationship exists between the signifier and the signified, between the linguistic sign and reality. In these interpretations, the sign merely *represents* reality, and even though this relationship is quite close, the two parts of it are essentially separate from each other. In Nahua language theory, however, the signifier and the signified were blended into each other, with the linguistic sign *depicting* reality and being an essential part of reality itself. Furthermore, language was not so much understood as an abstract linguistic sign present in the mind of the individual; instead, language was fundamentally perceived as sound. Being sound, language could express one level of reality, the one of sound contrasting with the visual or tactile level of reality. The fact that Nahua linguistic styles drew heavily on visual and other sensory images suggests a strong correlation between the different sensory impressions reflecting the different levels of reality. In their essence, all these levels were interrelated by being realizations of the same essential qualities and cosmic forces.

In his analysis of Nahua songs, Tomlinson emphasized this "multiplicity of reference" between the many forms of human expression, such as language, iconography, music, ritual, choreography, or architecture (1996: 268). In his view, Nahuatl was not just a spoken word but closely interrelated with these other forms of expression, resulting in a semantics quite different in nature from the semantics of European languages. Because of its "intimate bond to structures external to speech," which was visible in the fundamental structures of grammar, Nahuatl had a strong "worldly materiality" (Tomlinson 1996: 268). Consequently, writing was not designed as a secondary system representing

language. Instead, it was a primary system with the same ontological status as language. It stood in the same relationship to reality as language and had "equivalent constitutive powers" (Tomlinson 1996: 269–270).

6 Nahua Imagery and the Problem of Rationality

The songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* frequently use imagery translated in most interpretations as metaphorical "as if" relations, such as "Friendship is scattered about *like* a rain of flowers from the precious tree" (León-Portilla, E. Shorris, and S.S. Shorris 2001: 83, emphasis added). According to my alternative reading, the phrase should be read literally as "Friendship *is* (identical to) plumelike popcorn flowers scattering down." This sentence, if understood as a literal proposition, clearly contradicts modern Western ontology, since a form of social interaction cannot be identical to an entity from the natural world.

Europeans, in their encounter with non-European cultures, particularly with the anthropological Other of Indigenous societies, were often confronted with the problem that Indigenous propositions contradicted their own supposedly rational world view rooted in the emerging natural sciences. In the nineteenth century, many scholars labeled ideas of Indigenous cultures that diverged from this European world view as irrational. Practices based on these ideas were often labeled as "magic," because they were presumably "based on error or on arbitrary decision" (Ian Jarvie 2017; see also B.-C. Otto 2011: 112–114). The most famous example of this approach is the work of James G. Frazer (1890). Frazer argued that Indigenous propositions that contradict the natural truth according to Western science have mistaken ideas of causality that rest on the mental laws of association and are based upon perceptions of similarity and contiguity according to the principles of imitation and contamination. Thus, "magical" action was rational in the sense of being goal-oriented but only deficiently rational regarding truth. Frazer's theory stands in a long tradition of European philosophies defining reason as the most evolved human faculty for understanding reality as well as in a tradition of denying Indigenous peoples this faculty. Accordingly, the category of *primitive people* drew heavily on the idea of primitivity as a deficiency in the rational faculty.

Frazer's approach was part of a larger debate in anthropology about the question of rationality, which focused primarily on the interpretation of the sentence "I am a red parrot," allegedly stated by the Brazilian Bororo people. In his close analysis of this debate, Jonathan Z. Smith (1972) found that Karl von Steinen had introduced the statement into the anthropological discourse in

the late 1880s. In his Brazilian expedition report, von Steinen had actually recorded that the Bororo understood this sentence metamorphically in the sense that they believed they became *arara* parrots after death. Most of the subsequent anthropological literature, however, ignored this context and interpreted the sentence literally (see J.Z. Smith 1972: 392–393). Consequently, the statement served as an example for the primitive mental capacities of the Bororo or, more sweepingly, of Indigenous people in general. Von Steinen had already voiced his belief that the Bororo could not distinguish men from animals (see J.Z. Smith 1972: 395). Frazer ([1910] 1935: 61), in his famous evolutionary theory about magic, religion, and science, used the sentence as evidence for his judgment that the primitives walked in a dense intellectual fog. Much later, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1966: 62) established the Bororo as the prime example for prelogical thinking. Referring to this example, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard discussed the problem of rationality in many publications (most famously, 1937, 1956). Most importantly, Evans-Pritchard argued that any analysis of a statement like this should include the cultural context. Thus, he removed the example from a discussion about Indigenous mentalities in general to place it into the context of a particular culture (see J.Z. Smith 1972: 405–409).

If we exclude the cultural context of the Bororo for the sake of a thought experiment (as Smith did, see 1972: 398), the sentence, if understood as a literal proposition, raises the fundamental question whether different standards of rationality exist in different cultures. According to Smith's analysis (1972: 410–412), there were different approaches in answering this question. Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl both took the sentence literally. Frazer applied his own rationality standards, judged the sentence as false and irrational, and explained this as an error or misapplication of rational procedures. Lévy-Bruhl, on the other hand, understood the sentence as an expression of a different standard of rationality, that is, of a primitive, prelogical standard. While later anthropologists interpreted the sentence nonliterally as symbolical or as fulfilling particular social functions, Evans-Pritchard revisited the question of literal truth. According to him, truth is always contextually determined and there are indeed different standards of rationality. In contrast to Lévy-Bruhl, however, he believed that these standards are principally cross-culturally intelligible if based on a deep analysis of the criteria of rationality in the respective culture (see J.Z. Smith 1972: 411; see also Epstein 2010: 1067–1068).

Such an analysis is also possible for Nahua cosmovision. The *Cantares Mexicanos* actually contain a song with a phrase strongly reminiscent of the sentence "I am a red parrot." In song four, the singer sings *nocuic nitozmiahuatototl*, which Bierhorst (1985b: 138–139) translated as "I, a parrot corn-tassel bird, I sing." Typically, this phrase is understood symbolically and not literally

and thus interpreted metaphorically as comparing the singer with a bird. Based on my interpretation of Nahua ontology, however, we could easily interpret the sentence literally. Accordingly, the singer expressed the idea that the singer itself, the parrot, the bird, and the corn tassel share their essential identity. As far as I know, there is no "corn-tassel bird" as a specific species of bird. Rather, I assume that the parrot, the bird, the corn tassel, and the singer are separate entities juxtaposed and merged into another, as is done in many songs with other entities. This might express the idea that all named entities share the same essential quality and are related to one another through the concept of coessence or *nahualli*.

The sentence may also refer to the shape-shifting transformation of the *nahualli* shaman into his animal counterpart, a transformation in which the human person of the shaman and the animal merged into one another to become one. Frazer would see the statement "I am a (singing) parrot (corn-tassel bird)" as an example of a misapplied explanation of a similarity that the Nahuas saw between the different items. Lévy-Bruhl would regard it as an expression of primitive prelogical thinking. I would say, however, that the Nahuas based this explanation on their cultural knowledge about different entities sharing the same essential quality. While I do not evaluate whether this knowledge is true, it nevertheless makes absolute sense within their ontology. In other words, it is rational (at least according to my limited understanding of logic). Thus, my interpretation assumes that the Nahuas principally used the same standard of rationality as I myself do, but that its application depends on the context of the basic paradigms of their culture.

In a further move, I also acknowledge that the Nahuas may have found the question of the rationality of their statement "I am a singing parrot corn-tassel bird" irrelevant, in the same way as I, a modern Western individual, might also use different standards to evaluate my own thinking (and acting). There might be different standards according to linguistic genre or to context and situation, for example, for the practice of divination (see Epstein 2010) as distinguished from a political speech. There might be noncognitive needs and necessities influencing my linguistic expressions. We might also pragmatically and happily live with many inconsistencies and incoherencies in our world view and our expressions.

In conclusion, some expressions in Nahua songs contain cues not only to an underlying implicit language theory but also to general Nahua ontology. All translations and interpretations of Nahua songs and of the imagery used as metaphorical, metonymical, or literate also present interpretations of their general ontology and, in many cases, evaluations of this ontology.

CHAPTER 8

Materializing Reality in Writing: Nahua Pictography

Having reflected in the last chapter on highly abstract ideas about the relationship between the linguistic sign and reality, we now take a breath by learning about the basics of the Nahua writing system. Following a short overview of the history of writing systems in Mesoamerica, I describe the principles of Nahua writing in general and examine the social practices of "reading" and performing the written texts. After analyzing Indigenous concepts of the *book* and the *author* and the significance of the materiality of paper, I finally discuss interplays between orality and literacy in Nahua culture.

1 The History of Writing Systems in Mesoamerica

Writing was invented in Mesoamerica in several places and at different times. Some systems evolved independently from one another, others were secondary developments initialized by cultural contact (Houston 2001: 338).[1] In general, Mesoamerican writing systems include both sound-writing and what is called *thought-writing* (Houston 2001: 338), that is, the depiction of ideas in graphic form. North and South American systems of thought-writing were elaborate. Among them were the *khipu* (knotted strings) and *tocapu* (woven textiles) of the South American Inca (Cummins 1994, Urton 2003, Urton and Brezine 2011), the South American pre-Inca *chuquibamba* (tapestries) (Zuidema 2011), the rich iconography of the South American Moche (Jackson 2011), the woven designs of the Huichol in northern Mexico (Schaefer 2002), and the North American Navajo and Pueblo sand paintings (Parezo 1983). In Mesoamerica, archaeological evidence reveals four major writing systems with regional variants: Olmec, Zapotec, Maya, and Mixtec.

Reconstructing the history of early writing systems poses many methodological problems. Most pressingly, samples are poor and patchy, with only isolated, almost unreadable, and difficult-to-date specimens (see Houston 2004: 280, 308). In general, writing appears to have been invented in pre-state cultures with intensive agriculture and hereditary social ranking but prior to extensive social stratification and political centralization (Marcus 1976: 37). In

1 For relevant overview literature on Mesoamerican writing systems, see Boone (1973), Marcus (1976), Arellano Hoffmann, Schmidt, and Hofmann-Randall (1997).

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contrast to early writing in Mesopotamia, Mesoamerican early writing served to record chronological frameworks, histories, myths, and rituals rather than economic subjects. In the Early Formative Period (1500–900 BCE), a variety of abstract symbols were written on sculpture, ceramics, and roller stamps, suggesting a complex and elaborate iconography (Marcus 1976: 42–43). Later writing prevalently recorded genealogies and political successions and served the political legitimation of ruling dynasties (see Marcus 1976: 15, 143, 435–445).

In the Middle Formative Period (900–400 BCE), the earliest evidence of sound-writing in linear sequence combined calendric and numerical information with syntactically ordered linguistic statements in Olmec and Zapotec writing. Sometimes, phonographic clues for syllables were included (Houston 2001: 292, 339). Many typical Mesoamerican icons and symbols, such as the hill sign, were already present in the rich iconography of the Olmec civilization, with its intense cosmic scenes showing world trees and mountains (Houston 2001: 339). The longest and most sophisticated surviving texts from the time of the turn of the eras (100 BCE–100 CE) were found in Veracruz in the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This Isthmian writing, sometimes called "Epi-Olmec," probably descended from Olmec writing (Houston 2001: 339, 2004: 296–298).

Independently from the Olmecs, the Zapotecs in the Valley of Oaxaca invented their own writing system. Most surviving Zapotec inscriptions are from Monte Albán, the capital of the region that thrived for almost a millennium (ca. 500 BCE–500 CE). The most famous of these are the "Danzantes," dancing human figures carved in stone featuring glyphs on their bellies (Houston 2004: 276, 293–295). The one hundred or so known glyphs, with few examples of linear arrangement, most probably depict calendric data, toponyms, and some logograms (see Urcid 2011). In the Valley of Oaxaca, Zapotec writing was later replaced by the Mixteca-Puebla Style (Urcid Serrano 2001: 343).

The script of the Maya is the best known of all Mesoamerican writing systems and is in the most advanced stage of decipherment.[2] The first texts of unambiguously Maya origin, including the chronological long count, date from around the beginning of the Common Era (Marcus 1976: 40–41, Houston 2004: 299). During the Classic Maya civilization (ca. 300–900 CE) on the Yucatán Peninsula, the complex phonographic Maya script was fully formed. It includes lengthy inscriptions on stone monuments or shorter ones on ceramic vessels and other media, and is arranged mainly in glyph blocks in doubled columns.

2 For a fascinating history about the deciphering of the Mayan script, see M.D. Coe (2012); for key texts in this history, see Houston, Mazariegos, and Stuart (2001); for an excellent introduction to reading Mayan script, see M.D. Coe and van Stone (2001).

The glyphs are generally combinations of logograms and signs for syllables. The most striking feature of Maya script is its creative use of allographs—several signs serving the same function—with different registers, ranging from the abstract to animated signs, for example, in the form of human faces, animals, or hybrid creatures. Mayan script was also diverse; it had several regional variants and changed significantly over the many centuries it existed. Though Mayan script was no longer written on stone monuments after the Classic Maya civilization collapsed around the tenth century CE, it continued on in other media, most prominently in codices (Stuart 2001: 340, Houston 2004: 299).

In Central Mexico, Teotihuacan writing (ca. 350–450 CE) is generally considered a predecessor to the later writing systems of the Postclassic Period. The little archaeological evidence consists primarily of emblems on murals with isolated word signs in pictographic and narrative settings. These emblems had a considerable impact on the larger region, including the Valley of Oaxaca (Prem 2001: 346, Houston 2004: 277; see also Taube 2011). Thus, the bas-reliefs with day and name signs and narrative scenes found in the Postclassic Central Mexican towns of Cacaxtla and Xochicalco display features of both Teotihuacan visual imagery and Mayan script and iconography (Prem 2001: 346, Houston 2004: 278).

In the Valley of Oaxaca, a new writing system called the Mixteca-Puebla Style developed in the Late Classic and Early Postclassic Period. In contrast to many of the earlier Mesoamerican writing systems, Mixtec writing is characteristically nonphonographic and largely pictorial, although it contains some linguistically inspired imagery, such as idiomatic expressions. Seen from the perspective of European writing theories, which consider phonographic writing as more advanced, the use of a nonphonographic writing system in Postclassic Central Mexico is typically considered a regression. However, as Houston indicated, all writing systems in Mesoamerican history combined pictorial iconography with linguistic information. The newer Mixteca-Puebla Style might have "more effectively integrated art and writing" and thus provided "a satisfactory solution of a tension that had existed since late Olmec times" (Houston 2001: 340). The appeal of such a nonphonographic system might also have been to communicate meaning across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. It also avoided "the problem of how to express the tonal differences and the changing tonal patterns" of the Mixtec language (M. Jansen 2001: 344; see also Houston 2001: 339–340).

The Nahua writing system is similar to Mixtec writing and part of a general Postclassic International Style shared in the regions of Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxcalla, and the Basin of Mexico. The following sections describe this Central Mexican writing style as used in the manuscripts from the Mixtec, Borgia, and

Aztec groups as well as in colonial hybrids such as the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*. The description is primarily based on the work of Boone (see, most importantly, Boone 1994a, 2000, 2007), who published the most systematic current analyses of Aztec and Mixtec writing, based on earlier studies by Mary E. Smith (1973), Charles E. Dibble (1971), Hanns J. Prem (1992), M. Jansen (1992), León-Portilla (1992c), and Joyce Marcus (1992).

2 The Writing System of the Nahuas

2.1 *Introducing Nahua Writing*

The writing systems invented in the Americas use two basic types of writing, either individually or in combination: *phonographic* and *semasiographic* systems (see Boone 2011b: 380, 384–387). Phonographic systems record the sound of language and are also called *glottographic* (referring to the language or the word) or *logographic* (referring to words as units of meaning). These are "closed" scripts relating to a particular language and culture. Texts are typically organized in the form of a list. Semasiographic systems record information or thoughts with visual markers independently of language. These are "open" discourse systems, which can potentially cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Some semasiographic systems use abstract tactile signs, such as the knots in the Inca *khipu* system, which are organized like a table. *Pictographic* systems, another subset of semasiographic systems, use mimetic visual imagery, including iconic, conventional, figural, descriptive, and emblematic signs, and are organized like diagrams (Boone 2011b: 380, 384–387).

Central Mexican writing is an open pictorial semasiographic system with few phonographic references. According to Hanns Prem and Berthold Riese (1983: 170), this system used two different modes: narrative pictography and glyphic information. Separating these two modes, however, projects the European concepts of *image* and *text* and does not account for the fluidity in the modes of expression within the Central Mexican pictorial system (see Boone 2000: 32–33). Pictorial writing systems typically provide little information on the linguistically expressed thoughts and feelings of people or on their motivations for action. Instead, they elaborately express nonlinguistic thoughts, experiences, and concepts of reality.

2.1.1 Basic Components

The basic components of Central Mexican writing, comparable to the vocabulary of phonographic systems, are signs and symbols. Nahua and Mixtec styles share a basic symbol set (Boone 2000: 11) and differ mainly in stylistic aspects,

including the design of forms, the organization of signs into coherent compositions, and "such other expressive characteristics as the hardness or softness of line, the quality of light and color, and so on" (Boone and M.E. Smith 2003: 186).

For a first formal analysis of a text, it is helpful to distinguish between pictograms referring to the depicted object through visual resemblance; ideograms conveying ideas, concepts, and things by natural association and metonymy or arbitrarily by convention; and phonetic references (Boone 2000: 33). Frequent pictograms are, for example, houses, stones, instruments, or water (see Figure 12). Some ideograms are actually compounds of pictograms, for example, a shield and spears for *war* (see Figure 8) or water and a burned field as a metonymy for *war* (see Figure 9). Other ideograms refer to abstract concepts by way of convention, such as the symbols for *movement*, *song*, or days of the calendar (see Figure 12).

Within this frame, Nahua writing covers six fundamental categories of information: (1) dates, durations, numbers, and amounts; (2) actors such as deities, human individuals and groups, or animals; (3) places, including particular locations and environments; (4) events and actions; (5) objects, instruments, and equipment; and (6) abstract concepts, for example, *movement*, *life*, *song*, and diverse qualities and attributes.

(1) Dates are typically depicted by referring to the two calendars: the *tonalpohualli* and the *xihuitl*. Years are marked by a year cartouche; the particular counted year is shown with the symbol for the respective year bearer and a number. Dates combine one of the twenty day symbols with a number between one and thirteen expressed with the respective count of dots. Greater amounts of things are indicated with conventionalized symbols, for example, banners for the quantity of twenty, feathers for four hundred, and a bag of incense for eight thousand. The duration of events is, in most cases, implied by giving the start and end dates; sometimes the abstract symbols for *day* or *year* are combined with the symbol for a certain number of things (see Boone 2000: 39–44, 2007: 36–39).

(2) The typical actors in the manuscripts are deities, human beings, animals, or figures combining elements of all three. Deities exhibit a rather distinctive iconography (or, more precisely, contemporary readers identify figures with specific iconographic features as deities). Deities typically have anthropomorphic and zoomorphic bodies painted with distinctive body paints, wear elaborate costumes and jewelry, and carry specific objects (see Figure 13). Human *teixiptlame* are presented in the same way and are usually not distinguishable from deities. The Lords of the Day in the divinatory almanacs are typically accompanied by the thirteen volatiles (see Boone 2007: 39–49). Human beings

are painted as icons in an emblematic way that emphasizes particular body parts and clothing as well as the instruments they carry. They exhibit distinctive markers for ethnicity, gender, age, rank, occupation, and temporary status (see Boone 2000: 44–48). The names of human individuals are given by iconographically rendering their birth date (among the Mixtecs) or their personal names (among the Nahuas) (Boone 2000: 48). Only in ambiguous cases or when names cannot easily be depicted pictorially are the signs for Nahua names complemented with phonetic markers (similar to Spanish names in early colonial days) (Boone 2000: 35–38). In the divinatory codices, human figures are rarely named, since they function as anonymous actors and represent groups of people or specific actions (Boone 2007: 49–50). In general, the poses and gestures of deity and human figures appear to be extremely important to the meaning but are thus far only rudimentarily understood (Boone 2007: 50).

(3) Signs for specific locations combine a topographical marker and a qualifier. Topographical markers are, among others, the conventionalized signs for a hill, a platform, bodies of water, ball courts, or sky bands. The qualifiers identify the specific location by expressing pictorially the name of the place. For example, *Tenochtitlan* (Nopal Cactus on Stone) is a cactus growing on a stone, *Coatepec* (Serpent Hill) is a hill topped by a serpent, or *Chapultepec* (Grasshopper Hill) flowing water and a hill topped by a grasshopper (see Figure 14). In some narratives, the general character of a place is more relevant than its specific name and is accordingly depicted in a more elaborate way. In stories, places are actually complete scenes with architectural and landscape elements, such as canals and rivers, roads, chinampas, cloudy skies, or a night sky (Boone 2000: 49–55).

(4) Events and actions are typically depicted using characteristic elements of the respective event or with stylized images of the people performing the respective action. Births were painted by the Mixtecs by showing a newborn connected with an umbilical cord to its recently married parents and by the Nahuas with a cradleboard accompanied by the personal name of the newborn. Marriages are presented with lineages of descent or, more concretely, with a man and a woman facing each other. Deceased people are painted with closed eyes or bound in a funerary bundle. The codices show many more human activities, among them accessions and foundings, conversations, travels, wars, conquests, and hunting. They also show natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, solar eclipses, and epidemics. All these events and activities are depicted in conventionalized, stylized pictograms and ideograms (Boone 2000: 55–61).

(5) The manuscripts show many objects. In narrative stories, these are typically held and manipulated by the actors, while in the divinatory almanacs,

they are often ritual offerings or qualifiers for time periods or deities. Signs for objects represent either actual objects operated by the actors in a concrete scene or refer in an indexical or symbolic way to a type of action, such as bloodletting. The signs for objects are stylized representations of the visual appearance of the respective object. The main categories of depicted objects are ritual instruments, tribute or trade objects, occupational tools, and musical instruments (Boone 2007: 56–59).

(6) Central Mexican pictography conveys abstract concepts in two main ways. First, concepts such as *movement* are expressed with abstract visual signs that in one way or another resemble or reflect the quality of the abstract concept. Second, concepts are expressed with cultural metaphors, or rather metonyms (e.g., the burning temple for *war*, see Figure 19). For example, the concepts of *danger, destruction*, and *conflict* could be presented by the sign for crossroads, because crossroads were considered as inherently dangerous places in Nahua culture.

2.1.2 Visual Mode

In pictographic writing, not only the basic vocabulary carries meaning but also the syntax, which in this case refers to the spatial arrangement of the signs, including the spaces in between. Meaning is also conveyed by the "combination of forms and colors, … organization of space, the relations between figures and ground, contrasts of light and shade, geometrical laws received and employed, the activity of reading," or "the varying complexity of the representations" (Gruzinski 1993: 13). Differently from most forms of (modern and print) phonographic writing, the actual visual appearance of the sign, including every line, form, color, or design, is a crucial element of its meaning. Colors, for example, are essential for the identification and qualification of deity personae, such as black and red signaling Quetzalcoatl. The efficacy of the respective text depends not only on the "accuracy in recording concepts and facts" but also on "its poetics, balance, and graphic execution" (Boone 2011a: 197).

Central Mexican pictography displays a characteristic painting style and distinctive preference for specific forms of graphic expression. Colors, for example, are generally clear and bright, with "candid reds and yellows jostling deep blues and greens" (Clendinnen 1991: 230). In general, the painting was nonrepresentative, nonrealistic, and emblematic. The depiction of landscapes and maps "did not attempt to create mimetic, illusionistic renderings of actual topographical forms but provided instead conceptual clues to navigating one's way through space, territory, and time" (DiCesare 2008: 7). This emblematic style oscillating between the concrete and the abstract is even more obvious with regard to depicting human beings and anthropomorphic deities. These

figures are strongly stylized and their faces show no traces of individuality. Emotions are only rarely portrayed in the form of tears or as gestures signaling disapproval or regret (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010: 313–333). Human bodies are painted in nonrealistic, out-of-scale proportions, with the head and the extremities rather large compared to the trunk. The postures and gestures emphasized in this way were most probably relevant to the meaning of the respective images, but we have little knowledge about this meaning, thus far (see Boone 2007: 50). The most frequent postures are sitting, genuflecting, walking, and jumping but also activities such as saluting and dismissing, pointing and counting, domineering and surrendering, or dying (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010: 227–258, 281–311). The faces of human figures—be they human beings, *teixiptlame*, or deities—are depicted in profile, whereas the body is typically not in complete profile but bent toward the front so that the figures' jewelry, costumes, and attire are clearly visible.

In sum, the human body functions as a two-dimensional blueprint, with the body parts as modules presenting the meaningful aspects of posture, gesture, body paint, dress, and adornment (see Figure 13). As such, the qualifying aspects relating the person to society and the cosmos are emphasized instead of the individual. In Mixtec codices, the human body plays a strong role as a carrier of meaning. Both in Mixtec pictorial painting and in Mixtec language, the body and its processes and organs are utilized frequently as cultural metaphors, such as for social or political relations (Monaghan 1994: 95–96).

In the early colonial years, Indigenous painters gradually adopted European Renaissance forms of representation, notably the idea of the three-dimensional perspective, the topographical mapping of space, and the naturalistic rendering of the human body and its silhouette. This transformation is clearly visible in the images included in the *Florentine Codex* (see Figure 15; see Baird 1988, Escalante Gonzalbo 2003). The most striking example of colonial change is the depiction of Franciscan Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico, on folio 44v of the early colonial *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (see Figure 16). The bishop's face is painted with a frontal perspective, directly looking at the viewer of the painting. In Rabasa's interpretation (2011: 35), the Indigenous *tlacuilo* who had painted this image used the new frontal perspective intentionally to reflect the bishop's theology and concept of the human person. Similarly, the general change from the traditional stylized emblematic rendering of human figures to the naturalistic European style in the first colonial decades most probably indicates a gradual adoption of European Christian concepts of the individual, as Gruzinski (1993: 37) argued. Whereas the traditional stylized figures had emphasized the three main animistic centers of the human being in their relation to the cosmos, the European painting style, in

comparison, highlights the Christian dualism of body and soul and the autonomy of the individual faced with the divinity (Gruzinski 1993: 37).

2.1.3 Visual Structure

The visual structure of any pictorial text influences its general meaning. Two basic reading order formats exist: (1) Aztec annals and Mixtec genealogical and historical screenfolds use a unidirectional reading order with the story told in a continuous narrative following a single line or parallel lines. With exceptions, the Aztec annals are read from left to right or from bottom to top. The Mixtec histories flow back and forth in a boustrophedon pattern. (2) Cartographic histories and divinatory almanacs use an open, un-predetermined reading order, which enables the reader to choose where to start and how to proceed (see Boone 2000: 61–63).

Regarding the general visual structure of Central Mexican pictography, Boone analyzed two genres in detail: the historical accounts and the divinatory codices. The divinatory codices present information in autonomous but complementary units, distinct from the continuous story lines of the historiographical texts. The divinatory codices contain a relational type of knowledge that graphically expresses the relationships between variables and the correspondences between "units and cycles of time and the meanings that adhere to them" within the sacred calendar and within the cosmos (Boone 2007: 3). According to Boone (2007: 68), the structures of many sections of the divinatory almanacs are comparable to "the charts, graphs, diagrams, and algebraic and other notational systems" used in the modern Western sciences. They simplified, abstracted, marked, labeled, and schematized the complex observed phenomena of nature and "were intended to reveal the structure and functioning of the cosmos in all its complexities" (Boone 2007: 238). Appropriately, Boone acknowledges these almanacs as "equivalent to our books of philosophy, theoretical physics, astronomy, and astrology" (Boone 2007: 3). Some graphics are organized in sequential lists, others in tables composed of multiplied and layered lists, and still others in diagrams formed in a particular shape (such as the shape of a deerskin). Composite tables presented "a great quantity of precise information in a structure that facilitates ready inspection of individual data and quick comparison between potentially related phenomena." This formed an efficient system of recording knowledge that captured diverse nuances of cosmic relationships that "would be impossible to render in words and sentences" (Boone 2007: 75). The *tonalamatl* conceptualized the Mesoamerican experience of *tonalli* time as distinctive units featuring particular qualities and interlocked in continuously expanding cycles. It did so in a visible, material form that allowed the diviner to recognize and interpret these

features and to intimately understand their qualities across the several layers of cycles by combining information gathered from several almanacs (Boone 2007: 65). As such, the *tonalamatl* depicted the "complex confluence of powerful forces" in the form of a cognitive map of time, tide, place, and direction that helped the diviner to navigate these currents and to guide proper living (Maffie 2014: 427).

The pictorial conventions used in the historical accounts differ considerably from those in the divinatory almanacs. A systematic analysis of the visual structure of the historical manuscripts is possible due to their relatively high number (see Boone 2000: 9). Based on Robertson's first typology ([1959] 1994: 62–65), Boone distinguished three basic historiographical genres: (1) time-line presentations, (2) event series, and (3) cartographic presentations (2007: 64–86). Each of the genres emphasized a different aspect of the information relevant for histories: time, event, and location. No genre focused on a fourth information aspect that plays an important role in European histories: actors and participants (Boone 2000: 86).

(1) Time-line presentations, or annals, were used by local communities to record their histories; the *Codex en Cruz* (Dibble 1981), for example, depicts the history of Texcoco. Many of the surviving annals express the imperial history of the Mexica (e.g., parts of the *Codex Mexicanus*, Mengin 1952). They are structured according to a constant measure of time at an unchanging pace. Events are attached to continuous line-of-year cartouches and year markers with actors typically unspecified. While the time-line presentations are firmly rooted in a constant flow of time and show significant events for a particular location, they are less suited for depicting spatial relationships, contemporaneous events, and changing actors (Boone 2000: 65–70).

(2) Event series (or "*res gestae* presentations") were used by the Nahuas in some cases for migration stories and were the genre the Mixtecs preferred for their genealogies (e.g., the *Codex Selden/Añute*, Caso 1964). They are arranged in a flexible time count following a string of events in a narrative fashion with a story beginning, development, and conclusion. Even though dates and place-names are typically added to the events, time and place in some cases remain ambiguous (Boone 2000: 70–77).

(3) Cartographic presentations were often used for migration stories and were largely painted on *lienzos* (e.g., the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* or the *Codex Xolotl*, Dibble 1980). Distinct from the *tableau mode* of European geographic maps, with their stable spatial depiction of territory, the cartographic presentations are painted in *tour mode*, in which the spatial arrangement depended on the relevance and extent of events. Thus, space is conceptualized as an internal or experiential place and not as geographic space (Boone 2000:

165). While cartographic presentations focus on the experiences of a particular group of people, they also provide options for depicting other people with whom the group is interacting. Time can be indicated by added dates but often remains ambiguous. Cartographic presentations are less suited for conveying sequential events occurring at one location (Boone 2000: 77–82).

To counteract the disadvantages of each of these historiographical genres, the *tlacuiloque* also blended several genres (e.g., the *Mapa Sigüenza*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia 2018). Many Nahua and Mixtec *lienzos* are basically cartographic representations accommodating a series of events at particular places. Annals, on the other hand, are often interrupted to provide more space for special events, as seen in the *Codex Boturini*.

In conclusion, the divinatory codices and the historical accounts are two of the most important genres found in the surviving Central Mexican manuscripts. Their manifold visual structures reveal complex solutions for visually conveying information.

2.2 *Reading the Texts*

Reading the pictorial manuscripts presents many problems for contemporary readers because Central Mexican pictography is highly polysemous on multiple levels. First, the meaning of the basic vocabulary is often unknown, as is the level on which the vocabulary is used in specific textual contexts. The different levels of meaning in Mexican pictography can be better understood with the help of Peirce's semiotic theory. Peirce ([1940] 1955: 102, 104, 109) distinguished between three types of signs: (1) the icon depicts its subject through similarity or analogy, (2) the indexical sign refers to its subject through metonymy (with a single element of the subject referring to the whole), and (3) the symbol depicts its subject through a conventional connection. These categories overlap frequently in Nahua pictography. A serpent, for example, can be read iconically as referring to the actual animal (e.g., in the context of a ritual offering), indexically as a qualitative element of a deity, or symbolically as a day sign. Syntax sometimes provides some clues as to which particular meaning is the most relevant for understanding a text passage (Boone 2007: 33–34).

In many cases, however, this polysemy presents a serious problem for contemporary readers because the Nahuas and the Mixtecs used a great deal of visual imagery to express experiences and knowledge. A quetzal bird, for example, principally conveys the idea of *preciousness* and can mean many different things. Standing in a cosmic tree, it might depict an episode with an actual bird, but it might also refer symbolically to prosperity. Depicted on the backpack of a merchant, it symbolically refers to successful trading. Embraced by a woman in a marriage almanac, it refers to her virtue and fidelity. The quetzal

feathers in the headdress of a deity might refer to many of these symbolical meanings but also indexically to the animal as a qualitative element of the deity (Boone 2007: 35). This complex "visual simultaneity of meaning" (Maffie 2014: 230) becomes obvious for the flower motif, one of the better understood images. This motif may express

> one, several, or all of the following: blood, preciousness, transformative power, creation, life, language, song, nobility, government, the Fifth Sun, an era of the calendar, joy, love, games, sexual pleasure, female sexuality and genitalia, venereal diseases, and the four orientations of the cosmos. (Maffie 2014: 230)

This polysemy allowed the skilled Indigenous reader many different interpretations "to accommodate distinct reading occasions and interpretative ambitions" (Leibsohn 2009: 105). The resulting fluidity and flexibility of the pictorial mode of recording knowledge generated discourse among the readers rather than reproducing fixed testimonies. Instead of triggering the reading of linguistically fixed speech, the "exegetical voice was cued by the images and their placement and colour" and guided by the knowledge and experience of the interpreter (Clendinnen 1991: 232). This fluidity, however "should not be mistaken for indecision or elusiveness … the capacity of its imagery to summon meaning traced, and abided in, distinct patterns and limits." At the same time, the imagery "calls upon a wide range of affects and logic, yet this evocative range had to be able to shift, like a view through a kaleidoscope" (Leibsohn 2009: 105).

Contemporary attempts to read the manuscripts can grasp only a small portion of these potential meanings. Scholars such as Boone (2007: 87), Michel R. Oudijk (2011: 150–151), and Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011: 186–198) follow relatively similar procedures for reading pictorial sources. First, they analyze the pictorial elements iconographically and identify the theme. Second, they compare the image with similar images and depictions of similar themes in the same manuscript and in other pictorial codices (e.g., in other divinatory almanacs of the same type). Third, they analyze alphabetical glosses if applicable. Fourth, they create a triangulation with alphabetical texts written by the early colonial chroniclers dealing with similar subjects. Fifth, they search for inspiration for a potential interpretation in later colonial or contemporary evidence about Indigenous concepts and practices. Finally, they provide a subjective interpretation of what the visual composition might implicate for the narrative.

Dana Leibsohn used a similar method to produce her highly fascinating interpretation of the colonial *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, a hybrid manuscript

combining traditional pictography with alphabetical texts. Rather than reading the alphabetical texts alone—as many previous scholars had done—Leibsohn included the images in her interpretation of the story and thus gained a much deeper understanding of the story told in the manuscript. For example, she compared different paintings of the town of Cholula with regard to scale and color choice. As a result, she discovered that Cholula was painted in a larger scale, in more detail, and in lusher colors in the period after its Toltec conquest (see Figures 17, 18). This may suggest that the authors were expressing that Cholula had found its true glory and flowering cultural heights only under Toltec rule (Leibsohn 2009: 113). Potential readers experience this transformation in a more immediate visual way, whereas it would have taken many words to express it verbally.

> In bringing into play relations of form and colour and spatial effects, offering modes of reading and multiple approaches, the "paintings" show an intuitively and immediately perceptible specificity, only partially able to be verbalized by virtue of their "iconicity," to borrow the language of the semioticians. (Gruzinski 1993: 52)

One of the most pressing problems for reading the pictorial manuscripts is our lack of cultural knowledge, which is indispensable for understanding the meaning of individual signs and the level of meaning implied in the respective context. Moreover, the visually expressed meaning does not necessarily transfer easily into linguistic expression. Even if contemporary readers could understand the perceptual as well as conceptual meaning and "perceive this dimension intuitively" (Gruzinski 1993: 13), it would still be extremely difficult to verbalize and thus to transcribe.

Finally, contemporary scholars use a practice of reading that is supposedly quite different from the one Indigenous interpreters used. Scholars typically derive their "interpretative authority by pulling apart the text from its points of reference and then reifying the connection between the text and its scholar-reader." The Indigenous readers, however, probably formed a link with the text "through bodily, or interior, knowledge in order to draw upon the necessary connections that exist between the text and the cosmos to which it refers" (Arnold 1999: 204). Contemporary, non-Indigenous, scholarly interpretations of Indigenous manuscripts will always present only a pale reflection of a rich cultural knowledge that is mainly lost to us today.

2.3 *The Problem of Phoneticism*

In general, Central Mexican writing records neither speech nor language. Two early colonial manuscripts, the *Codex Xolotl* (Dibble 1980) and the *Codex Boturini*, contain a series of signs attached to a human figure, which might be interpreted as depicting a speech act in a speech bubble (Boone 2016). This phenomenon, however, seems to be a rare exception. Some early colonial Central Mexican manuscripts enclose pictorial or ideographic signs that were apparently used, according to the rebus principle, as phonetic indicators. That means they did not indicate the idea of the depicted item but only presented the item's word sound. Typically, these rebus words are monosyllabic and may form the sound of a polysyllabic word in their combinations (León-Portilla 1992c: 54). Alternatively, a rebus affixed to a principle glyph serves as a reading guide indicating the intended meaning and pronunciation. In some Indigenous manuscripts, phonetic indicators are used for place or personal names, particularly if a part of the name is difficult to render pictorially, for example, the qualifiers *small*, *near*, or *on top of*.

Having said this, these phonetic indicators are rather infrequent; most names are depicted in pictograms or ideograms (Boone 2000: 35–36). Gruzinski (1993: 11) suggested that the rebus principle was introduced during the expansion of the Aztec Empire to record the correct sound of place-names across linguistic divides. Boone (2000: 35–36), however, thinks that foreign town names were always depicted pictorially and simply read differently according to the language of the reader. While phonetic rebus writing appears to have been rare in precolonial times, it spread after the Spanish invasion, primarily to depict the sound of Spanish names. Only in the end phase of pictorial writing in the late sixteenth century was it also adopted to record Indigenous names (Boone 2000: 35–37).

Although most contemporary scholars describe the Nahua writing system as primarily pictorial, the issue of the existence and extent of phoneticism in Mexican writing has recently been discussed anew. Spanish linguist Alfonso Lacadena published a series of articles (2008b, 2008a, 2008c) proposing the controversial hypothesis that, in his view, the Aztec civilization knew "true writing," that is, phonographic writing. Lacadena's colleague Mark Zender (2008) enthusiastically advertised this proposal as the "long-delayed decipherment" of the Nahuatl script. According to Lacadena (2008b: 1–3), the crux of the matter is that only art historians had been analyzing Central Mexican manuscripts in the last century and that no linguist had seriously worked on deciphering the Nahua writing system. These art historians commonly interpreted the early colonial sources containing phonetic indicators (such as the *Codex Santa Maria Asunción* and the *Memorial de los Indios de Tepetlaoztoc*, Perla

Valle 1992) as nonrepresentative for the pre-Hispanic Indigenous tradition. As a linguist, Lacadena strongly opposed this interpretation. According to his view, these cases of phoneticism are not the result of Spanish influence but expressions of an alternative pre-Hispanic school of writing based in Texcoco, a school preferring phonographic over pictorial writing (Lacadena 2008b: 3–13). Based on this hypothesis, Lacadena proceeded with deciphering this phonographic system (2008a, 2008c) using the early syllabary that Joseph M.A. Aubin (1885) had developed.

German-based scholar Gordon Whittaker (2009) generally followed Lacadena's idea that Nahua writing contained important phonographic elements. In Whittaker's view, the Nahuas employed phonographic signs for names, titles, sociopolitical designations, and place-names. All of these expressions actually worked as sentences; a place-name, for example, in Nahuatl is actually a locative phrase. For this reason, we can say that the Nahuas had developed "true writing," meaning recorded linguistic information in complex phrases or sentences (Whittaker 2009: 52). Whittaker also designed a syllabary that unveiled several internal contradictions in Lacadena's argumentation. In addition, Whittaker vehemently criticized Lacadena for claiming the proposed deciphering as his own although Lacadena clearly and strongly relied on suggestions previous scholars had already made (Whittaker 2009: 74). Finally, Whittaker showed that some early colonial manuscripts written by Mexica authors (e.g., the *Codex Tlatelolco*, Barlow and Berlin 1948, and the *Codex Aubin*, Aubin 1893) contain extensive phoneticism. In his view, this fact contradicts Lacadena's hypothesis of a Texcoco-based alternative school of (phonographic) writing (2009: 73). As a result, Whittaker (2009: 76) suggested that the early colonial phoneticism might actually not be the expression of a pre-Hispanic school preferring phonographic over pictorial writing but the colonial expansion of an existing Indigenous system to "match, rival, or replace" the "intrusive" Spanish writing system. Thus, his final argument resembles the earlier assessments of art historians, while assuming different Indigenous motivations for adopting phonographic elements.

Considering the scarceness of evidence, we will most likely never know the role phonographic writing actually played in pre-Hispanic and colonial writing. Notwithstanding this, the evidence strongly suggests that before the Spanish conquest Indigenous writers largely preferred pictorial writing. Leaving aside the detailed arguments for and against the use of phonograms, both Lacadena's and Whittaker's arguments contain one serious flaw in their theoretical approach and underlying thrust. As linguists, both Lacadena and Whittaker adhere to the definition of "true writing" being the recording of linguistic sounds. Lacadena's reasoning, in particular, appears to be motivated by the

attempt to prove that the "Aztec civilization" was highly advanced. In his view, the Aztecs proved themselves worthy of European acknowledgment exactly because they had invented phonographic writing after all. This motivation rests on the idea that writing systems, in particular, and civilizations, in general, evolve according to a universally uniform trajectory. Rather than arguing about the extent of Nahua phoneticism, it is much more important to challenge this thinking pattern at its foundations. Evaluating non-European cultures and writing systems solely according to European standards exerts epistemological violence. As an alternative, we should acknowledge Mesoamerican writing systems on their own terms. It is exactly their difference from phonographic writing that demonstrates the richness and diversity in forms of human graphic communication, a diversity that clearly transcends the limits of phonographic writing alone.

3 Social Text Practice

3.1 *The Level of Literacy*

Little information exists on the actual level of literacy in Nahua society. Some early colonial sources report that reading and writing skills were primarily mastered by nobles and priests; others, however, contend literacy existed among the wider populace (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010: 17). Most scholars assume that "full literacy was restricted to specialized elites," because writing primarily served the state and its rulers (Marcus 1992: 52–53, Navarrete 2011: 190; see also Gruzinski 1993: 13–14). Nevertheless, the number of literate nobles was most likely much higher in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico than in European societies at the same time (Gruzinski 1993: 4). For the capital Tenochtitlan and regional centers, a generally high standard of education, including literacy, should be assumed—an assumption supported by facts recorded in the early colonial decades. At a time when many missionaries did not yet understand Nahuatl, it was common practice for Indigenous people, including commoners, to present their supposed sins at the Christian confession painted on paper in pictorial style (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010: 17). Most likely, though, not all people had access to all genres of Nahuatl writing. Whereas divinatory codices were frequently used, local annals and ruler genealogies were read mainly in the royal families, and tribute lists only by palace administrators (Boone 2007: 237). Similarly, some of the surviving manuscripts suggest they were directed at a particular audience; the *Codex Boturini* has thus been interpreted as "plebeian," whereas the imperialistic *Codex Mendoza* is thought to reflect the perspective of the ruling class (Brotherston 2008: 27). Be this as it may, being able

to skillfully read and interpret the divinatory codices required years of extensive training in the temple schools (Boone 2007: 4).

Several Nahua social roles were concerned with reading and writing. The *tlacuiloque* were responsible for the actual handicraft of writing or painting on a variety of surface materials. "Writing" and "painting" were merged in the verb *icuiloa*, which means, "to spread liquid colored material on a surface" (Lockhart 1993a: 326, 576). Sadly, we know almost nothing about the social position of the *tlacuiloque* or about the preferred places to practice writing. Were there special scriptoria or did the writers work at home (see Robertson 1994: 25)?

Apparently, the *tlacuiloque* did not publicly interpret the written texts. This practice was reserved for professional interpreters of the divinatory codices (the *tlapouhque*, "counters," and the *tonalpouhque*, "counters of the day signs"), the orators and singers (*cuicanime*, sg. *cuicani*), the wise men (*tlamatinime*), and the "possessors of books" (*amoxhuaque*). There is a certain scholarly debate whether *tlacuiloque* were male only or if some were female: only one female *tlacuilo* appears in the surviving pictorial manuscripts (*Codex Telleriano-Remensis,* folio 30r), and the alphabetical colonial sources provide neither explicit not implicit evidence on this issue (Nahuatl in the indicative is gender-neutral). Judging from the context of Nahua gender identities, it is quite possible there were also female scribes. Consequently, progressive scholars opt for speaking in a gender-neutral way about the *tlacuiloque* (see Baca 2008: 70, Rabasa 2011: 2–3).

The handicraft of writing/painting was typically handed down within families. Young children of a family of scribes who were born on particular days of the calendar were presented with miniature painting tools at their naming ceremonies. During their lifetime, scribes were required to study and perfect their skill. They were also expected to acquire a specific intentionality: to learn how to "converse with their hearts" and to attain an *ioteutl* (a divine heart), deemed necessary for correctly and skillfully creating pictorial records of knowledge about the cosmos (Sahagún 1961: x, 28).

3.2 *Reading, Seeing, Interpreting, and Performing*

The sources are rather silent on Indigenous text practices, and early colonial Spanish sources merely mention the act of reading pictorial manuscripts (see e.g., Motolinía 1985: 52–53, Sahagún 1982: I, 53–56). Some sources describe it as orally interpreting the texts while following the figures of the manuscripts with a small rod (see Gruzinski 1993: 13). We should be careful not to project our own habitual reading practices onto the Nahuas, since reading and all activities associated with literacy are socially and culturally formed and therefore differ from culture to culture (see Monaghan and Hamann 1998: 131). The

modern European practice of reading silently for the purpose of accumulating knowledge, for example, is culturally and historically relative and represented the first revolution in media technology in European history, even before the invention of the printing press (Rabasa 2011: 24, 112).

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to reconstruct the reading practices of the ancient Nahuas, even more what they actually *saw* when they looked at their paintings. The manuscripts contain some inherent clues regarding how they were read. Many images in the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*, for example, face different directions and can only be properly seen if one moves around the (rather large) map (Leibsohn 2007: 392). In addition, the preference for bright and radiating colors in Nahua manuscripts may be related to the cult of brilliance. At any rate, the sensation of seeing played an important role in Nahua culture, judging from the many pictorial depictions of human eyes and eye glyphs and the high number of words related to seeing in Molina's Nahuatl dictionary (see Leibsohn 2007: 398). The ability to see the underlying structures of reality was considered a special gift and a mark of great wisdom and competence that was attributed to wise (wo)men, priests, and shamans.

Nahua texts and paintings were used to study these structures of reality by looking at them (Monaghan and Hamann 1998: 133–136). Reading the divinatory books for people was described as holding a mirror before their face so that they could "come to see" their "reflection" in the book (Sahagún 1979a: IV, 152). This act of seeing, of perceiving images, might have been extremely different from the cognitive act of reading the letters of an alphabetical text. As the Spanish noted during the Mexican Inquisition, the Natives were highly interested in European books, although more in looking at the printed images of Christian saints than in reading the alphabetical texts (Gruzinski 1993: 50). Fittingly, this act of looking at or seeing might be termed as "gazing."[3] Karl Young (2000: 27) even speculated whether the ancient Nahuas used their paintings in "visualization exercises like those practiced by Tibetan Buddhists" with mandalas. He believes that these visualizations may have played an important role in preparing ritual participants for the role of *teixiptlame*, which finally transformed the human being into "a living page of the book" (Young 2000: 30).

Notwithstanding the relevance of seeing, Indigenous social text practices also emphasized orality. Texts were not (only) studied silently but also served as visual scores for oral interpretations and performances. Several Nahua terms for "reading" refer to both the pictorial record and its oral recitation; *pohua* can be translated as "to count, relate, recount" (Lockhart 1993a: 326–327, 576), and *amoxpohua* as "to read a book, to relate, to expound a report" (Boone 1994a: 71).

3 See the discussion of the gaze by David Morgan (2005: 3–5, 260).

One of the most common social text practices was interpreting paintings on public occasions, for example, in life-cycle rituals, *veintena* ceremonies, or in politically inspired feasts. This interpretation was typically accompanied by elegant speech, singing, dancing, ritual offerings, and performative enactments (Navarrete 2011: 175). At gatherings of nobles, codices were hung on the palace walls and publicly interpreted, with professional singers playing important roles (Sahagún 1961: x, 28–29, Escalante Gonzalbo 2010: 16). In these contexts, the images stimulated the visual senses of the participants, while the oral interpretation addressed the sense of hearing. In addition, the performances most probably focused on many more human senses with "facial movement, gesture, manipulation of symbolic objects, the drawing and painting of figures, the wearing of costumes" (Young 2000: 25).

Some parts of the divinatory codices are actually ritual prescripts guiding the performance of specific rituals (see Boone 2007: 157–169). Similarly, many of the narrative genres may have served as blueprints or even scores for "artistic elaboration and dramatic performance" (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: 34). From the Mixtec manuscripts, we know that they were apparently used as prescripts for performing (re-)enactments (King 1994: 102, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: 63). Pictography efficiently records body language and physical movement in space because it conveys information through figurative images and scenes (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: 34). That being the case, the performance was contained in the inherent structures, forms, and contents of the manuscripts (Monaghan 1994: 89). The layered arrangement of many Mixtec codices is indeed comparable to musical scores containing several voices (King 1994: 109). The enactments of these scores were multisensorial events, giving voice "through the entire body: through choreography, through hand gestures, through spacing, and through the clothing worn, as well as through verbal utterances" (Monaghan 1994: 91).

4 Books and Authors

4.1 *The Concept of the* Book

In Nahuatl, the term *tlacuiloliztli* refers to the act of writing or painting, *tlacuilolli* to the result of writing or painting, and *amoxtli* to the book in form of several pages of glued paper. One of the terms for "reading," *amoxpohua*, derives from this term for "book." In colonial times, the term *amoxtli* was used infrequently; however, it was adapted to refer to the Christian Bible, qualified as *teoamoxtli* ("divine" book, see Schroeder 2006: 14). Many early colonial sources mention that books and written texts were highly valued in Nahua

culture and regarded as the foundation of knowledge. This becomes apparent in the migration story of the Mexica as recounted by Sahagún's informants (Sahagún 1961: x, 189–91). During the migration, the Mexica were, for unspecified reasons, abandoned by their wise men, who carried away the sacred bundle and all the books and writings of the Mexica, including the songbooks and the flutes. Thus, the Mexica were left in a desperate state without cultural knowledge, knowing how to live properly, and any standards of living. They were salvaged from this misery only by four remaining wise men, who remembered and devised anew "the book of days, the book of years, the count of the years, the book of dreams" (Sahagún 1961: x, 191). These new books could serve the role of "the torch, the light" (Sahagún 1961: x, 191) for the people.

Many nobles had larger collections of books stored in the *amoxcalli*, a "library," room, or house for books. Bernal Díaz del Castillo (2008: 169), for example, mentioned that Motecuhzoma II possessed a large library. One of the major functions of books in a culture with a strong historical consciousness was record-keeping—each royal family supported its own record-keeper and guide to the books (Schroeder 2006: 18–20). For the Mexica, their unique ethnic history was particularly important because they derived their sense of identity from it as the children of Huitzilopochtli and as the people of the Sun (see León-Portilla 1963: 154–155). This history was considered so important that the *tlatoani* Itzcoatl (reigned 1426–1440) even ordered the burning of history books, only to commission new ones with a rewritten history glorifying the Mexica. After the Spanish conquest of Mexico, some of the early missionaries, including Bishop Juan de Zumárraga in 1535, followed Itzcoatl's example by fanatically burning complete libraries of Indigenous books (see Carrasco 1990: 12). The reason for this was that the missionaries realized that books played as important a role in Nahua culture as in European culture, and they wanted to eradicate everything smelling of "idolatry." As a result, most pre-Hispanic manuscripts with overtly religious content were destroyed, while some political histories considered as "secular" survived.

It appears that Mesoamerican people and Europeans both viewed the book as a carrier of knowledge (in contrast, e.g., to the Inca, who did not). However, there are considerable differences between the colonial Spanish and the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican concepts, as Mignolo (1994b: 253–257) argued: the Spanish regarded the book, the Holy Book written by God, in particular, as a container for (divine) knowledge, the Nahuas regarded the person with the book as the container for (human) knowledge. The Spanish regarded the words and letters as keys to understanding and carriers of (an absolute, final) truth; the Nahuas regarded the observation of nature, the contemplation of books, and the accompanying oral discourse as keys to understanding (a relative)

truth. The Spanish placed (final) authority in the book itself, the Nahuas placed (relative and flexible) authority in the skilled interpreter (Mignolo 1994b: 253–257).

Despite these differences, a similarity existed regarding the status of the book in relation to reality. Both were regarded as directly presenting reality. The Spanish believed the Bible was written by God and thus presented ultimate reality. The Nahuas believed that books not only represented human knowledge about the underlying principles of nature but also *depicted* these realities directly through their colors and forms (as discussed in the next chapter). However, Spaniards and Nahuas attributed different ideas of truth to the book. While the Spaniards emphasized absolute truth fixed in alphabetical writing, the Nahuas emphasized relative truth contained in the paintings as flexibly construed by oral interpreters according to the situation (see Mignolo 2010: 96–109).

4.2 *Book Genres and the Problem of "Historical Truth"*

Nahua painted manuscripts and books fall into several subject categories or genres. According to Motolinía (1996: 121–122), the Nahuas used five genres: (1) year-count annals; (2) sacred calendars, including the annually repeating rituals; (3) books for interpreting dreams and omens; (4) ritual prescripts for the naming ceremonies of babies; and (5) books containing rituals, ceremonies, and omens related to marriage. In Motolinía's judgment, only the first of these book genres could be trusted to contain truth because these dealt with (secular) history while the other four contradicted the Gospels written by John, Luke, Mark, and Matthew and thus were invented by the demons (Motolinía 1996: 121–122). As Cummins (1995: 162) remarked about this passage by Motolinía, we should be suspicious of taking this categorization of Indigenous books into five genres literally. Most likely, Motolinía used a stylistic frame for his statement, creating a "kind of medieval typology in which the four books of the Gospel stand for God's truth in distinction to the four books of the Mexicans which stand for the devil's deceit" (Cummins 1995: 162). Following Cummins's interpretation, Motolinía was motivated to create five genres because this model helped him make sense of the foreign culture from within the frame of his own belief system.

Unfortunately, no information about Indigenous genres exists apart from what the early chroniclers describe. Sahagún mentioned—similar to Motolinía—books for interpreting dreams (Sahagún 1978: III, 67). Ixtlilxochitl (1997: I, 527) described the following genres: annals and historical accounts; genealogies of nobles; maps with boundaries of settlements; books with laws, rites, and ceremonies, including the public feasts; and books containing

scientific knowledge, which were complemented by the songs taught in the oral tradition. Ixtlilxochitl also noted different types of scribes with particular trainings for the individual genres (see León-Portilla 1963: 157, Mignolo 1994b: 243). Spanish chroniclers added further genres or subjects covered in the books; Durán (1971: 293), for example, named books with military and mechanical knowledge, Peter Martyr referred to astronomical observations and agricultural information (see Boone 2007: 19).

Since the few Indigenous manuscripts that have survived to this day cover only a small range of pre-Hispanic writings, we cannot assess the chronicler's categorizations of genres from the perspective of contemporary scholarship. The surviving manuscripts belong to the genres of historiographical accounts, genealogies, maps of settlements, tribute records, ritual handbooks, and divinatory almanacs. Using modern categories, Michael E. Smith (2012: 246) classified these genres into three larger groups: (1) "religious" books (containing myths, rituals, the sacred calendar, and divinatory data), (2) "historical" books (annals, histories of dynasties, and genealogies), and (3) "administrative" books (tribute lists, maps of city-state territories, and records of landholdings).

Indigenous historiographical genres were clearly different from Europeans ones. Common themes in all surviving Central Mexican historical manuscripts are the origins of particular ethnic groups and histories of the primordial ancestors, foundations of polities through rituals, genealogical lines of rule, and the political and military histories of particular polities (Boone 2000: 239–243). In the Central Mexican valleys, the annals were the most widely spread genre and continued well into postconquest times. Annals typically record the history of particular polities from the perspective of the ruling class and were possibly written by official state historians. They are essentially local histories with a rather small spatial radius of coverage, apart from the record of conquest of foreign polities (Lockhart 1993a: 376–378; see also Boone 2000: 238, 244). Indigenous chroniclers such as Chimalpahin (for his hometown Amecameca Chalco, see Schroeder 2010a: 101) and Ixtlilxochitl (for his hometown Texcoco) continued the idea of local histories into colonial times. Pre-Hispanic Nahuas identified primarily with their local *altepetl*.

In addition to the annals, cartographic histories played an important role in the historical identity of Nahua polities. They provided a "visual framework for indigenous constructions of identity" in demarcating between neighboring *altepeme* (Leibsohn 1994: 161). Indigenous cartographies were still used in the first colonial century in law disputes regarding landholdings (see Leibsohn 2007: 400). In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mexico, a genre combining characteristics of the annals and the cartographic histories emerged, the *Primordial Titles*, which recorded the spatial boundaries and histories of local

communities. Whereas the annals had recorded the history of the ruling class, the *Primordial Titles* typically contained the perspective of common people (Lockhart 1993a: 376; see also Horn 2001). Another fascinating colonial manuscript is the sixteenth-century *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, which recorded the history of Cuauhtinchan and combines elements of different pre-Hispanic historiographical genres with colonial alphabetical accounts (see Leibsohn 2009).

The Nahuas believed that the past fundamentally shaped the present. Cosmogonically, the Fifth Era had been created after the progressive evolution of the four previous world ages, and humanity had been formed from the bones of their ancestors from the preceding eras. The present society and political rulership rested on events of the past. Ethnic identity was rooted in the history of the particular group, and rulership was legitimized by reference to this history (Boone 2000: 18–27; see also Eschmann 1976). In Nahua belief, neither past nor future were "permanently closed" (Boone 2000: 19). The future could be seen through omens, dreams, and visions; the past could be visited under certain conditions but not changed. When Motecuhzoma I sent a group of shamans on a search for Aztlan, the shamans traveled into the past and found a place where time passed more slowly than in the present. Mytho-historical events were frequently reenacted in ritual performances, establishing a powerful link between the past and the present. They were also used a priori as exemplary models for action in the present and a posteriori as narrative frames for recording and interpreting events (López Austin 1973: 159–160).

In historiographical recordings, the correspondence to significant previous events was often considered more important than what Europeans regard as "historical truth." The dates of events, in particular, were sometimes matched with similar events that had occurred in years with the same year bearer, that is, in years believed to have the same essential character. Umberger explained the historical contradictions in the year bearer signs presented on Nahua sculpture with reference to their function. While some signs refer to specific dates of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, others are rather "symbolic dates" alluding to "important events in several time frames and to different levels of meaning" according to a cyclical or helical concept of time (Umberger 1981: 11; see also Eschmann 1976: 269–271).

Transcending the European differentiation between rational and symbolic truth, Federico Navarrete (2011: 188) simply acknowledged that "Aztec conceptions of history" broke with the "Western notion of historical truth" by assimilating past and present events. For example, the Dedication Stone of the Templo Mayor commemorates the temple's dedication ceremony after being renovated by the *tlatoani* Ahuitzotl (reigned 1486–1502). The sculpture shows Ahuitzotl and his predecessor, Tizoc, performing blood self-sacrifice in the

year 1487. The emphasis in this recording is on dynastic continuity and not on "historical truth," since Tizoc was already dead in 1486 (Navarrete 2011: 188). Similarly, the dates given on the Stone of Tizoc conflated "different moments of the recent past and of more distant cosmogonical time" to provide a "more literal and tangible presence" of past rulers and their actions (Navarrete 2011: 190).

Correspondingly, many of the early colonial *Primordial Titles*, judged from the perspective of Western historiography, give implausible and "wrong" dates. Scholars have typically attributed this historical incorrectness to the uneducated background of the respective authors, believing that these authors simply did not know better. Following this line of reasoning, Kevin Terraciano (2010: 25) attempted to find the historical truth behind the "selective and distorted versions of the past" he believes are common in "the 'social memories' of all societies." Gruzinski (1993: 125–127), on the other hand, broke with this modern Western arrogance by resurrecting the possibility that the Indigenous authors were capable of rational thinking after all. In his view, the authors had intentionally given apparently "contradicting" dates because they used different concepts of time and historiography.

Confronted with Mesoamerican historiography, Western historians often come up against the limitations of their own conceptions of time and historical truth. One of the most difficult issues in this context has been separating "myth" from "history" in ethnohistorical accounts to rewrite Mesoamerican history from the perspective of Western historiography. In this process, scholars typically designate as "mythological" anything that refers to something we cannot explain with our rational interpretation of reality based on the natural sciences. For the reconstruction of what "actually" happened, they use only the elements that remain after eliminating the "mythological" aspects. This method was implemented most characteristically by Nicholson (2001b) in his legendary reconstruction of the historical Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

In a similar way, the two differently designed parts of the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* have often been explained by referring to this model. While the left side, about the migration of the ancestors from Chicomoztoc to Cholula, has been designated as representing "myth," the right side, about the founding of Cuauhtinchan, has been acknowledged as "history." Carrasco and Scott Sessions broke with this frame by interpreting both sides as "symbolic ways of talking about the human ordeals of leaving home" (2007b: 429).

In conclusion, we should be careful about projecting European concepts, including the separation between "myth" and "history," on non-European cultures and instead attempt to understand Indigenous concepts of time and history. Nevertheless, in Mexico, these Indigenous concepts gradually changed after the Spanish conquest through the adoption of European discursive

frames, including particular genres for organizing knowledge and recording history (see Mignolo 2010: 171–216).

4.3 *The Problem of the "Author"*

Closely related to the modern European concept of the *book* is the idea of the *author*. Typically, the individual author is responsible for the contents of the book and owns the copyright. This idea does not match Nahua writing culture, judging from what little information the sources provide on this issue. Rather, authorship was a collective endeavor that included the *tlacuilo* and the interpreter, along with the composer of a song and the singer.

Reading pictorial sources leaves ample room for alternative interpretations and thus blurs the boundaries between "author" and "interpreter." Several notes from early colonial chroniclers reflect this social text practice. In his *Crónica Mexicayotl*, Tezozómoc mentioned multiple possible readings of the pictorial sources and declared his own narrative as a synthesis of those (see Rabasa 2005b: 125–126). Any surviving alphabetical transcription of a pictorial source inevitably presents only one possible reading of it. Alonso de Zorita, Pomar, and Ixtlilxochitl gave similar statements (see León-Portilla 1992c: 71–72). Many alphabetical transcriptions also contain internal evidence revealing these multiple voices, for example, the oral transcriptions in book six of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1969) or the alphabetical glosses of the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (see Rabasa 2005b: 118, 131, 2011: 112).

Mesoamericanists have intensely discussed the problem of the author with reference to the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*. León-Portilla is deeply convinced that individual authors wrote the songs in a tradition similar to European philosophical poetry. Consequently, he set out to reconstruct these authors and initially discerned thirteen, later fifteen individual authors of the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* (León-Portilla 1967, 1992a). According to León-Portilla's theory, these authors were historical *tlatoque* from several Aztec polities, mainly in the fifteenth century, with Nezahualcoyotl the most important of them. This is proven, in his view, by the fact that Aztec rulers speak in the first person ("I, Nezahualcoyotl . . .") in the songs and that the sixteenth-century authors of the glosses presented corresponding titles for the songs ("Song of Nezahualcoyotl"). For León-Portilla, this is clear evidence that the named rulers were the composers of the respective songs and, consequently, that the songs are of pre-Hispanic origin.

León-Portilla's interpretation has faced several fundamental critiques. As one of the first critics, Bierhorst interpreted the references to the rulers in the glosses and titles as referring merely to stage roles in a theatrical script. The singers recognized the spirit of the respective ruler as their muse, took on the

character or stage role of the respective ancestor, and then sang in the first person "I, Nezahualcoyotl" as part of the dramatic monologue. Bierhorst based this interpretation on the fact that no sources ever noted Nahua rulers as composers of songs (1985b: 101–102, 2009: 8). Other scholars basically followed Bierhorst's critique of León-Portilla's theory that the songs had been written by individual authors. Lockhart (1991a: 121, 1993a: 394) did not principally rule out the possibility that rulers also composed and sang songs; after all, they were expected to be excellent rhetoricians. Nevertheless, because of external evidence, he generally finds it more convincing that the references to rulers in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* are postconquest stylistic devices rather than indicators of the songs' composers.

The very idea of the individual author is a European projection to a culture with dissimilar concepts and practices of written and oral expression. This projection dates back to the early colonial appropriation of Indigenous culture and the attempts of Indigenous chroniclers to defend the pre-Hispanic civilization as highly advanced. Thus, the image of Aztec rulers as authors had already been voiced by Gerónimo de Mendieta, Pomar, Torquemada, and later by Ixtlilxochitl, who used as a frame of reference the idea of David and Solomon as authors of the Biblical psalms.

By the eighteenth century, the image of the ruler-poets had become dominant and Nahuatl poetry closely associated with the figure of Nezahualcoyotl (see Bierhorst 1985b: 104, Lee 2008: 133–134, 150). In Indigenous Nahua culture, however, the idea that specific knowledge and forms of expression should be ascribed to particular individuals evidently did not exist. The roles of *composer* and *singer* or *author* and *interpreter* were not sharply distinguished, and each performer had "some model or source from which he to a greater or lesser extent varie[d] in style and content, within the framework of the genre" (Lockhart 1993a: 398; see also 1991a: 121). Furthermore, several interpreters read the manuscripts and performed the songs collectively, at least in public contexts (Lee 2008: 135). Hence, the concept of the *author* was most probably meaningless to pre-Hispanic Nahuas (Lee 2008: 147).

Despite this contextual deconstruction of the idea of individual authors in Nahua poetry, León-Portilla never gave up on his theory. Taking the colonial sources at face value, he never truly engaged with the postcolonial critique his fellow colleagues expressed. Instead, he once more compared the songs with those from authors in European antiquity. In particular, he compared the colonial manuscripts with medieval copies of ancient authors. Thus, León-Portilla (2011b: 200–205) argued, if we do not question Sophocles's authorship even though no original manuscript of his writings has survived, why should we question Nezahualcoyotl's authorship? This argument, however, completely misses the point of the critique.

4.4 *The Materiality of Books and Paper*

Nahua books were made from paper, animal hide, or woven cloth and came in different formats. Despite this variety of basic materials, the Indigenous concept of the *book* was tightly connected to paper; the term *amoxtli*, typically translated as "book," derives from *amatl* (paper) and *oxtli* (glue) and means "glued sheets of paper." Paper books were, in most cases, bound as screenfolds and sometimes protected with elaborately ornamented wooden endpieces. Many of the divinatory codices were folded as leporellos, which made it possible to lay several pages from the almanacs next to each other and easily compare their contents. Apart from the screenfold books, writings on paper were also folded into smaller rectangles, rolled, or left in large sheets; in the colonial period, they were also bound like European books. In addition to paper books, the Nahuas used animal hides (primarily deerskin) glued together to form long strips (*tiras*), which were similarly folded or rolled up. *Lienzos* from cotton cloth were spread out on the floor or hung on walls for reading and folded for storage (Boone 2000: 23–24).

Amatl, the paper used for Indigenous books, was primarily made from the inner bark of the native fig tree and sometimes with fibers from the maguey plant. To produce *amatl*, the bark was soaked in water, cooked several hours with wood ash, washed with clean water, beat thin, pressed into sheets, and glued together to form larger sheets (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 27–31). The finished paper was covered with a thin layer of white gesso or stucco on one or both sides. The gesso was then painted using brushes and reed pens. The figures were first outlined in red, then filled with different colors, and finally delineated in black (Boone 2000: 24). The applied colors were made from carbon (black), cochineal (red), and mineral and vegetable dyes (yellows, reds, blues, and greens) (see Sahagún 1963: XI, 239–245).

In Nahua culture, paper was not regarded as the inherently meaningless (if indispensable) carrier of polychrome paints forming the writing; rather, it was imbued with meaning itself. Consequently, paper was not only used to write on but was also a key ingredient of many rituals. Expanding the typical scholarly interest in only the contents of Nahua books, Arnold (1995) studied the cultural significance of paper in its materiality. He discovered (1995: 39) that *amatl* was tightly associated with food and used as its metonymy, connecting humanity with earth and water deities through ritual exchange. The labor-intensive production of *amatl* is indeed similar to preparing maize for eating: both maize and the tree bark need to soak and be boiled for several hours with ash or lime (this procedure makes the maize protein digestible for humans) (Arnold 1995: 40). Furthermore, the *amatl* tree, directly translated as the "arm of water," had a strong natural connection to water, since it grows in watery

areas and has large roots reaching far into the soil (Arnold 1995: 32). Because of its material characteristics, *amatl* was regarded as an important ritual item "infused with an ability to interact with deities in the landscape" in the reciprocal cycle of feeding between humanity and the earth (Arnold 1995: 28, see also 239).

Being associated with earth and water, nourishment and the human body, paper was used in many *veintena* rituals described in the *Florentine Codex*, mainly those related to Tlaloc, the landscape, maize, and water (Arnold 1995: 32, 233). Tlaloc was deeply connected to the land, and water was imagined as the blood of the earth. To ensure agricultural fertility, the Nahuas often performed human sacrifices at Tlaloc's mouth, that is, on mountaintops and at springs and lakes. These rituals were imagined as an exchange of food between the living landscape and humanity (Arnold 1995: 37–38). Paper was furthermore used to make ritual costumes, such as the *amatetehuitl* (paper streamer), *tlaquechpaniotl* (paper neck ornament), *amacuexpalli* (pleated paper neck ornament), and *amacalli* (paper house), a type of paper cap. Paper was also made into incense bags, tied on wooden poles as flag banners, and carried as streamers and banners in processions. The children sacrificed at the *veintena* of *Atlcahualo* were called *tlacatetehuitl* (human paper streamers) (Arnold 1995: 32–37). These children "wore different-colored paper clothing that was pleated to resemble leaves or wings. The colors were associated with the different places they were to be sacrificed. Paper clothing was said to be pleasing to the rain deities" (Arnold 1995: 37). Paper also played a major role in the rituals of Etzalcualiztli. This *veintena* celebrated the harvest, focused on the "reciprocity of life-sustaining foods between the Aztec and Tlāloc," and was characterized by the eating of maize and bean stew (Arnold 1995: 34).

In sum, paper was used for writing and reading, to adorn ritual objects and participants, to burn as offerings, to hold off diseases in medical practices, to embody deities in protective devices, to divine, or to accompany the dead to the underworld. Accordingly, it "acted as a kind of messenger or go-between, providing a medium of communication between the human and spirit worlds" (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 12).

In the early colonial period, this Indigenous concept of paper clashed with Spanish understandings of written texts, as Arnold (1995: 236–239) concluded from his analysis of conflicts about land as recorded in the *Techialoyan Codices*. In these conflicts, both Spaniards and Natives used paper to increase their power, but in different ways. The Spaniards emphasized the *contents* of the writings, and paper was only a carrier for a placeless authority dealing with a utopian relationship to the land. The Natives, in contrast, emphasized the *materiality* of the paper. In their view, the manuscripts carried authority because

of their material connection to the land and its deities. Their relationship to the land was immediate, material, and somatic. Thus, two "radically different worldviews" and book cultures clashed with one another (Arnold 1995: 29).

The Indigenous ritual use of paper as an important item in ritual offerings and as a form of communication between the human and spirit worlds has continued in Mexico into modern times (t'Hooft and Flores Farfán 2012a: 105). Moreover, it has also become one of the key elements in the ritual materialization of the spirits. Among contemporary Nahuas, Otomís, and Tepehuas, shamans elaborately cut and use paper figures for all kinds of rituals to present the endless pantheon of spirits. The distinctive cuttings of the specific paper figures iconically materialize the specific nature of the respective spirit (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986: 272). In doing so, they are similar to the presentations of "deities" in the pre-Hispanic pictorial manuscripts, where the details of the body figures, costumes, or regalia also materialize the specific identity of the respective deity persona. Manipulating the paper figures in rituals summons or bans the spirits and manipulates them for the benefit of the humans performing the rituals (A.R. Sandstrom and P.E. Sandstrom 1986, A.R. Sandstrom 1991: 260–279; see also Baéz-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 2000: 82–89). The paper used to cut the spirit figures is, in most cases, modern colored tissue paper but sometimes traditionally made *amatl* paper is also used. Traditional bark tree and maguey paper is still produced in Mexico and its use extremely popular for folkloristic paintings (Boone 2000: 23).

5 Nahua Culture between Orality and Literacy

In Nahua culture, orality and literacy were strongly intertwined, a fact not always acknowledged in the scholarly literature. The most famous example of a scholar classifying the Aztec civilization as a primary oral society is Todorov, whose theory about the semiotic inferiority of the Aztec culture compared to the Spanish rests on the conjecture that Aztec culture was a primary oral society. Thus, Todorov simply ignored that the Nahuas not only possessed a pictorial writing system but used it extensively. While the reasons for Todorov's ignorance remain unclear, he most likely evaluated pictorial writing as only a forerunner of writing. Based on this premise, using pictography did not actually count to define Nahua culture as literate.

Other scholars took the Nahua pictorial writing system seriously but thought that the oral tradition was primary and that writing was only a visual mnemonic device to better remember it. This interpretation, previously voiced by Motolinía (see Robertson 1994: 28), became popular through León-Portilla. For

him, the pictorial codices are clearly only auxiliary devices for the oral tradition because of their apparent limitations in communicating relevant information (1993: 7, 1996: 12–13):

> It was not easy (and often impossible) for the Nahuas to indicate in writing the cause of an event, the moral features of a person, or, the countless nuances and modalities that are necessary to narrate or understand fully the doctrines, events, and varieties of human acts and motivations. Conscious of these limitations, they developed a complement to the writing of codices. As could be expected, that supplement was the product of the systematization of previously existing traditional forms of oral transmission that had developed over generations. Their wise men were the ones who structured and taught in the education centers the art of memory, whose aim was to fix in the student's mind the commentaries that deciphered the narratives signaled by the inscriptions and paintings of the codices. (León-Portilla 1992c: 70)

Currently, most Mesoamericanists agree that the Nahuas used a dual communication system that combined writing with oral discourse (see, e.g., Lockhart 1993a: 327). The historical codices, in particular, appear to ask for oral complementation. Along these lines, the *Codex Boturini*, with its reduced visual expression, might appear as condensed to its "epitome," its "most distilled visual form … abstracted and conventionalized graphically to the barest essence that still retains identity and meaning" (Boone 1994a: 71). These compact graphic messages merely served to trigger the memory of the story depicted in the codex, a memory "with all its details and with all the verbal requirements and the conventional phrases of its telling" (Boone 1994a: 72). Based on this impression, Carrasco named the historical codices "storybooks" and emphasized their relation to the oral tradition (Carrasco 2000: 20).

Judging by the information contained in the surviving sources, the strong intertwinement of the written and oral traditions in Nahua culture is indisputable. What is disputable, however, is our interpretation and assessment of this intertwinement. Many interpretations of pictorial writing as (only) a mnemonic device problematically established phonographic writing as the standard. In the light of phonographic writing, pictography indeed appears as a reduced form of writing because it communicates any verbal message in a less precise way (see Uehlinger 2006: 179). It also does not do "justice to the subtleties of flowery phrasing that were the essence of Nahua formal talk" (Lockhart 1993a: 330). In the following chapter, I present an alternative interpretation, in which pictography is not assessed from the perspective of phonographic

writing. I argue instead that it presents a system of visual communication that is valuable in its own way. Before I do this, however, I need to discuss in a more detailed way the implications of traditional assessments of pictorial writing in relationship to the oral tradition.

5.1 *Transcriptions of the "Ancient Word": the Problem of Flexibility*

One of the major academic problems regarding the pre-Hispanic oral tradition of the Nahuas is that it was irrevocably lost with the colonization of Mexico. Or was it? It is León-Portilla's profound conviction that the alphabetical transcriptions in some of the sources and the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* are faithful records of the pre-Hispanic oral tradition and present the authentic "ancient word" (León-Portilla 1992b). He presented five sets of arguments supporting this view.

First, the alphabetical texts of sources such as the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* and the *Leyenda de los Soles* frequently contain phrases indicating that the authors are directly transcribing their or their informant's oral reading of a pictorial manuscript. These phrases mark that the reader is pointing to a particular figure or image on the manuscript: *in nican ca* (here is), *inin* (this), *iniqueh in* (these), *inezca in nican can* (of this, his appearance is here), *izcatqui* (here is), and *niman ic/niman ye* (then, next). Some alphabetical texts even begin with the formula *quilmach*, which means, "they said, it is said" (León-Portilla 1963: 37, 1992b: 328).

Second, the alphabetical texts contain further phrases León-Portilla interpreted as mnemonic devices, and for him their existence proves that the texts reflect a stable knowledge taught in the *calmecac* schools. There, the Nahuas formally learned a special technique for reading the pictorial manuscripts (called *amoxotoca*). Using this technique, the interpreters recited songs, poems, and speeches while following the pictorial images with their eyes and fingers (León-Portilla 1992c: 73). León-Portilla (1992c: 70–75, 1992b: 317–319, 333) is convinced that the readers using the technique of *amoxotoca* did not interpret the manuscripts freely and spontaneously. Rather, a stable meaning was taught at the schools, and the students learned the verbally fixed songs, poems, and speeches by heart. According to León-Portilla, the chroniclers referring to pictorial manuscripts in their texts also used this technique: Tezozómoc in his *Crónica Mexicayotl*, Pomar in his *Relación*, Juan de Tovar in his letter to José de Acosta, Zorita in his *Breve y Sumaria Relación*, and Ixtlilxochitl in his *Historia de la Nación Chichimeca* (León-Portilla 1992c: 72).

Third, in León-Portilla's view, other sources describing the oral tradition support his theory of a fixed, memorized oral tradition. For example, the *Florentine Codex* records that the students of the *calmecac* were taught "good

discourse," "the count of days, the book of dreams, and the book of years," and the "songs which they called the gods' songs inscribed in books" (Sahagún 1978: III, 67). The contents of this teaching were also recorded in the *huehuetlatolli* transcribed in the Bancroft Manuscript (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987: 153). Furthermore, a verse in one of the songs in the *Cantares Mexicanos* (folio 14v) self-referentially speaks of this tradition: "I sing the paintings of the book, / I unfold it / I am like a florid parrot, / I make the codices speak / in the interior of the house of paintings." (León-Portilla 1992c: 71, his translation). In León-Portilla's view, all these records prove the existence of a fixed, memorized oral tradition.

Fourth, the contents of the alphabetical transcriptions are so similar to the depictions in the pictorial manuscripts that in many cases it is possible to read the latter with the help of the first (León-Portilla 1992b: 329–330).

Fifth, many similarities in content exist across a large variety of different types of sources—such as pictorial manuscripts, alphabetical texts, and archaeological remains—and sources of different chronological and geographical provenance. For example, many associations exist between the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, the *Leyenda de los Soles*, and parts of the *Codex Vaticanus A 3738/Ríos*. In addition, several sources contain variants of poems that differ only slightly from one another. León-Portilla believes that this all suggests an established tradition taught unchanged throughout several generations and in different locations of the Aztec Empire (León-Portilla 1992b: 329). This oral tradition, the "ancient word," or *palabra antiguo*, was stable and verbally fixed. It was only slightly adapted to the respective context of the reading and transcribed faithfully and authentically in the early colonial sources (see León-Portilla 1996: 74).

León-Portilla's motive in arguing in this way is to rescue pre-Hispanic culture—so brutally destroyed by the Spanish conquest—from oblivion. In this, he was particularly inspired by a poem Tezozómoc wrote in the *Crónica Mexicayotl* (see, e.g., León-Portilla 1996: 8). This poem strongly expresses the desperation of a generation of Nahuas faced with the demise of their civilization and the extinction of their culture; it urges the descendants not to forget their ancient history and cultural knowledge.[4] León-Portilla devoted his life's work to saving the pre-Hispanic Mexican heritage from being forgotten. Thus inspired, he strongly defends his theory that the early colonial transcriptions truthfully reproduce the "ancient word." They may be only an echo of a once-living tradition, but at least they preserve the ancient voice: "La flor náhuatl

4 See León-Portilla's (2007: 186–187) translation of the poem by Alvarado Tezozómoc (1975: 4–6).

perduró (The Nahuatl flower persisted)"! (León-Portilla 1993: 10, translation mine.)

Notwithstanding this laudable motive, León-Portilla's argument was essentially criticized by a younger generation of scholars influenced by postcolonial theories and orality studies. These scholars did not challenge the motive to preserve what little remains of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures. On the contrary, they argued for deeper methodological reflection and a more critical revision of European projections within Mesoamerican scholarship. With regard to León-Portilla's theory about the authentic transcription of the pre-Hispanic word in colonial sources, they had two main objections, the first addressing colonial influences, the second the essentially flexible character of any oral tradition.

First, the scholars recognized that the transcription of oral sources was a colonial act in a context characterized by a strong asymmetry of power. All content of colonial sources is influenced by this asymmetry—to which degree possibly changing from source to source. Sahagún's recordings, for example, are strongly shaped by his questions and his way of organizing the material. The extent of pre-Hispanic ideas in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* is highly disputed. León-Portilla's argument for their essential pre-Hispanic nature essentially hinges on his theory of a stable transmission of verbally fixed songs that were passed down unchanged well into the colonial period.

Second, the younger scholars realized that any alphabetical transcription of an oral performance rigidifies a flexible tradition by fixing a single voicing of it and by excluding all nonlinguistic aspects of the performance (see, e.g., Bierhorst 1985b, Gruzinski 1988, Klor de Alva 1989, 1992, Burkhart 1989, Florescano 1994). Appropriately, Rabasa (2005b: 116–117) named the transcriptions "stenographies" of the linguistic part of a particular, singular performance. Inspired by orality studies of cultures around the world, many younger scholars also found evidence for the flexibility of the Nahua oral tradition and verbal interpretation of pictorial manuscripts. The reading of the manuscripts was not so much the recitation of a fixed presentation but left much room for spontaneity. Depending on the context, the manuscripts could be read in a short or expanded version and interpreted in many different ways. The paintings themselves had woven into their very fabric a "constellation of narrative possibilities, a situation that runs against the grain of the alphabetic texts and their fixation on an orthodox reading pattern from top to bottom, left to right, and line to line" (Leibsohn 2009: 86).

Accordingly, the alphabetical texts in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* contain phrases that show that several interpreters were discussing the meaning of the pictorials (Rabasa 2005b: 118–124). A similar situation was recorded in the

commentary to the alphabetical glosses in the *Codex Mendoza*, whose author apologized for their rather sloppy character. The reason for this was that he had insufficient time to rework them because the members of the group of interpreters, who had been summoned to interpret the text, could not agree on one binding interpretation of the respective pictorial text (see Rabasa 2011: 126). This comment suggests a practice of debate around the traditional teachings in Nahua culture (for this impression, also see Burland 1967: 61). This strongly contradicts León-Portilla's idea of a fixed oral tradition that was simply recited from memory without agency on the part of the interpreter.

Furthermore, all the evidence León-Portilla used for the five sets of arguments supporting his theory could also be interpreted differently. First, the fact that manuscripts such as the *Leyenda de los Soles* are direct transcriptions of an oral reading of a pictorial manuscript does not necessarily imply that every reader interpreted the pictorial alike. The same applies to the second argument: no source defined the technique of *amoxotoca* as the recitation of an interpretation learned by heart. Third, the external evidence provided here only indicates that there was an oral tradition strongly related to the written tradition. Fourth, the alphabetical transcriptions are indeed transcriptions of pictorial sources, but alternative readings could also exist. Fifth, and finally, the content similarities across different source types certainly suggest a shared tradition with core narratives, but this does not contradict the idea of flexibility.

Because of the generally sparse source situation, we will never know how the Nahua oral tradition really worked. Nevertheless, I find a moderate interpretation most likely: certain patterns of memorization were taught in the *calmecac*, along with expectations regarding the style of a genre or the line of reasoning, a shared set of core narratives, and a common repertoire of knowledge. Within this frame, however, there was considerable flexibility for the individual orator and singer to elaborate and interpret the story. Furthermore, the act of interpretation does not appear to have been an exclusively individual endeavor but a collective one with multiple voices.

To conclude, the colonial transcriptions do contain the "ancient word," and at the same time they do not. They most probably do not in the form of a verbally fixed, indisputable lore for which the pictorial manuscripts are only mnemonic devices for properly reciting the respective story, poem, or song. It could have been the case that the different genres allowed varying degrees of interpretational flexibility. While the historical codices left some room for the elaboration and situational adaptation and interpretation of the respective story, the highly complex and polysemous divinatory codices left even more, depending on the knowledge of the diviners and their ability to adapt this knowledge to the client's situation. In addition, the alphabetical transcriptions only

reflect the linguistic part of the interpretation, while all performative aspects are excluded, that is, the many levels of producing meaning, such as inflection and tone, facial expressions and gestures, and music and dance. Having said that, the early colonial sources nevertheless present highly valuable information about the pre-Hispanic cosmovision. They also record specific linguistic performances, which reflect a highly advanced and flourishing oral tradition among the ancient Nahuas. In addition, they contain fascinating information about the cultural contact in the early colonial period and speak of a high degree of agency and creativity on the side of the Natives to deal with the new situation.

León-Portilla apparently has never realized that his critics might be inspired by the same motivation he has to preserve Indigenous ways of seeing the world. Ignoring all methodological and epistemological reflections by his critics, he sees only two interpretative options: either the sources contain the authentic "ancient word" or they contain only lies (see León-Portilla 1996: 9). Why does he so close-mindedly insist on this argument? Leaving aside the black-and-white-thinking of authenticity versus lie and his evident resistance to consider colonial contexts, including Indigenous syncretistic creativity, as worth studying, we can reconstruct his reasoning with regard to the issue of orality and literacy.

At its foundation, León-Portilla wishes to prove that the Aztec civilization was highly advanced. In his view, the existence of *literature* is a marker for the advanced developmental status of any culture. He believes that the pictorial manuscripts are only rudiments of writing. This is most likely inspired by the belief that only phonographic writing is true writing. Therefore, he needs to argue that the pictorials merely served as mnemonic devices for the real "literary" tradition of the Nahuas: the oral tradition. Nevertheless, he evidently thinks that an oral tradition can only be compared to the elevated achievements of the European literate tradition if it is a stable tradition with fixed verbal texts. Since he also judges poetry as capable of expressing ultimate truth (and thus implicitly following the tradition of Aristotelian language theories), does he also think that only a fixed verbal poem (on which the respective author might have worked for quite some time) might be linguistically and intellectually refined enough to be capable of expressing ultimate truth?

Be that as it may, León-Portilla's idea of a fixed oral tradition is similar in many ways to the approach of such nineteenth-century ethnographers of Native North American cultures as Franz Boas. Boas had applied the concept of *speech* as an expression of a fixed, true meaning of linguistic utterances to Native oral traditions (see Krupat 1987: 116–117, 120). Correspondingly, only the linguistic expressions of oral performances were transcribed in his day. In

addition, the subsequent translations attempted to stay relatively close to the "true" linguistic meaning of the uttered words. Nonlinguistic elements of the performances typically remained neglected—as in the alphabetical transcriptions of the oral interpretations of Nahua pictorial manuscripts. Furthermore, the inherent flexibility of oral performances was ignored, while the one performance that the ethnographer happened to witness was presented as expressing the ultimate, true cultural meaning (Krupat 1987: 118–120).

Later scholars, however, noticed that many of the Native American people investigated were not concerned "with interpretative uniformity or agreement of any exactitude as to what a word or passage *meant*," because these "are the worries of manuscript and book cultures, pretty exclusively" (Krupat 1987: 118, emphasis in original). Thus, the idea of an unambiguous and definite meaning of a linguistic expression was projected onto Native American cultures, an idea that had developed in Europe in the context of the literary revolution and the invention of the printing press. With this analysis, I have touched upon the fundamental theoretical questions that were also discussed in the orality–literacy debate and applied to Nahua orality and literacy.

5.2 *The Orality–Literacy Debate and Its Application to the Nahuas*

In the European history of tradition, thoughts about the effects of (alphabetical) writing on forms of thinking, cultural memory, and knowledge organization and the implications for the expression of *truth* have a long tradition, one that started with Plato's critical assessment of writing compared to the truth transmitted through the oral dialogues of wise men (see Plato 1973). Most influential in later positive theories about writing were Christian ideas of the Bible (as written by God) as the transmitter of true knowledge, an idea that was transferred to the book and to writing in general (Mignolo 1994b: 220–221, 233). By the Renaissance, a full philosophy of writing "celebrating the letter" (Mignolo 2010: 231) had emerged, including an evolutionary model mapping the development of writing in civilizations. This model was also used for the intellectual appropriation of the newly discovered American civilizations and to legitimize their colonization based on their lack of alphabetical writing (Mignolo 1994b: 228, 261, 1994a: 304).

Stimulated by the media revolution of the 1970s, some scholars rediscovered the topic of the intellectual effects of literacy in comparison to orality. They came from several academic cultural disciplines, among them anthropology and sociology, literature studies, and historiography. One of the most momentous theories in the field of the newly emerging orality–literacy debate came from Eric A. Havelock, Walter J. Ong, Jack Goody, Ian Watts, and Marshall McLuhan. First, classicist Havelock famously noticed a profound intellectual

transformation that occurred in classical Greek literature between Homer, Hesiod, and Euripides on the one side and later writers such as Plato on the other side. According to Havelock, the Homeric epics show the typical characteristics of an oral tradition, they transcribed specific oral performances (including oral mnemotechniques) but also served as scripts for subsequent performances. The texts of later Greek authors, in contrast, increasingly detached writing from oral performances and therewith thoroughly transformed the character of those texts.

Only after writing was established as a medium of communication in its own right did it finally provide an analytical distance from the cultural heritage transmitted in the oral tradition. Hence, writing also enabled individuals to critically abstract and rationally reflect this tradition in their minds (Havelock 1963, 1976, 1982). Goody and Watt (1963) expanded this interpretation of the Greek evolution of writing to a general theory of orality and literacy. According to the two scholars, as soon as any civilization makes the evolutionary shift to literacy, the thinking patterns of its members essentially change from mythical to logico-empirical modes of thought (see their critical discussion of Lévy-Bruhl's theory about the prelogical mentality of primitive peoples, Goody and Watt 1963: 320–321, 345). Literacy frees the discourse from the concrete collective situation of delivery and of the subjective perspective of the participants of the oral performance. It provides historical distance and stimulates private analytical reflection, skepticism, criticism, and objectivity because it allows for the comparison of authoritative texts. Thus, literacy stimulates the creation of a logical, specialized, and cumulative intellectual tradition (see also Goody 1977, 1986).

Ong developed a similar theory in his famous publication *Orality and Literacy* (1982). He distinguished between different types of orality: (1) primary orality in societies without writing, (2) residual orality in generally literate societies with survivals of oral traditions, and (3) secondary orality created by modern electronic media in the thoroughly literalized world of the West. Similar to other thinkers in the orality–literacy debate, Ong was convinced that each of these different forms of orality (and literacy) essentially shapes the possible types of thought processes and personalities and restructures consciousness. In his judgment, primary oral mentalities are generally conservative or traditionalist, redundant, homoeostatic, and situational rather than abstract, empathetic, and participatory.

This idea of a "grand divide" between primary oral and literate societies and of the power of (alphabetical) writing to transform consciousness and elevate it to higher levels of rational thinking was also applied to Native American societies. According to Mignolo's analysis (2010: 213), its application to the

Americas is the twentieth-century scholarly version of an "implicit judgment already made by sixteenth-century missionaries and men of letters" who were confronted with American cultures with nonalphabetical writing systems. Classifying the Aztec civilization as a primary oral society permitted scholars such as Todorov to develop their far-reaching theories about the mentality of the Aztecs. Todorov explained the victory of the Spaniards in the Mexican conquest through differences in mentalities. In Todorov's view, the character of the Aztecs was typical for any primary oral society: ritualistic and inflexible. Because Hernando Cortés's consciousness had been shaped by a literate society, he could improvise and act strategically, politically, and rationally. Motecuhzoma II, in contrast, was constrained by his ritualized and overly fixed tradition. Thus, he was unable to develop a successful strategy to deal with the arrival of the Spaniards, an event that was "absolutely unpredictable ... surprising and unique" for the Mesoamerican experience (Todorov 1984: 84). Motecuhzoma II merely turned fatalistically to the stars in search for omens predicting the outcome of the political conflict with the Spaniards.

Todorov based this interpretation of the conquest on the theory that people in any primary oral society (which he believed the Aztec civilization was) generally have a different mentality than people in literate societies (like the Spanish, as he thought). Todorov might have based his idea of the fixed and unchangeable oral tradition of the Nahuas on León-Portilla's theory of the "ancient word." However, while León-Portilla interpreted this as a positive characteristic, Todorov believed this oral tradition prevented Motecuhzoma II from reacting flexibly to unique new situations (1984: 74–77, 81–84). Even more, he denied the Nahuas the capacity for strategic and rational thinking and acting because they had never made the shift of consciousness that resulted from the invention of alphabetical writing. In line with the theories from the orality–literacy debate, he believes that writing is "an index of the evolution of mental structures" (Todorov 1984: 80). In sum, Todorov sees a clear connection between the existence of (alphabetical or "true") writing in any society and the mental capacity for improvisation, rational thinking, and strategic acting or—the other way round—between the nonexistence of (alphabetical) writing and superstition, ritualism, and historical fatalism (see 1984: 252).

By now, many Mesoamericanists have proven Todorov's interpretation of the conquest incorrect and debunked it as a European projection that contradicts both Indigenous perspectives on the conquest and our general knowledge about Nahua culture. In Todorov's projection of the orality–literacy theory of the Nahuas, two arguments must be criticized: First, most contemporary scholars do not view the oral tradition of the Nahuas (in combination with the pictorial writing) as fixed and inflexible. Neither is there any reason why we

should think that the knowledge contained within this tradition was untransferable to hitherto unknown situations. Second, the pictorial writing system should not be declassified as a simple forerunner to "true" (alphabetical) writing, nor as a preliminary stage of writing expressing a prerational mentality. Rather, I argue for understanding the Nahua pictorial writing system as an efficient system of communication not inferior to but different from alphabetical writing.

Before I discuss the last argument in more detail in the next chapter, I want to emphasize again how flexible the Nahuas were in their use of different types of media. This appears in their creative adoption of European forms of writing and painting in the early colonial period. Then, the Nahuas combined the newly introduced European literacy with their oral tradition as well as with their own forms of writing, adapting all to their new needs. Neither the binary theories of the orality–literacy debate nor León-Portilla's theory of the unchanged "ancient word" do justice to the complexity and creativity of Nahua engagement with different forms of expression to make sense of a hitherto unknown situation.

The many manuscripts preserved from the first colonial century—ranging from the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* and the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* to the *Primordial Titles* and the *Techialoyan Codices*—offer fascinating evidence of this creativity. They present many different forms of hybridity between Indigenous and European forms of writing and painting (see Gruzinski 1993: 4, 20, 25, 45, Lockhart 1993a: 326–373, Schroeder 2010b, Boone 2011a). Rabasa (2011) analyzed these fluid colonial Indigenous textualities by expanding concepts Goody (1977) initially presented. According to Rabasa, the Nahuas used both *savage literacy* and *domesticated glyphs* in the first colonial century. In Rabasa's definition, *domesticated glyphs* are traditional pictorial texts that include elements from European alphabetical writing to collaborate with the colonial order. *Savage literacy*, by distinction, refers to the adoption of alphabetical writing by the Natives in situations uncontrolled by the Spaniards (Rabasa 2011: 111). Pictography continued to be used in increasingly transformative ways for authoritative documents in legal disputes with the Spaniards over landholdings. The alphabetical script, on the other hand, was gradually adapted for internal use, such as historical accounts. Thus, the *Codex de Tlatelolco* used domesticated glyphs for negotiations between Tlatelolco leaders and the Spaniards, while the *Historia de Tlatelolco* (a part of the *Anales de Tlatelolco*, see Barlow 1948), written mainly in Latin script, condemned the Spanish conquest. Based on these results, Rabasa concluded that the alphabet introduced by the Spaniards was not a "tyranny" imposed in the context of colonization, as Mignolo famously stated in the phrase "the tyranny of the alphabet" (1992: 315).

Rather, the Natives creatively adopted and adapted the new technology. This syncretism was a new signifying practice of the subaltern and, as such, a form of resistance against the colonization (Rabasa 2008a: 235–236).

In all this, neither the Natives nor the Spaniards apparently separated alphabetical from pictorial literacy (Rabasa 2011: 111). Furthermore, most of the Spanish colonizers in Mexico acknowledged Indigenous forms of pictorial expression as valid forms of writing. Colonial writers such as Acosta, Sepúlveda, and Torquemada, who presented Mesoamerican cultures as exclusively or primary oral traditions were evidently the exception. It is an interesting fact that it is exactly the latter writers who are typically quoted in arguments for the inferior stage of development of the Aztec civilization (Rabasa 2011: 111–123). Gradually, however, the Indigenous sense for appropriate forms of expression and concepts of the human person and reality were transformed by the adoption of European forms of representation (Gruzinski 1993: 50–53).

CHAPTER 9

Understanding Pictography: Interpreting Nahua Semiotics

This chapter presents the results of the interpretative journey of this study, an interpretative (re)construction of Indigenous Nahua semiotic theory and a theory from the perspective of contemporary scholarship about the modus operandi of Nahua pictography. To reach these interpretations, we first need to reflect on the history of evaluating and devaluating "Aztec writing," a history projecting European philosophies of language and writing onto Nahua culture. The baseline running through many arguments devaluating Mesoamerican writing systems is the idea of rational reason as the supreme human faculty for understanding reality. Therefore, to develop a new theory that recognizes Nahua writing positively as an elaborate semiotic system, we need an alternative to this idea. I found this alternative in the embodied meaning approach developed by Lakoff and Johnson. Theories about nonlinguistic kinds of meaning and knowledge form the theoretical background for my interpretative theory of the modus operandi of Nahua pictography. Before reaching this interpretation, however, I first present my interpretative (re)construction of the Indigenous semiotic theory.

1 The History of Evaluating Aztec Writing

When the Europeans discovered a new continent on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean with peoples and cultures they had never heard of, they needed to make sense of this bewildering experience by incorporating this new world into their own cultural frames of knowledge. They did so not only with regard to foreign material objects, plants, and foods but also regarding the people, whose ways of living were dissimilar to the known European ones. Faced with this otherness, they began to debate about the nature of humanity and the universality of cultural achievements, particularly the faculty of reason. Over the course of the ensuing decades and centuries, these debates came in different waves, emphasized different aspects, and came to different conclusions,[1]

1 For a thorough analysis of the history of European appropriation of the Americas and of the Aztecs, including both negative and positive evaluations of their cultures and societies, see Greenblatt (1991) and Keen (1990).

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but all centered on the question of the inferiority or equality of the American civilizations as compared with Europe.

At first, American peoples were classified within the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchical structure categorizing all matter and life within God's creation (including social classes) into different divisions and subdivisions (see Lovejoy 1936). Later, this frame, which organized differences in space, was replaced by a frame that organized differences in time: the concept of a historical timeline representing stages in the (assumed) evolution of humanity. In a "denial of coevalness," American cultures were integrated into this timeline generally at an earlier stage of human evolution than European civilizations (Mignolo 2010: xi; see also Mignolo 2011: 153–155). Several cultural aspects were used as criteria in determining the degree of humanness or the evolutionary stage of the respective civilization: the character of the religion, the arts, and the language; the organization of the society; and the achievement of alphabetical writing and historiography in the European sense. In many cases, the particular cultural aspects used as criteria were associated with "mental operations such as reasoning, memory, and the imagination" (Farago 1995: 6). Thus, the Europeans essentially wondered whether the Indigenous people possessed rationality and intelligence.

This was also one of the basic questions during the Great Debate of Valladolid, Spain (1550–1551), in which a council of theologians Charles V of Spain had summoned debated about the justification of the American conquest and evangelization. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, one of the main leaders in the debate, placed the Natives on the same level with children, women, and apes and concluded that the colonization into obedience and slavery was therefore justified. Bartolomé de las Casas, in comparison, argued that the Natives had been living in a civilized society that was even superior to Europe in some aspects, such as education. Because he believed that the Indigenous people possessed as much rationality as the Europeans, he advocated proselytization based on persuasion instead of violent coercion (Carrasco 1990: 8). Las Casas, who had been in Mexico, classified five kinds of "barbarians" according to specific critera. These were, briefly summarized in modern words, (1) irrational behavior, (2) lack of an alphabet, literary tradition, and education, (3) lack of governmentality, (4) lack of Christian belief, and (5) being an enemy of Christianity. In his view, the Mexican peoples were among the higher forms of "barbarity"—they had no alphabet and were non-Christians—but they were not behaving irrationally, had an advanced political system, and were not decided enemies of Christianity (Mignolo 2005: 17–21).

As was the case with Las Casas and Sepúlveda, the Spanish missionaries and colonizers with direct contact with the Mexican peoples voiced much more

nuanced views of Mesoamerican cultures than many of the thinkers who had remained in Spain. Among those who had traveled to Mexico, some denied the Mesoamerican cultures had writing and historiography; others did not and understood "their ways of writing" as an alternative form of record-keeping (Pillsbury 2011: ix). For instance, Sahagún acknowledged the writing system of the Nahuas even if it was nonalphabetical. He had grasped the high importance of writing and books within Nahua culture and recognized the elaborate forms of Indigenous historiography (see Rabasa 2008a: 234–235).

On the other hand, Sahagún's Franciscan colleague Pedro de Gante believed that the Mexica had neither writing, letters, nor any form of intellectual enlightenment, at least this is what he wrote in a letter to king Phillip II (see Mignolo 2010: 44). Torquemada was similarly convinced that the Mexica had no record-keeping since they did not have the requisite for it: alphabetical writing (Mignolo 2010: 128). At the end of the sixteenth century, the Mestizo Pomar recognized Indigenous pictography as writing but classified it as inferior to alphabetical writing because it needed the oral tradition as a complement (Mignolo 2010: 44). Similarly, the Jesuit Acosta was surprised to learn upon his arrival in Mexico City in 1586 that the Nahuas indeed had record-keeping traditions and sophisticated rhetoric, even though they lacked an alphabet (Mignolo 2010: 133–134). Nevertheless, he "ranked writing systems according to their proximity to the alphabet" (Mignolo 2010: xi) and in his *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* (Acosta [1590] 2008) "created a descending hierarchy of cultural achievement based upon a society's level of writing" (Cummins 2011: 306). Since this was one of the most popular books in seventeenth-century Europe, Acosta's opinions had an immense influence on European views of the Americas (see Mignolo 2010: 31).

In the sixteenth-century European Renaissance, scholars popularly referred to language structures and ways of thinking to define the superiority or inferiority of particular cultures. In this way, Spanish humanist thinkers such as Antonio de Nebrija (late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries) and José de Aldrete (late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) developed extensive philosophies about languages, grammars, and alphabetical writing that discussed the role of these cultural aspects in the politics of colonization (Mignolo 2010: 29–67). Aldrete, for example, was convinced that the American peoples lacked science and literature because they had no alphabetical writing and, consequently, lacked civility, a judgment he also justified by voicing his belief that they went around naked (Mignolo 2010: 30–34). In general, the evolutionary Renaissance ideology of alphabetical writing was used to legitimize the colonial expansion in the Americas (see Mignolo 1994b: 228, 1994a: 304, 2000: 3). Thus, the European Renaissance, with its "rebirth of classical legacies

and the constitution of humanistic scholarship for emancipation," also had a "darker side" (Mignolo 2010: vii): the use of the classical tradition to justify colonial expansion. It was during the Renaissance that Europe started to strive for world hegemony and develop a narrative of modernity "that builds Western civilization by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, 'coloniality.'" (Mignolo 2011: 2–3). Over the centuries, the "myth of modernity" promoting the superiority of Europe firmly took hold in the European discursive frame. This myth argued that the "technicoscientific rational of modern Europe" presents the highest level of human knowledge (Castro-Gómez 2008: 267, 271).

These ideologies generally regarded the possession of a historical consciousness as one important criterion for intelligence and civility and assumed that true historiography was only possible in alphabetical writing (see Mignolo 2010: 127–169). Since Indigenous nonlogographic writing systems were, in most cases, denigrated as mere forerunners to writing, many American civilizations were consequently denied historical consciousness and classified as "people without history" (Wolf [1982] 2010). One rarely known fact about such revered European philosophers as Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is that they also presented racist opinions that linked skin color with mental capacities and aesthetic capabilities. Hegel claimed that "because Africans had not mastered the European art of writing languages, they had no history, and what Africans presumably lacked collectively, they also lacked individually: the childlike nature of slaves was due to their absence of memory" (Farago 1995: 5; see also Castro-Gómez 2008: 262). The idea that Europeans were the only ones who recorded history and also "the only ones who *made* history" (Wolf 2010: xx, emphasis added) remained a strong discursive pattern until well into the twentieth century, combined with the arrogant notion that global history only began with the incorporation of non-European lands into European history.

Regarding Mesoamerica, most European thinkers denied that the Indigenous cultures possessed any form of historiography. Similarly, they largely ignored that at the time of contact the Mesoamerican people were confronted with the same problem the Europeans had: they needed to incorporate the Europeans and their ways of living into their own concepts of humanity and frames of history (see Rabasa 2005b: 151). How they did so appears in many Indigenous annals that include the arrival of the Spaniards and the attempts to make sense of this experience (see Boone 2000: 197–238). Nevertheless, for a long time European historiographical interpretations of the conquest simply ignored both pictorial and early colonial alphabetical Indigenous sources and disregarded Indigenous perspectives. In this manner, Hugh Thomas's account

of the conquest (1993) employs only Spanish sources and consequently has a strong bias toward the Spanish perspective of the events. And although Todorov's intention (1984) was to present the Aztec view of the conquest, he nevertheless rarely used Indigenous sources and evaluated Indigenous forms of writing and historiography firmly from within the European ideology of logocentrism. As a result, Americanists such as Brotherston (1992: 6) argued vehemently against classifying American cultures as prehistoric, while Jansen and Pérez Jiménez wish to restore the authority of the "people without history" over their own history (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007: xii–xiii).

In colonial history, most European thinkers denied the existence of both historiography and writing in Mesoamerica in their arguments for the intellectual superiority of Europe. However, some scholars recognized Indigenous forms of recording as such. Thus, Martyr, André Thevet, and Athanasius Kirchner compared pictography with Egyptian hieroglyphs, acknowledging its power of communication but nevertheless placing it at an inferior evolutionary stage than alphabetical writing (see Keen 1990: 64, 152, 208, 261). Francesco Patrizi even considered whether "sculpted and painted record keeping are more properly history than written ones, because they reveal the events to the eyes without need of mediation by words" (Mignolo 2010: 167, see also 64). This idea was later restated by Giambattista Vico, who included semiotic modalities such as sound, body movement, and graphic signs in his writing theory beneath the transcription of language (Mignolo 2010: 147–149). Finally, Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci adopted Vico's general approach in his *Idea de Una Nueva Historia General de la America Septentrional* (1746). Boturini, although fascinated by the efficacy of the Mesoamerican nonalphabetical writing system, nevertheless maintained the idea of the superiority of alphabetical writing (Mignolo 2010: 143–163). In comparison, eighteenth-century Neapolitan intellectual Raimondo di Sangro was so deeply fascinated and inspired by American forms of signification that he even wished to replace European writing systems (see Pillsbury 2011: ix).

Despite these positive voices, most twentieth-century academic writing theories preserve the European tradition of devaluating nonalphabetical communication systems to narrowly define *writing* as the recording of language. The classical writing theories of the 1960s to 1980s focused on script classifications according to the types of signs used and developed the categories "pictographic," "logographic," "logosyllabic," and "phonetic." These classes of scripts were then ranked—either explicitly or implicitly—based on the belief that "certain kinds of semiotic relationships are more 'efficient' than others" (Monaghan and Hamann 1998: 137). In this way, David Diringer (1962) developed a scale of writing that progressed from pictography and more abstract

ideography to analytic transitional scripts using words, phonetic scripts, and alphabets. Ignace J. Gelb (1963: 12), despite defining *writing* broadly as "a system of human intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks," nevertheless believed in an evolution from pictography to logography and syllabary to alphabetical script. In his view, Mesoamerican pictography belongs to the category of "forerunners of writing" (1963: 12). Curiously, he based this judgment on his impression of the *Codex Hammaburgensis* (Danzel 1926), a pictorial source that was later revealed as a fraud and has only remote iconographic similarity to authentic Mesoamerican pictorial sources (see Batalla Rosado and Rojas 2008: 16).

In my experience of the contemporary academic world, the narrow definition of *writing* as the recording of language is still the most popular. I witnessed this, for example, at the *Sign and Design: Script as Image in a Cross-Cultural Perspective (300–1600 CE)* interdisciplinary conference in Washington, DC, in October 2012. Here, Boone presented a paper on "Pictorial Talking: The Figural Rendering of Speech Acts and Texts in Aztec Mexico." According to an implicit evolutionary model, the conference organizers placed this paper in a section labeled "Before the Letter" (much to her annoyance). Even among Americanists, the narrow definition of *writing* is prevalent, particularly among Mayanists (see Boone 2000: 4, Cummins 2011: 306). For example, Mayanist Alexandre Tokovinine distinguished, in a syllabus he had written for a 2012 Harvard University anthropology class named "Digging the Glyphs: Adventures in Decipherment," between notational, iconographic, and phonetic communication and considered only the latter as true writing, that is, the "linear, graphic record of speech." Similarly, Anthony F. Aveni regarded the Classic Period Maya as the "only culture on the American continents demonstrated to have developed a writing system of coordinate rank with those of the Old World" (2008a: 5).

One could argue that the definition of the category *writing* is simply an academic decision based on agreement about labels and that no harm is done by excluding pictography from *writing* and naming it a visual, graphic form of communication. This, however, naïvely ignores the long history of using language, writing, and historiography as arguments for the (evolutionary) superiority of Europe. Definitions of writing typically imply opinions about "societies and individuals, their modernity (or lack thereof), cognitive development (ditto), and capacity to contribute usefully to the intellectual and spiritual life of the planet" (Gundaker 2008: 155). Correspondingly, classifying Nahua culture as a civilization without *writing* typically entails labeling it as intellectually inferior. Because of this ideological legacy, scholars working with Mesoamerican and South American nonphonographic cultures have begun to argue for a broad definition of *writing*, most popularly in *Writing without Words* (Boone and Mignolo 1994). In the view of these scholars, only a broad definition of

writing can transcend epistemic violence and academic ethnocentrism. A broad definition of *writing* opens the academic mind for other forms of visual communication and acknowledges American cultures as "literate, historical, and civilized" (Boone 2000: 29).

Following this intention, several Americanists have proposed broad definitions of *writing*. While Boone (2000: 30) understands *writing* as "the communication of relatively specific ideas in a conventional manner by means of permanent, visible marks," Gary Urton defined it as the process of transmitting information "*in its original form and mode*(*s*) *of expression* across great distances and over long periods of time (i.e., through the generations)" (Urton 2011: 4, emphasis in original). Alternatively, academia might refer to an emic category shared by many pre-Hispanic American cultures, namely

> the practice and materiality of recording and interpreting knowledge of a specific nature by means of graphic or tactile marks that are made on or in a permanent or semipermanent substance (the permanence depending on the durability or fragility of the medium). The marks are conventionally understood within their societies to signify objects, events, identities, temporalities, relations, and other concepts and things. (Boone 2011b: 379)

This definition of *writing* includes not only phonographic scripts but also pictographies and sign systems such as the Inca *khipu* (Boone 2011b: 380). All of these communication forms were "fundamental to the cultural life and sometimes the economies of their societies" (Boone 2011b: 380).

In sum, in acknowledging American literacies as "writing" in the true sense, we might finally manage to break free from a "long parade of destructions, appropriations, misappropriations, and misunderstandings" (Gruzinski 2001: 12) and from a history in which Europeans projected their own cultural concepts onto American cultures, their *imaginarie* "indissociable from a complex and mobile whole made of attitudes, feelings, and interpretations" (Gruzinski 2001: 28).

2 Different Kinds of Meaning and Knowledge

2.1 *European Theories about Reason as the Supreme Human Faculty for Understanding Reality*

After the discovery of the Americas, the Europeans incorporated the American peoples into their hierarchical frames of knowledge. In these frames, the faculty of reason served as one of the most fundamental criteria for defining

whether to regard the encountered people as fellow human beings. Renaissance scholars particularly referred to Aristotle's concept of the *psyche*, which considered the rational mind, with its capacities for belief, opinion, and reason, as the defining characteristic of humanity in comparison with animal and plant life (McKeever Furst 1995: 5–6, 8; see also Shields 2016). While the American peoples were, in many cases, attributed at least some sense of reason and thus classified as human beings, they were nevertheless, in most cases, compared to women and children, who were believed to possess only minor intelligence and an undeveloped sense of rationality. This idea shaped the European discourse about the colonial American Other, with the image of American peoples serving as the shadow of the European self-image. Whereas Europe was believed to embody rationality, abstract thought, discipline, creativity, and science, the American cultures were perceived as "pre-rational, empirical, spontaneous, imitative, and dominated by myth and superstition" (Castro-Gómez 2008: 268). Said (1978) famously discerned this type of Othering for the Orientalist discourse that began in the eighteenth century. The same pattern, however, had already been applied to the Americas from the sixteenth century onward (see Mignolo 2000: 13, 91–92, 2011: xxiii–xxiv).

The modern European understanding of rationality, nevertheless, was fundamentally shaped by the discourse of the Enlightenment, when the faculty of reason was established as "an autonomous and legitimate ground for knowledge over against the claim that revelation is the ultimate source of truth" (Vásquez 2011: 124). This understanding became the foundation for the epistemology of the modern natural sciences, which were believed to rationally and inductively analyze reality, a reality "organized by universal principles, which can progressively be apprehended by reason" (Vásquez 2011: 124). Consequently, the natural sciences were perceived as expressing propositional knowledge about reality, while other kinds of knowledge were outsourced to other literary and scholarly genres, with literature, for example, perceived as expressing verbal creativity and philosophical discourse expressing wisdom (Mignolo 2010: 212). Diverse scientific ideologies, such as objectivism, empiricism, rationalism, or logical empiricism, share the belief that the rational inquiry of the natural sciences is the highest human achievement for understanding reality (see also Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 186–188). In this context, the human faculty of reasoning includes "not only our capacity for logical inference, but also our ability to conduct inquiry, to solve problems, to evaluate, to criticize, to deliberate about how we should act, and to reach an understanding of ourselves, other people, and the world" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 3–4). This faculty of reason is believed to be requisite for the scientific inquiry to understand objective truth about reality, to understand "the real truth about

the order of nature considered as an entity separate from the human mind and soul" (Aveni 2002: 272). In sum, the modern natural sciences are based on an objectivist cosmovision that believes that the "world consists of objects that have properties and stand in various relationships independent of human understanding … there is a rational structure to reality, independent of the beliefs of any particular people, and correct reason mirrors this rational structure" (Johnson 1990: x). Within this cosmovision, the "structure of rationality is regarded as transcending structures of bodily experience" (Johnson 1990: x). Rooted in the idea from the Judeo-Christian tradition that "rationality is like a divine spark" with which "we can participate in God's reason" (Johnson 1990: xxvi), objectivism believes that the human mind possesses transcendental "a priori structures of reason and categories to understand the world" (Vásquez 2011: 60). Rational reasoning is regarded as transcendental, that is, offering a value- and culture-neutral, ahistorical, and disembodied access to an a priori truth.

According to the later philosophical representation theory, these structures of reason in the mind directly mirror reality (Vásquez 2011: 14). Since reality is by itself divided into reasonable categories, the rational concepts the human intellect uses mentally represent these categories, and hence the mental symbols correspond objectively to reality (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 21–22, Johnson 1990: xxii). Twentieth-century analytical philosophy adopted this philosophical perspective by discussing the nature of linguistic meaning (see Johnson 1999: 83–84). This branch of philosophy assumes that the signs and abstract conceptualizations in our minds represent the rational categories of reality and that reasoning is the manipulation of these signs and their larger conceptual structures. Consequently, any propositional expression of these categories with linguistic signs in the logical structure of a sentence is regarded as a literal expression of external reality and thus of truth (Johnson 1999: 83–84). Following this perspective, literal and therewith rational language is the perfect sign system to "map onto the objects, properties, and relations in a literal, univocal, context-independent fashion" (Johnson 1990: x). While words "get their meaning by virtue of their capacity to correspond directly to things in the world," rational thought "can be viewed as an algorithmic manipulation of such symbols" (Johnson 1990: x).

According to this correspondence theory of linguistic truth, (literal) linguistic signs and structures correspond to external reality. The objective meaning of a sentence is formed from the sum of the meaning of its components, and communication is the transfer of objective meaning. Although this theory and its objectivist ideology were renounced by thinkers advocating the linguistic and hermeneutic turns in the middle of the twentieth century, it nevertheless forms the foundation for most contemporary theories of writing. Following the

logocentric idea of the metaphysics of presence, alphabetical writing has been considered from "Rousseau through Hegel to Saussure … an indirect presentation of a presence found embodied in speech. It has been seen as a sign of a sign of presence" (Tomlinson 2007: 11; see also Vásquez 2011: 225). As a result, alphabetical writing is typically regarded as the best expression of rational truth about reality, because it correctly represents the primary semiotic system of language, a system considered to directly express objective, rational truth. Along these lines, DeFrancis stated that phonographic writing is the most superior type of writing because it conveys speech the most exactly, and "speech has evolved as the fullest and most efficient means of conveying thought," for "only full spoken language enables us as human beings to express any and all thought" (1989: 5, 7). Seen from this perspective, pictography cannot be anything other than a primitive form of writing because it expresses rational linguistic categories, and consequently truth about reality, only in a rudimentary form.

Apparently, the orality–literacy debate is rooted in these European philosophies of language and writing, since it so strongly links rational thought with (alphabetical) writing. According to the idea of the "grand divide" between primary oral and literate societies, only the introduction of (alphabetical) writing in any society permits individuals to critically distance themselves from the cultural heritage transmitted in the oral tradition and thus to open their minds to abstraction and rational reflection. With the use of (alphabetical) writing, consciousness elevates from a prerational to a rational, logico-empirical mode of thinking—a mode of thinking considered as supreme because only the rational concepts and categories of the mind directly mirror the rational structures of reality. Orality–literacy theories typically deny individuals in primary oral societies the capacity for critical and rational thinking because it is believed these only emerge as a consequence of literacy.

In conclusion, the question whether the American peoples possessed rationality and the capacity to reason has been dominating large parts of the European engagement with the Americas. It has been strongly influencing any evaluations of the Nahua tradition between orality and literacy and also any theories of writing declassifying pictography as merely a primitive forerunner to "true writing," that is, alphabetical writing. The idea of alphabetical writing representing the highest advancement of any writing system then again is rooted in European logocentric philosophies of language as much as in objectivist correspondence theories of linguistic truth. These ideologies essentially define reason as the supreme faculty to understand reality, a rationality that is best expressed in rational linguistic thought represented by alphabetical writing.

In the search for an alternative understanding of Nahua pictography, I challenge exactly this ideology of reason as the supreme faculty for understanding reality. If we wish to acknowledge Nahua writing/painting as an efficient semiotic system without a priori discrediting its power, we need to see whether alternative kinds of knowledge and meaning might exist that also express truth about reality, if only in a different way than rational reasoning. For this purpose, I turn to the theory of embodied rationality and meaning as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson.

2.2 *The Theory of the Embodied Mind*

In 1980, George P. Lakoff and Mark L. Johnson published the influential book *Metaphors We Live By* ([1980] 2003), which challenged the objectivist ideologies of the natural sciences, the correspondence theory of truth as prevalent in Anglo-American analytic philosophy, and the idea of a universal, transcendental rationality. Since then, the two authors have refined and expanded their initial metaphor theory into general theories of the embodied mind and of embodied meaning (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Johnson 1990, 2007). Although Lakoff and Johnson's approach offers many points of contact with recent theories in cultural studies and social sciences, thus far only a few scholars from these disciplines have begun to adopt it.

In *Metaphors We Live By* (2003), Lakoff and Johnson started their work by criticizing traditional metaphor theories, which deny linguistic metaphors the capacity to objectively describe reality "for they involve category crossings that do not exist objectively in the world" (Johnson 1990: xxiii). The objectivist metaphor theories are generally based on the correspondence theory of linguistic truth, according to which only literal linguistic concepts correspond to the underlying rational structure of reality (Johnson 1990: 66–67; see also Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 119–122). Revolutionarily, Lakoff and Johnson defined the metaphor as "a pervasive principle of human understanding that underlies our vast network of interrelated literal meanings" (Johnson 1990: 65) and which plays a "*constitutive* role in the structuring of our experience" and behavior (Johnson 1990: 73, emphasis in original).

According to Lakoff and Johnson, linguistic metaphors are not isolated and poetic rhetorical devices but essential expressions of basic cognitive structures in the human mind. Metaphors strongly shape our understanding of our emotional and social experiences, our abstract intellectual concepts, and our repertoire for action and interaction. We talk primarily metaphorically about our experiences because we conceive them in that way and act accordingly (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 3–6). As such, metaphors are not merely a linguistic phenomenon and the result of a "conscious multistage process of interpretation."

Instead, they are "a matter of immediate conceptual mapping via neural connections" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 57). Consequently, conceptual metaphors manifest not only in linguistic imagery but also in "grammar," and "gesture, art, or ritual" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 57). Nevertheless, linguistic metaphors are the basic means for accessing these fundamental structures of our thinking and acting (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 4).

Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 45, 2003: 56–60, 115) argued that human cognition primarily uses mental imagery from sensorimotor domains and from physical body experiences to conceptualize subjective experiences, emotions, and abstract intellectual concepts. We base our abstract concepts for "nonphysical entities, institutions, actions, relations, values" (Johnson 2007: 165) on our natural interaction with the physical environment in the form of spatial orientation, movement, object manipulation, and ingestion (Lakoff and Johnson 2011: 137). In particular, we refer to the logic of the sensorimotor structures of "image schemas (e.g., containers, paths, contact, balance, centrality) and motor schemas (grasping, pushing, pulling, moving)" to develop metaphorical concepts and abstract reasoning (Johnson 1999: 85). In general, we choose and organize such metaphors in a coherent way depending on our cultural context (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 14–21). The most basic foundation of our perceptual, largely unconscious knowledge is movement in space, including our own bodily motions and interactions with moving objects. We form this knowledge, which "keeps us in touch with our world in the most intimate and profound way," from the beginnings of our bodily experience as infants (Johnson 2007: 20). In bodily movement, we experience "four recurring qualitative dimensions . . .: tension, linearity, amplitude, and projection." We also experience the quality of things, of spaces, and of forceful exertions such as explosive, graceful, halting, or weak and use these qualities to conceptualize nonphysical ideas (Johnson 2007: 22). Correspondingly, we express these ideas linguistically in metaphors such as "moral uprightness," a metaphor combining the abstract concept of *morality* with the spatial orientation of being upright. This idea is grounded in our bodily feeling of standing straight and tall (Johnson 2007: 26). Similarly, many of our most basic conceptualizations of time are based on spatial movement and the "passage of time is understood as relative motion in space" (Johnson 2007: 28).

Small infants conflate their subjective experiences, such as social affection, with sensorimotor experiences such as the closeness of bodies and the warmth of being held. Later, children learn to separate between the two domains. Nevertheless, the cross-domain association remains and forms a large system of primary metaphors, such as "emotional closeness," "a close friend," "having warm feelings for somebody," or "a warm smile." The early bodily experiences of infants are

> nonpropositional and arise prior to language, and yet they are what make it possible for a child to make some sense of its surroundings and to act intelligently to achieve its ends. Because embodied structures of this sort organize our emerging world, they correlatively organize and form our emerging and always developing sense of self. If our bodies were different, and if we therefore had different bodily experiences and different kinds of interactions with our multiple and multidimensional environments, then we would have a different sense of self and different ways of understanding and reasoning. (Johnson 1999: 99)

Several forms of continuity exist between sensorimotor activity and abstract conceptualization. One of these is the image schema, a "dynamic, recurring pattern of organism-environment interactions," such as the experiences of center-periphery, compulsion, or balance (Johnson 2007: 136). These image schemas come as gestalt structures, that is, in "parts standing in relations and organized into unified wholes"; they give our experience "discernible order" and make it comprehensible (Johnson 1990: xix). For example, the compulsive force schema (that is, "the movement of an object through space in some direction") involves the experience of a sequence of causality, a source and a target of a force, directionality with a single path of motion, and different degrees of intensities (Johnson 1990: 42–44). We experience these schemas cross-modally, including "kinesthetically, visually, tactically, and auditorily" (Johnson 1999: 94). At a general and abstract level, the dynamic and flexible image schemas structure and organize our mental representations (Johnson 1990: 24). The image schemas for spatial and temporal orientation, in particular, are "so pervasive and so constitutive of our ordinary experience that they are taken for granted (and thus overlooked) in standard accounts of meaning and understanding" (Johnson 1990: 31). Although they are preverbal, they "play a major role in the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of natural language. They lie at the heart of meaning, and they underlie language, abstract reasoning, and all forms of symbolic interaction" (Johnson 2007: 145).

Basic image schemas can be extended into complex categorical structures and conceptual metaphors mapping our physical, sensorimotor experiences onto abstract concepts. Through conceptual blending, distinct conceptual domains "can be coactivated, and under certain conditions connections across the domains can be formed, leading to new inferences" and finally to complex conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 47). Many complex, everyday metaphors are "built out of primary metaphors plus forms of commonplace knowledge: cultural models, folk theories, or simply knowledge or beliefs that are widely accepted in a culture" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 60). For instance,

the act of reasoning itself is often conceptualized as a motion along a path, in which we move our ideas from A to B, reach a final destination in our argument, or go over the same territory again when we rethink our arguments (Johnson 1999: 96). Basically, we cannot understand the act of "reasoning" independent of any metaphor of this kind (Johnson 1999: 97).

An example of a more complex metaphorical blending is the image A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY. It combines the primary metaphors of (1) actions as motions and (2) purposes as destinations with the ideas that (3) a person living a life is a traveler, (4) a life plan is an itinerary, and (5) a life goal is a destination, and finally with the cultural belief that (6) people are supposed to have destinations in life and try to reach those (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 60–61). We use this complex conceptual mapping to reason, for example, if somebody has reached a "dead end" in life and receives advice to reverse the motion and go somewhere else (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 65). There is hardly a way to think about the abstract concept of leading a life without one of those complex metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 72). Even the most basic concepts of our thinking, such as "time, events, causation, the mind, the self, morality" are blended multiple metaphors. In fact, so "much of the ontology and inferential structure of these concepts is metaphorical that, if one somehow managed to eliminate metaphorical thought, the remaining skeletal concepts would be so impoverished that none of us could do any substantial everyday reasoning" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 128).

In brief, the basic argument of Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory is that complex metaphors are based on our bodies' physical, sensorimotor experiences and are integral parts of our cognitive reasoning, rationality, and understanding. These metaphors are present in our basic linguistic structures, use of modal verbs, speech act structures, and intensity of statements (Johnson 1990: 48–61). Thus, fundamental corporeal experiences (such as the equilibrium of gravitational balance) are projected into abstract realms such as psychological states (emotional balance), intellectual reasoning (the balance of a rational argument or mathematical balance), and systemic cultural processes (political balance) (Johnson 1990: 75–80). Looking at it from the other side, the primary metaphors on which complex metaphors are built are embodied in three ways: (1) bodily experience is paired with subjective experience, (2) our reasoning "arises from the inferential structure of the sensorimotor system," and (3) this reasoning "is instantiated neurally in the synaptic weights associated with neural connections" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 73). Most of the time, these processes are unconscious and "we have no direct access to it or control over its use" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 73), although metaphor is "one of the chief cognitive structures by which we are able to have coherent, ordered experiences that we can reason about and make sense of" (Johnson 1990: xv).

Based on this analysis of metaphors as reflections of our bodily experience, Lakoff and Johnson radically criticized the European ideology of the disembodied mind, an ideology separating the cognitive faculties of the "*formal*, conceptual, and intellectual" from the "*material*, perceptual, and sensible" (Johnson 1990: xxvii, emphasis in original) and separating the mental, rational dimension of logical reasoning from its "bodily, perceptual, material, and emotional side" (Johnson 1990: xxv). Consequently, they criticized the strong over-intellectualization of "many aspects of human meaning-making and thinking" (Johnson 2007: 8), along with the exclusive association of rationality with linguistic expression (Johnson 2007: 135–136). In Johnson's view, human beings are essentially

> creatures of the flesh. What we can experience and how we make sense of what we experience depend on the kinds of bodies we have and on the ways we interact with the various environments we inhabit. It is through our embodied interactions that we inhabit a world, and it is through our bodies that we are able to understand and act within this world with varying degrees of success. (Johnson 1999: 81)

In contrast to many European philosophies of the last centuries, Johnson did not single out the human faculty of reasoning and rationality to distinguish humanity from "lower" beings in the Great Chain of Being or in evolutionary scales. In his view, no ontological gap exists "between the different levels of functioning within an organism" (2007: 123) and, accordingly, no ontological gap exists between human thinking and the "less sophisticated, less complex engagements of animals with their world" (2007: 112). Rather, the human cognitive faculty of reason "builds on and makes use of forms of perceptual and motor inference present in 'lower' animals" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 4). Notwithstanding this, there are "clear differences in the size, complexity, and structural differentiation of human beings as compared with single-celled organisms such as bacteria" (Johnson 2007: 124). The main differences are, first, that "we have neural mechanisms for metaphorically extending image schemas as we perform abstract conceptualization and reasoning" and, second, that we "are capable of becoming aware" of this process (Johnson 2007: 141).

In conclusion, this theory of the embodied mind is the most relevant aspect of Lakoff and Johnson's approach for the context of our discussion. It challenges the premises of the traditional correspondence theory of truth and offers a new understanding of reason and rationality. In Johnson's words, reason "does not drop down from above like a transcendent dove" (Johnson 1999: 86), it is not a "transcendent feature of the universe or of the disembodied mind"

(Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 4). Rather, it "emerges from the 'corporeal' logic and inference structure of our bodily, sensorimotor experience" (Johnson 1999: 86). Human reasoning is always embodied; it works by mapping the "logic, the imagery, and the qualitative feel of sensorimotor experience" on most of our concepts, as much in everyday metaphysics as in abstract scientific theorizing, formal logic, and even in our most sophisticated rational abstractions (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 128–129). The fundamental patterns of our thinking are largely unconscious, metaphorical, imaginative, and emotionally engaged (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 4). Consequently, rationality is

> not a static external structure that we come to grasp or know, as though it pre-existed independently and only awaited discovery by each new infant. Rationality is not a universal structure "wired" into us that we simply activate over time. Rather, our reason is an ongoing, developing activity by which we understand things, and this activity emerges for organisms of the sort we are, organisms with certain constraints on perception, movement, and cognitive processing. We conceptualize and reason the ways we do because of the kinds of bodies we have, the kinds of environments we inhabit, and the symbolic systems we inherit, which are themselves grounded in our embodiment. (Johnson 1999: 99)

In sum, according to this theory of the embodied mind, the faculty of reason and rationality is not transcendental and a preexisting structure of reality. Nevertheless, it is universal insofar as human beings share the capacity for embodied reasoning and cross-culturally share "perceptual and sensorimotor structures, … environments, and … stable contexts that define the ways we conceptualize and draw inferences" (Johnson 1999: 100).

2.3 *Nonlinguistic Kinds of Knowledge and Meaning*

In the last section, I summarized Lakoff and Johnson's theory of the embodied mind. Their understanding of embodied reasoning and rationality offers a new perspective on common devaluations of Nahua pictography, since these typically assume that disembodied, transcendental rationality is the supreme human faculty for understanding reality, and that only alphabetical writing is capable of expressing it appropriately. Challenging these first assumptions, Johnson expanded the theory of the embodied mind by discussing the nature of meaning and examining the processes of understanding and meaning-making, which not only include abstract reasoning but also draw on experiential knowledge. This approach to meaning provides a new tool for understanding the semiotic modus operandi of Nahua pictography.

The philosophies of objectivism, the metaphysics of presence, and the correspondence theory of truth declare propositional, representational language as the best expression of true knowledge about reality. This idea was criticized not only by Lakoff and Johnson but also within several larger academic movements. Among them was the hermeneutic turn as initiated by Heidegger and Gadamer, who pointed to the interpretative step necessary for any understanding of linguistic propositions. The later linguistic turn raised awareness about the influence of history, situational context, and practice on the meaning of linguistic utterances. Wittgenstein, for instance, withdrew his earlier belief in language as the mirror of reality and stated that linguistic meaning depends on the rules of *language-games*, on convention, habit, and context (see Vásquez 2011: 216). John L. Austin (1962) emphasized the role of practice in a similar way by stating that the meaning of any sentence depends on the respective speech act in which it is embedded. Poststructuralists such as Derrida went even further in deconstructing the metaphysics of presence. In his theory of the intertextuality of linguistic signifiers, Derrida showed the "radical openness of the hermeneutic process" (Vásquez 2011: 226). Finally, sociologists also challenged the idea of human knowledge as a transcendental mirror of the rational structures of external reality. According to the approach of social constructivism, knowledge depends on the "sociocultural matrixes that provide us with categories with which we make sense of reality," a process resulting in a "historicized, positioned, embodied" kind of knowledge (Vásquez 2011: 123). All these thinkers and movements turned away from objectivist claims to knowledge of reality by acknowledging the social and cultural embeddedness of all communication, meaning, understanding, and knowledge.

Based on his Latin American postcolonial experience, Mignolo developed a similar theory of perspectival and situational knowledge that criticized the idea of a transcendental subject generating objective knowledge and aesthetic norms independent of its location and context. As Rabasa added, the problem of the correspondence theory of truth is not the idea of truth in general or the belief in humanity's capacity to understand and express (aspects of) truth. Rather, we should dismiss the claim that any human understanding and expression of truth is universal or transcendental. Thus, we should "envisage a plurality of worlds" with a "multiplicity of horizons for establishing truth and authority" (Rabasa 2005a: 85).

Lakoff and Johnson embraced a similar position with their theory of the embodied mind. Accordingly, their pragmatist, experientialist theory of knowledge mediates between objectivist and subjectivist perspectives of reality. In their view, there is no objective, absolute (epistemological) truth about

reality.[2] Our cognitive concepts and abstract ideas do not mirror objective properties inherent in reality but merely mirror the interactional properties in which we conceive this reality (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 214). Correspondingly, linguistic meaning is not objectively given but depends on the situation of its utterance: "We understand a statement as being true in a given situation when our understanding of the statement fits our understanding of the situation closely enough for our purposes" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 179). Lakoff and Johnson also agreed with earlier scholars in acknowledging the role of the larger social and cultural context for making meaning and understanding truth. They are convinced that experiences cannot be separated from the social and cultural shaping of the person making the experience. Neither abstract linguistic concepts nor emotional or physical experiences are direct; they are interpreted always in terms of "cultural assumptions, values, and attitudes" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 57) and are essentially shaped by the social reality any individual lives in (2003: 146). Although knowledge is always human (in contrast to transcendental), mediated by understanding, and constructed (Johnson 1990: 206–209), knowledge is nevertheless not purely subjective or arbitrary, because it emerges from our interaction with the environment. This environment is "at once physical, social, moral, political, and religious" (Johnson 1999: 82). As physical realists, Lakoff and Johnson (see 1999: 110) believe that there is a physical reality external to human experience (Johnson 1990: 201) as well as a cultural and social reality, including "our history, culture, language, institutions, theories, and so forth" (Johnson 1990: 207), that our experience and understanding are part of. Therefore, our knowledge corresponds to reality, even if it is perspectival knowledge "relative to our *understanding* of our world (or present situation) and of the words we use to describe it" (Johnson 1990: 203, emphasis in original).

Lakoff and Johnson also believe that human knowledge is not arbitrary and that a large part of human knowledge is shared across all cultures. First, humanity has "found theories, schemes, and paradigms that make partial sense of the world" and enable humanity "to function more or less successfully" in its environment (Johnson 1990: 205). Many "inaccurate and unuseful schemes and structures of understanding" have been excluded during the course of human history, not least by the rigorous methods of the Western natural sciences (Johnson 1990: 209). Second, human beings across all cultures share commonalities with their bodies; they share the foundations of their sensorimotor interaction with the physical environment and many of "the same embodied

2 This reading differs from Kevin Schilbrack's (2014a: 169–173). He criticized Lakoff and Johnson for not distinguishing (clearly) between epistemological and ontological truth.

basic-level and spatial-relations concepts" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 107). Consequently, the conceptual system of any person is "not *merely* a matter of historical contingency" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 5–6, emphasis in original), instead, "there will be an enormous range of shared 'truths'" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 107). Since these truths are the result of interactions tested "by billions of people over our history as a species," they can be considered as stable; they "work pretty well, or we wouldn't be here to talk about them" (Johnson 1990: 208). In sum, Lakoff and Johnson follow a philosophy of embodied realism. They believe in the existence of an external reality that is experienced by human beings in direct contact with it, since they are part of it. Nevertheless, human beings understand this reality only through the capacities of their bodies and minds, as shaped and formed through culture and social context.[3]

The aspect that Lakoff and Johnson *add* to the discussion about culturally and socially constructed, perspectival, and situational truth and knowledge is their emphasis on the *embodiment* of human understanding, on the grounding of knowledge in the physical, sensorimotor experience of our bodies. According to this perspective, meanings do not "just pop into existence (arise in our consciousness) out of nothing and from nowhere. Rather, they must be grounded in our bodily connections with things, and they must be continuously 'in the making' via our sensorimotor engagements" (Johnson 2007: 25). Following Johnson's principle of continuity, infants learn the meaning of things and experiences on a prelinguistic, bodily level and carry these experiences forward into their later "mature acts of understanding, conceptualization, and reasoning" (Johnson 2007: 33). Prelinguistic infants learn the meaning of the world through their bodies and affects in social contexts. One strong pattern of experience that includes movement and the quality of things are vitality affects, that is, patterns of feeling, flow, and development, such as surging, fading away, fleeting, explosive, crescendo, or bursting. These vitality affects are intermodal or cross-modal, meaning they are identical across the different perceptual modalities, such as the visual or the haptic (Johnson 2007: 41–45). After the acquisition of language, these kinds of embodied modes of understanding "do not simply cease to exist," but "situate, make possible, and give meaning to what we call our higher-level propositional operations and linguistic performances" (Johnson 1999: 93). Adults appropriate and recruit these embodied meanings and bodily ways of meaning-making "in what we might think of as our more refined, abstractive modes of understanding and thinking" (Johnson 2007: 51).

3 Understood in this way, I do not see much difference between Lakoff and Johnson's *embodied realism* and Schilbrack's *critical embodied realism* (see Schilbrack 2014a).

Every act of understanding is shaped not only by sensorimotor experience, image schemas, and vitality affect but also by emotions as crucial aspects of our "ability to evaluate situations and to assess, both moment to moment and over the long run of our extended lives, the meaning of our experience" (Johnson 2007: 54). These sentiments include assessments of our internal bodily functions, basic reflexes, the immune system, feelings of pleasure and pain, and basic drives and motivations. They also include emotions as "complex neural, chemical, and behavioral responses to various types of stimuli" with background emotions (energy or calmness), primary emotions (fear, joy), or social emotions (shame, pride). If these sentiments and emotions reach our conscious awareness, we experience complex "feelings" (Johnson 2007: 55–56). All these responses are vital for our survival and are "one of our primary ways to monitor the nature and adequacy of our ongoing interaction with our environments," thus producing meaning "at a primordial level" (Johnson 2007: 18). According to Johnson, even the meaning of the philosophical concept of *doubt* is rooted in the "bodily experience of holding back assent and feeling a blockage of the free flow of experience toward new thoughts, feelings, and experiences" (Johnson 2007: 53–54). Most of these emotional experiences happen at an unconscious level, either in the neurophysiological unconscious of neural networks, in the cognitive unconscious of image schemas and embodied conceptual metaphors, or in the phenomenological unconscious of felt qualities (Johnson 1999: 82). The large range of sensations grouped under the umbrella term of *emotions* are essential components in the process of understanding and meaning-making and consequently form one important kind of knowledge, which informs and shapes any propositional knowledge.

This approach to *knowledge* constitutes a paradigm shift that is apparently not shared by other parts of contemporary Western philosophy, which relate knowledge primarily to cognition and linguistic thinking. For example, the 2011 *Routledge Companion to Epistemology* (Bernecker and Pritchard 2011) assembled a large number of articles on many aspects of knowledge, which nevertheless remains astonishingly disembodied and ahistorical. Similarly, the lemma on knowledge in the recent *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* (Hamid 2017) mentions three basic kinds of knowledge in its introduction (propositional knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, and knowledge-how) but nevertheless discusses only the first.

In other parts of academia, however, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to nonpropositional aspects of knowledge, parallel to a body turn in popular discourse (see Koch 2016: 61). Jessica Lindblom (2015), for example, understands knowledge as the interrelation of cognitive processes, bodily processes, and social interaction. Earlier approaches to the body in anthropology,

the social sciences, the humanities, and philosophy had already touched on the question of the relationship between knowledge and the body. Indeed, the European history of ideas has a long tradition of discussing this relationship. Twentieth-century theories are generally characterized by the attempt to transcend the dominant separation of mind and body (Kogge 2016: 33–34).

In sociology, for example, Marcel Mauss (1934) argued about techniques of the body by interrelating biological, psychological, and sociological aspects. Much later, Foucault (e.g., 1976) turned attention to the political dimension of the social body, while Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1977) created the concept of the *habitus*, referring to a system of embodied dispositions, habits, and skills that allow us to navigate social environments. In German sociology, Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann developed their concept of *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) by drawing on Edmund Husserl and Helmuth Plessner (see Knoblauch 2016: 51–53).

In philosophy, two classical concepts explicitly expanded on the concept of *knowledge* by including nonpropositional, nonverbal, implicit, and practical aspects: Gilbert Ryle's distinction between "knowing-how" and "knowing-that" (1949) and Michael Polanyi's concept of "tacit knowledge" (1967). With *knowledge-how*, Ryle referred to a practical and embodied kind of knowledge, for example, the knowledge how to ride a bicycle. Polanyi's idea of *tacit knowledge* is broader; it includes *knowledge-how* but also other kinds of implicit knowledge, such as the cognitive skill of speaking a language.

In recent years, the concept of *body knowledge* has been included in the debate. Stefan Hirschauer (2016) distinguished between three different kinds of body knowledge: (1) propositional knowledge *about* the body; (2) knowledge *of* the body, that is, knowledge created *by* and residing *in* in the body; and (3) knowledge that is communicated *through* the body. While the first, propositional knowledge about the body, has no relevance in our analysis of Nahua pictography, the second and third kinds do. Knowledge communicated through the body refers to the body as a medium of communication by wearing clothing and tattoos along with all kinds of body language, such as gestures, facial expressions, and postures, a medium that played a highly prominent role in Nahua culture. Many sociological approaches that analyzed the inscription of social power into the body indeed focused on this third aspect. In distinction, the concepts of *knowledge-how* and *tacit knowledge* focused rather on the second aspect of knowledge as embodied *in* the body. While this kind of knowledge is nonpropositional and largely unconscious, it nevertheless actively provides orientation and meaning for the human being-in-the-world (see Koch 2016: 67–68). While it is primarily implicit knowledge, parts or aspects of it could be made more or less explicit in textual, verbal, or symbolic media (Koch

2016: 67). Naming this kind of knowledge *implicit* might be misleading because even *tacit knowledge* can potentially be expressed quite explicitly, for example, by loudly shouting, as Hubert Knoblauch (2016: 52) pointed out. The semantic meaning of shouting might be highly implicit, seen from the perspective of linguistic propositional knowledge, but it is not necessarily tacit in the sense of silent (or not perceptible). Embodied cognition in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson could be included in this kind of knowledge created by and residing in the body.

With his theory of embodied meaning, Johnson expanded the focus of his and Lakoff's theory of embodied cognition by changing perspective to the processes of meaning-making and ways of communicating meaning. In this, he also transcended the limits of linguistic meaning and explored the "qualities, feelings, emotions, and bodily processes that make meaning possible" (Johnson 2007: x). Johnson is not interested in an abstract philosophy about knowledge but in the ways that human beings reason in their everyday lives and what they perceive as meaningful (Johnson 1990: 11). In this, he differs from objectivist semantic theories, which typically ignore nonlinguistic kinds of meaning and regard meaning as a fixed relation between words and the world detached from the process of (subjective) understanding (Johnson 1990: 173–174). Johnson, in opposition, views meaning as a part of human understanding, with linguistic meaning only "a special instance … of our capacity to have meaningful experience" (Johnson 1990: 177). Even though human beings use language to describe their experiences and understandings, the result is only a description of how something like an event, an object, a person, a linguistic utterance, or a narrative is meaningful to them (Johnson 1990: 1, 4). This meaningfulness involves nonlinguistic, nonliteral, and figurative cognitive structures (Johnson 1990: 5). It "comes through bodily experience and figurate processes of ordering . . ., preconceptually meaningful structures of experience, schematic patterns, and figurative projections by which our experience achieves meaningful organization and connection, such that we can both comprehend and reason about it" (Johnson 1990: 17). In Johnson's view, this "immanent, preconceptual, and nonpropositional meaning is the basis for all forms of meaning" (Johnson 2007: 34). Accordingly, our capability to understand situations, rationally reflect on them, and decide to take action is deeply rooted in the immediate qualities we experience in any situation (Johnson 2007: 265). The aesthetic dimensions of experiences, the "qualities, images, patterns of sensorimotor processes, and emotions" form "all our meaning, thought, and language" (Johnson 2007: 1). In sum,

> meaning includes qualities, emotions, percepts, concepts, images, image schemas, metaphors, metonymies, and various other imaginative structures. Learning the meaning of something would thus include a growing sense of all the qualities, percepts, distinctions, recollections of what has gone before, and anticipations of possible future experience that follow from it. No isolated thing, percept, or quality has any meaning in itself. Things, qualities, events, and symbols have meaning *for us* because of how they connect with other aspects of our actual or possible experience. Meaning is relational and instrumental. (Johnson 2007: 268)

As such, understanding is a dynamic, intentional, and related process in interaction with our social, cultural, physical, and biological environments (Johnson 1990: 177, 152, 265). Because we rely on cultural modes of experience, codification, and interpretation, this process is not exclusively subjective (Johnson 1990: 14).

In sum, Johnson's theory of meaning is a "semantics of understanding," defining understanding as a linguistically, "historically[,] and culturally embedded, humanly embodied, imaginatively structured event" (Johnson 1990: 175). The kind of meaning resulting from understanding essentially relies on experiential knowledge, with *experience* defined in "a very rich, broad sense as including basic perceptual, motor-program, emotional, historical, social, and linguistic dimensions" (Johnson 1990: xvi). Experiential knowledge thus employs our whole "being in the world," that is, "our bodily capacities and skills, our values, our moods and attitudes, our entire cultural traditions, the way in which we are bound up with a linguistic community, our aesthetic sensibilities, and so forth" (Johnson 1990: 102). Experiential knowledge is based on processual embodied understanding in an interaction of our human organism with our physical, social, cultural, linguistic, and historical environment producing a "shared, relatively intelligible world" (Johnson 1990: 209). This kind of experiential knowledge can be communicated not only with language but with other forms of human expression. In *The Meaning of the Body* (2007), Johnson argued that "various arts make use of the very same structures and processes that operate in ordinary, everyday meaning-making, including images, image schemas, metaphors, qualities, feelings, and emotions" (Johnson 2007: xii).

In the history of the Western theory of art, the capacity of the arts to express knowledge about reality has been a controversial debate (see Johnson 2007: 213–219). Sketched broadly, one discursive tradition goes back to Plato devaluating poetry and the arts as second-rate understandings of reality because their strong emotional character distorts rational realization. Along these lines, faculty psychology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

separated sensory impressions, feelings, and emotions from intellectual understanding and cognitive reasoning. In a hierarchy of human faculties, sensation and emotion were considered as "lower" faculties producing only subjective experiences. Because the arts were associated with expressing sensations and emotions, they were judged as incapable of expressing objective truth about reality. Consequently, eighteenth-century art philosophies defined the main office of the arts as creating beauty to stimulate (strong) feelings. Finally, drawing on this general approach, Kant separated aesthetic from scientific and moral judgment. In his view, aesthetic judgment is based on feelings and therefore primarily subjective; he considered only a general sense for the beautiful as universal (see Johnson 2007: 211).

In comparison to this discursive tradition, neo-Aristotelian approaches in the European history of art theory revalued sense impressions as carriers of knowledge about reality and linked the artist's imagination to rational thought. Particularly, Renaissance theories of art emphasized the artist's power to reflect sensory experiences and to represent a realistic, naturalist rending of sensory inputs. They regarded the visual capacity of sight in combination with imagination as a "process of gaining a rational understanding of the created world" (see Farago 1995: 9). Consequently, these theories disdained non-naturalistic art forms such as the grotesque as well as art forms of the newly discovered American cultures. Because American art forms use representations that appeared nonrealistic to European eyes, they were "associated with irrational mental activity, the active imagination unrestrained by human reason" (Farago 1995: 10; see also Gruzinski 2002: 110–124). It was left to the later Romanticist artists of the nineteenth century to argue against this correlation of the arts with realistic representation and rationality. These artists reconsidered the power of the arts to express emotions and subjective experiences and upgraded these human faculties as an even better way to get into contact with the forces of life than any rational thought could do.

A common discursive pattern in the history of art theories is to distinguish between (objective) rationality and (subjective) emotion. Johnson, in his theory of embodied meaning, transcended this dichotomy between rational, cognitive thought associated with objective knowledge about reality and linguistic expression, on the one hand, and sensation and emotion associated with subjective experience and artistic expression, on the other hand. In his view, both human faculties and activities are "two dimensions of a single, ongoing activity of meaning-making" (Johnson 2007: 82). Cognitive, rational abstraction is merely the process of singling out one quality or aspect of a situation from the "continuous flow of our experience" (Johnson 2007: 92). This process permits us "to recognize something that is *the same* over and over across different

experiences and thoughts" (Johnson 2007: 88, emphasis in original), to relate it to other concepts, and to discern implications for action (Johnson 2007: 92). Linguistic thinking plays an important role in this rational abstraction, but the complete process nevertheless draws heavily on the nonlinguistic dimension of our experience (Johnson 2007: 81).

In Johnson's view, the arts are an effective way to communicate the nonlinguistic aspects of experiential knowledge, understanding, and meaning, and they are by no means purely subjective (Johnson 2007: xi). Rather, the arts make use of all the intersubjective embodied dimensions of meaning and understanding, including the nonpropositional, prelinguistic kinds of meaning deeply rooted in our bodily experiences of the world and interactions with the environment, including the metaphorical imagination we use to form abstract cognitive concepts and to reason with these concepts (Johnson 2007: 208). He believes that the arts, as "exemplary cases of consummated meaning" (Johnson 2007: xi) are even more effective than language for expressing experiential knowledge because they provide "heightened, intensified, and highly integrated experiences of meaning" (Johnson 2007: xiii). Considering, for instance, a particular impressionist painting, it is difficult to discern its specific, definite meaning (even though art historians and art critics might attempt to convince us otherwise). Notwithstanding this, the painting is "redolent with meaning.... The deeper meaning of the work comes from the way it activates certain neural patterns that are significant for creatures with brains and bodies like ours" (Johnson 2007: 233). The visual arts take the "images, patterns, qualities, colors, and perceptual rhythms" as the "principal bearers of meaning. The obvious fact that we usually cannot put into words what we have experienced in our encounter with an artwork does not make the embodied, perceptual meaning any less a type of meaning" (Johnson 2007: 234).

Art psychologists such as Rudolf Arnheim examined these embodied kinds of meaning and visual expression and started to analyze the experience of "shape, form, color, balance, harmony, light, space, growth, and a host of perceptual forces" (Johnson 2007: 228). For example, some recurring forms or patterns are typically associated with "certain feeling values. It is now well known that organic, curvilinear forms generate a very different visceral response in us than do linear, rectilinear, and jagged lines" (Johnson 2007: 225). Investigating this visual meaning in a more thorough way, however, is a "vast and highly complex undertaking. It would require looking into research in perceptual psychology, physiology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and aesthetics" (Johnson 2007: 224). Following Johnson's analysis of experiential knowledge and its expression in the arts, it is aesthetics rather than the study of abstract rationality that must form the basis for any profound theory of human meaning and understanding (Johnson 2007: xi).

In conclusion, Johnson's theory of experiential meaning expressed in the arts presents a powerful theoretical alternative to logocentric theories of writing for reevaluating Nahua pictography. As we have seen, both the Nahua oral tradition, characterized by the use of imagery, and Nahua pictography were disdained by Europeans because of their assumed lack of rationality and thus of the capacity to express objective, propositional truth about reality. Mesoamerican art historian Boone was one of the first to point to the fact that European traditions also use many kinds of nonlinguistic communication systems that are highly valued as representations of reality (see, e.g., Boone 1994b: 8–10). Among these are musical notation as well as the notational systems of mathematical formulae or the use of graphs and tables in scientific thought. The latter two are typically considered as the highest evolutionary stage of rational thinking per se. These nonlinguistic notations can, in many cases, express and transport human knowledge much more effectively and efficiently than alphabetical writing. They are also often easier to understand and to translate into action (Boone 1994b: 9–10). The theory of the embodied mind, of embodied meaning, and of experiential knowledge as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson adds a fundamental argument to this approach and offers a powerful alternative for a new interpretation of the nature and efficacy of the Nahua writing system.

3 Seeing Reality: Nahua Semiotic Theory

The aim of this section is to interpretatively (re)construct the semiotic theory implicit in Nahua culture. For this purpose, we first need to recall some basic features of Nahua general ontology before we attempt to learn something about the Nahua image concept through its clash with European image concepts in the early colonial decades. This prepares us to (re)construct the semiotic theory implicit in Nahua culture and to formulate an epistemology and hermeneutics of Nahua writing and painting.

3.1 *Recalling Nahua Ontology*

As seen in the last chapters, the Nahuas put considerable effort into understanding and manipulating the underlying principles of reality—principles comprising both "natural laws" and the reasons for contingencies and chance happenings—in order to improve human life and to counteract disease, starvation, social conflict, and other miseries. Using ordinary human senses, the Nahuas acquired ample knowledge about their world through close, long-term observations of nature. They expanded this knowledge with insights from

religious and shamanic visions using senses beyond everyday waking consciousness, which (according to their interpretation) revealed the normally imperceptible but not transcendent realms of reality and the forces running through the cosmos. The result was a rich cultural discourse about what they believed were the underlying principles of reality.

Personified deities were acknowledged as among the most powerful agents influencing the cosmos and, consequently, humanity. The Nahua concept of *divinity*, however, was highly polysemous and immensely fluid. The source material on this matter is intricate, confusing, and bewildering and withstands all attempts to clearly structure the complex pantheon or to classify the deity personae. Deities constantly overlapped regarding their spheres of influences, functions, attributes, regalia, and iconographic depictions, and a confusingly high number of honorific titles and salutatory addresses were used interchangeably. Deities were also believed to be present in many different forms: They were interchangeably astromorphic, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and phytomorphic; they were present in physical qualities as well as in the characteristic features of material objects, and they manifested in the behavior patterns of animals and humans as well as in human emotions or inclinations to act in a certain way. In my view, based on earlier interpretations by other scholars, the best way to make sense of this extremely complex and intricate pantheon characterized by fluidity and polysemy is to understand the deities as realizations and epitomes of particular forces, essences, or qualities moving through the cosmos. As such, the deities were different aspects of the same pantheist metaphysical essence—*teotl*, as Maffie argued—unfolding and manifesting in a kaleidoscope of facets. Particular qualities or specific clusters of energies were merely singled out and imagined as deity personae for ritual, iconographic, analytical, and pedagogical reasons. The deities presented a continuum of essences rather than forming a neatly defined pantheon. Moving in constant and complex interaction, they were clusters of possibilities rather than entities. By using the concept of personified "deities" driven by particular needs and possessing a powerful agency to act sometimes capriciously within the cosmos, the Nahuas were thus able to explain both the repetition of natural occurrences and the contingencies of life. Despite arguments to the contrary, the surviving sources contain no evidence suggesting that the Nahuas perceived the deities as transcendent as opposed to immanent, or as supernatural as opposed to natural. Instead, my argument is that the Nahuas experienced these forces and qualities as fundamental characteristics of the Fifth Era, that is, of the cosmos in which they lived. They perceived them as essentially immanent even though not easily understandable by human beings.

These deities as clusters of forces were believed to realize themselves in the many different qualities of everything existing and on every imaginable layer of reality. As such, they were experienceable for humanity. In the natural world, the qualities were differences in cardinal directions, time units, or natural elements such as fire and water. In the world of objects, they were differences in form, material, consistency, and function. In the plant world, the forces appeared in different plant species and their characteristic properties. In the animal world, they realized as different animal species, with their particular appearances, behavior patterns, and characters. The human world was not separate from this cosmos but an inextricable part of it. Consequently, the qualities also manifested in human beings in the form of long-term characteristics, such as social roles, talents, and personal characters, and as changing aspects, such as emotions or behavior tendencies. Finally, the forces realized in the divine world in particular deity personae and in their material or human impersonators, the *teixiptla*. The essential identities of these deities were not permanently fixed but fluid, combining different sets of qualities in every changing moment and place within the general movement of forces through the cosmos. By using this concept of deities, the Nahuas established mental order in the apparent chaos of reality, made sense of the complex net of interrelated qualities and forces, and presented them in such a way that they could manage and manipulate them in rituals.

Every quality that could be perceived on one layer of reality (e.g., the natural world) was believed to have its equivalent on another layer of this same reality (e.g., the human world). The respective layers were related through the *nahualli*, or coessence of qualities. Thus, one particular quality could realize in a specific time unit and place as well as in a specific natural element or in a material object, in a particular plant species as well as in an animal species or in a particular deity persona. Such a quality could also realize in a human individual, both permanently and spontaneously. Accordingly, the character of any human being might be governed by the same essential quality as the jaguar, forming a bond of *nahualli* between the two subjects. Even concrete physical diseases or emotional experiences were regarded as outcomes of the powerful influence of one of these qualities.

The qualities and forces of the cosmos also realized in the realm of the visible. This is important to emphasize for our interpretative (re)construction of Nahua semiotic theory with regard to the writing system. Accordingly, every form, contour, texture, or color, in sum everything that human vision experiences is the realization of a particular quality existing in the cosmos. While this quality also manifests in other realms of reality, for example, in the audible realm or in the characters and fates of time units, the visible realm is one of the layers in which *teotl* realizes itself, corresponding to the other layers.

Human beings were able to detect forms, appearances, behavior patterns, and personality traits that resembled one another from one layer of reality to another and to express these insights in manifold ways: in language patterns, metaphors, and riddles; in painting and writing; in sculpture, feather-work, and architecture; and in religious imagery and ritual performances. Nahua artists were believed to be inspired in their hearts with insights into the underlying workings of reality. Following this inspiration, they could express this acquired knowledge in their artistic works and thus make it available to others. As a result, pieces of art were believed to depict the essential quality contained in the object or subject. Some things in the physical world presented a naturally intensified version of reality because of their extraordinary beauty and radiance. Artists could intentionally create this type of beauty by arranging things into a well-ordered state that strongly expressed the object's particular quality as well as the overarching balance of the complementary forces of the cosmos. In this way, art became a medium for expressing knowledge about reality, even to express reality itself, a medium to reveal an unclouded view of reality from the continuously moving and changing images of earthly life. Consequently, the arts, including the writing system, were understood in Nahua culture as human activities that not only expressed and communicated knowledge but also made the essential qualities of material objects more pronounced, clearly visible, tangible, and experienceable.

3.2 *The Colonial Clash of Representations*

In order to (re)construct Nahua semiotic theory, it is helpful to modify the perspective on the Nahua system of recorded visual communication, from seeing it as *writing* to considering it as a form of *painting*. In doing so, we extend the discussion from theories of *writing* to *image* theories. The Indigenous concept of the *image* differs a great deal from European understandings, a fact that becomes apparent in the colonial clash of representations.

In the European history of religions, the ontological nature of the image and the legitimate use of icons for religious worship have been vigorously debated. In the major iconoclastic controversies of the eighth/ninth and sixteenth centuries, the major bone of contention was the relationship between the material image of the icon and the divine prototype, in other words, the relationship between the visual representation and the invisible, immaterial world of the divine (Miller Parmenter 2013: 66–67). Most of the orthodox supporters of icons in the eighth and ninth centuries followed a neo-Platonic theory, which conceived the visible and the invisible as standing in a hierarchical relationship but not strictly separate from each other. As the archetypal Form was believed to be present in its visual copy, the image could serve as mediator

between the worshipper and divine realities (Miller Parmenter 2013: 67). The Western tradition, in comparison, strictly separated the image from the abstract reality it represented (Valentin 2010: 28–31). In the popular worship of images, nevertheless, the boundaries between both traditions were blurred (see Miller Parmenter 2013: 77).

It was the theory of strictly separating the representation and the represented that was carried into New Spain by the early Franciscan missionaries, who opposed the popular European Catholic worship of saints and their images. Torquemada (1976) regarded the image as merely a placeholder for something absent, with the mind associating the image with the represented only through similarity of appearance and resemblance (see Gruzinski 2001: 64–68). The Natives, however, for whom the many Christian images were often the most important, directly experienceable manifestation of the new faith, did not realize that the Franciscans thus differentiated between the divine and its images (Gruzinski 2001: 38, 65). The resulting clash of representations was one of the most important aspects of the "unforeseen and brutal clash of societies and cultures" in the colonization of Mexico (Gruzinski 2001: 5), which Gruzinski consequently called the "war of images" (2001: 2).

This clash of representations surfaces in many early colonial sources. Conflicts about the worship of Christian saints show that the Natives identified any statue or image of a saint with the person of the saint and took both for one and the same (Gruzinski 1993: 249–250). Neither did they follow the mannerist Christian image concept, which came into Mexico in the late sixteenth century and envisioned the image as an extended metaphor merely symbolizing some aspect or personality trait of the saint (Gruzinski 2001: 79–82, 114). Rather, the Natives apparently interpreted the animals, plants, and symbols in these images and their playful "decorative loading" and "allegorical flowering" as the *nahualli* of the saints (Gruzinski 2001: 114, see also 84, 180). Not surprisingly, the Indigenous painters who worked for the new Christian churches in early colonial Mexico became fascinated by the European tradition of the grotesque, an art style resembling some of the basic working mechanisms and visual styles of Indigenous painting. Italian artists had developed the grotesque at the end of the fifteenth century in opposition to the prevalent Renaissance theory of optical realism and naturalism, which was supposed to reveal reality in a rational way (see Farago 1995: 9). The grotesque, in comparison, used a visual language based on hieroglyphs, emblems, foliage ornaments, and fantastic creatures and was understood as an esoteric, sacred language revealing the profound essence of things (Farago 1995: 10, Gruzinski 2002: 110–114, 123). Most of the European grotesque artists interpreted their images as metaphors and allegories separating the signified from the signifier. Others nevertheless regarded the

images as metonymic presentations of the essence of particular ideas merging the signified with the signifier. It was this latter concept that rang true for the Indigenous painters (Gruzinski 2002: 123–124).

The difference between the Indigenous and the early colonial Franciscan concept of the *image* becomes particularly evident in colonial misunderstandings regarding the Indigenous idea of the *teixiptla*. The early missionaries translated the Spanish "image" into the Nahuatl term *ixiptla*, without realizing the completely different image theories behind the two concepts (see Gruzinski 2002: 173). While the Franciscan image was "meant to raise us toward a personal god, the copy moving toward its prototype [in a reverse, upward motion], guided by the resemblance uniting them," the *teixiptla* was a "localizable, epiphanic presence . . ., a 'being-here'" of immanent forces and qualities (Gruzinski 2001: 51). When the missionaries referred to the sun as the *ixiptla* of St. John the Baptist, they understood the sun as a metaphor and allegory for the personality, power, and relevance of the saint. Hence, the sun served merely as a symbol, which helped to understand some features of the saint with a cross-domain reference to a natural phenomenon that is associated with specific powers and feelings. The Natives, however, reversed the equation sun=signifier and saint=signified by conceiving the person of the saint as the *teixiptla* of the sun in an equation of saint=signifier and sun=signified. Moreover, the saint-*teixiptla* was not understood as a *re*presentation of the sun but as a presentation of it, as a human impersonator and localized manifestation of the qualities and forces of the sun. Thus, the Indigenous equation knew no signifier, with all elements being realizations of a particular force or quality, while the saint was understood as a personified, transformed *teixiptla* and the sun as a realization of the quality in the natural realm. In sum, the Natives made no ontological difference between the representation and the represented, the image and what it depicted, or between the signifier and the signified. Rather, both aspects were regarded as identical. The "divine" force did not exist independently of the *teixiptla* in a transcendent sphere only waiting to become incarnated in the immanent world. The cosmic quality existed *only* in the material world; its only way of existence was to be realized in the material world.

After the conquest, the Indigenous understanding of the *image* persisted for quite a while, unintentionally supported by the shift from Franciscan to Dominican theology in Mexican church politics at the end of the sixteenth and in the first half of the seventeenth centuries. For instance, the Dominican Alonso de Montúfar, second bishop of Mexico, supported popular saint worship in the way he knew it from Spain and even stimulated the new cult around the Virgen de Guadalupe (Gruzinski 2001: 96–98, 106, for the virgin, see 98–101, 117–130). In these times, the didactical image of the Franciscans was rapidly replaced by

the miraculous and thaumaturgical image (Gruzinski 2001: 104–105). These two Christian image concepts came much closer to the Indigenous concept of the *teixiptla*, without the new church leaders realizing the resulting misunderstanding and syncretism.

A similar phenomenon of representational misunderstanding apparently shaped the Indigenous adaptation of Christian theater plays in the early colonial centuries (see Lockhart 1993a: 401–410, Burkhart 2010, Burkhart, Sell, and Poole 2011). The Natives adapted this genre with great enthusiasm, most probably because it satisfied their taste for large-scale performances comparable to the preconquest *veintena* ceremonies. If we extrapolate from Indigenous understandings of the *veintenas*, the Christian plays were presumably not perceived as "plays" in the modern sense, differentiating between the play-as-if and reality, between the actors and the role they play, between the human *teixiptlame* and the cosmic quality they presented. In the *veintenas*,

> the cosmos and its acting forces became manifest and were made present, immediate and palpable; they were presented, and not "represented," to the beholders and the celebrants. This was a ritual of appearance, a sort of hierophany, and not a trompe l'oeil spectacle given for the pleasure of the eye and the edification of the crowds. (Gruzinski 2001: 87)

In conclusion, the colonial clash of representations demonstrates the essential difference between European image theories and the Indigenous concept of the *image*. This change of perspective from theories of *writing* to theories of the *image* helps us to (re)construct Nahua semiotic theory.

3.3 *Seeing Reality: Nahua Semiotic Theory*

In the last section, we saw that the colonial Nahuas incorporated Christian images into their religious practice by employing their Indigenous understanding of (re)presentation as manifest in the concept of the *teixiptla*. This concept did not distinguish between the material image and a (transcendent) referent, between (ultimate) reality and its (perishing) image, or between the present and the absent; it did not separate the copy from the original, the representation from the presented, or the signifier from the signified. Rather, both sides of the semiotic process were merged together, identical with each other. Let me explain this idea with one other example, the Indigenous understanding of "filth" in contrast to the Franciscan understanding of "sin."

The control of decentering, destabilizing pollution was an important part of Nahua everyday life. *Tlazolli*, "filth," was perceived as a fertilizing energy and as a constitutive part of the cosmos, with its transformative energy through death

deemed necessary for life. Nevertheless, this force needed to be assigned to its proper place, the periphery, to become harmless and innocuous to human life. The quality of *tlazolli* had effects not merely on the physical layer of human existence but also on the social, emotional, mental, and spiritual layers. Material filth was of the same essence as emotional or behavioral filth. Consequently, the accumulation or removal of filth on one layer directly influenced the degree of filthiness on the other layers. In their teachings to the Natives, the Christian missionaries used the image of physical, bodily pollution as a metaphor for the impurity of the soul. In doing so, they hoped to stimulate the emotional response and impulse to act related to cleaning the body of filth. The Nahuas, however, did not understand this image as a metaphor but rather as a metonymy and directly linked outer and inner bodily filth with emotional, moral, and spiritual pollution. As a consequence, they went to confession when they were physically ill because they believed that confessional purification directly influenced the disease understood as body pollution. Seen from the perspective of Nahua cosmovision, the cognitive linking of bodily health with mental health was no cross-domain mapping but rather a synecdoche in which one part of something (mental impurity) stood for another part of the same (physical pollution) within one semantic domain (the quality of filth). Thus, physical pollution and mental impurity were both different signifiers for the same signified, that is, for the quality of filth. The signifiers (physical and mental filth), nevertheless, were not regarded as mere representations of the signified (the quality of filth) ontologically separate from the signified but as realizations or presentations of the signified.

A similar ontology inspired the imagery of "flower and song" and general Nahua language theory. The image of "flower and song" was not used as a metaphor for *poetry*. Instead, flowers were seen in a metonymical relationship to songs. Flowers and songs were both related to one another in a direct, immanent, natural way because they shared their essential nature, that is, the quality or force that realized itself in both of them. This quality manifested in the many distinctive layers of reality, such as colors, physical forms, plants, animals, deities, or aspects of human life. In Nahua general language theory, language was not an abstract semiotic modality referring only arbitrarily to reality, nor did abstract linguistic reasoning mirror the rational structures of reality. Rather, following the idea of a natural language, the sounds of the language manifested the underlying structures of reality in the audible domain and were thus direct presentations instead of representations of this reality. In sum, this idea of a natural language blended the signifier (sound) with the signified (reality), and both were considered identical to one another, since sound was an essential part of that reality.

In my view, these interpretations provide a key to understanding Nahua semiotic theory and the concept of visual presentation in Nahua pictography. Recalling Nahua ontology, image concepts, and language theory, I argue that Nahua writing, according to their perception of it, was a primary presentation of reality rather than a secondary representation. That means that the pictorial signs were not signifiers pointing toward an absent signified but realizations of the signified.

In contrast to European philosophies of language privileging linguistically expressed thoughts as the place where truth about reality is most directly revealed, the Nahuas valued the arts as an important medium for revealing the underlying structure of reality and for communicating truth and meaning. Following this interpretation, the pictorial signs used in Nahua pictography, as well as the visual grammar and structure, were not chosen arbitrarily to represent (linguistic) thoughts. Rather, visual imagery was perceived to directly mirror the object, subject, or abstract category that it depicted. Thus, the Nahuas attributed to the visual sign the same position in relation to reality as Western philosophers attributed to language; both were believed to directly correspond to reality. Moreover, the visual signs Nahua artists painted were not merely mirrors of reality; such signs were also believed to be a part of that reality itself as it realized particular essential qualities. In consonance with the concept of *nahualli* as the coessence of qualities across the complete range of layers of reality, visual imagery stood in a direct relationship with this reality and with the forces and qualities contained in the particular entity depicted. The visual signs simply showed one type of realization of the underlying forces of reality, a realization on the visual layer, whereas the artist made the quality pronounced to the human eye and clearly visible, tangible, and experienceable. As such, the color used to paint a particular sign presented one realization of the respective force, along with the form used for the sign and its placement on the page. Figures of anthropomorphic deities painted in specific colors with their characteristic costumes and regalia were thus realizations of more intricate clusters of forces and qualities and expressed the interrelationships between different layers of reality (e.g., color, form, or substance).

Analyses of the Nahua writing system typically classify its basic signs as (1) pictograms referring to the depicted object by visual resemblance, and (2) ideograms conveying ideas, concepts, and things by natural association and metonymy or arbitrarily by convention. Referring to Peircean semiotics, Boone (2000: 33) equated the pictograms with icons (based on visual similarity) and ideograms with symbols (based on association or convention), while both classes use indexical elements referring to the signified "by metonymy, synecdoche, or instrumentality" (Boone 2000: 34). It is my impression that this

application of Peircean terminology is premised on an *image* concept that uses naturalistic renderings as its touchstone. Accordingly, the criterion for sorting any sign into one of the two categories is whether it visually resembles the depicted object (category *icon*), or a part of it (category *icon with indexical character*), or whether it does not (category *symbol*). Visual resemblance in this case means an illusionistic two-dimensional imitation of the sense impressions of our eyes; the painted form of a sign is compared to the form of the object in the natural world as our eyes perceive it. The latter, neo-Aristotelian idea, in turn presumes that human sense impressions rationally mirror the given and natural characteristics of the external world.

Attempting to transcend these naturalistic premises, an alternative reading of Peirce arises, allowing us to rephrase Nahua semiotics in Peircean terms in a different way (see Peirce [1940] 1955: 102, 104, 109). Nahua pictography chose an emblematic style over naturalistic renderings. Human bodies, for example, were painted nonrealistically, emphasizing qualifying aspects in relation to the cosmos, such as the three main animistic centers. Seen from the naturalistic view, the complete style thus tended toward the symbolic. As such, Nahua painting showed the essential quality of the depicted, an identity that included aspects not typically seen by the human eye in everyday, ordinary perception.

Note, however, that seen from the perspective of Nahua culture, this style might not have been perceived as "symbolic" after all. Maybe the Nahuas actually *saw* the world that way, since visual perception and the understanding and interpretation of visual inputs are fundamentally shaped by our cultural concepts. Be that as it may, I want to go one step further than comparing the visual form of painted signs with the visual form of the depicted. Seen from the perspective of Nahua semiotic theory, as discussed earlier, the Nahuas might not have distinguished signs based on their visual similarity to the signified but might have regarded all signs as *indexes*, regardless of their visual form. The painted signs were not indexes because they metonymically (as a synecdoche) represented a *part of the sign* for the signified entity. Rather, they were indexes because the signs themselves were considered a *part of reality*, a realization of their underlying essential quality.

In the semiotic theory Boone used, the *index* works on the same level of reality as the *icon* or *symbol*, on the level of signs. The indexical iconic sign (e.g., a painted quetzal feather) stands in the same relation to the complete icon (the painted quetzal bird) as the quetzal feather to the quetzal bird in the "real," natural world. Thus, the sign relations mirror the relations in the natural world. In my alternative application of the Peircean terms to Nahua semiotics, however, there is a cross-reference: the painted sign stands in an indexical relationship to reality because it partakes in this reality. It presents one part of

reality, the visual one (mediated by the painter's experience and limited by the medium). As such, the painted sign was related to reality by spatiotemporal contiguity. This was regarded as an existential, natural relationship. Like smoke being a natural index of fire or the turning weathervane being a natural index of wind, the painted sign was a natural index of the cosmic quality characterizing its essential nature. The visual signs expressed this essential level of reality by immediately evoking the sensory associations considered essential for the respective quality.

It follows that Nahua pictography, in contrast to alphabetical writing, was not perceived as a secondary representation of abstract, rational, and linguistic knowledge about reality. Nor was it perceived as a representation of the visual characteristics of reality in an illusionistic, mimetic way. Rather, Nahua painting was a direct, sensorial, and visual depiction of (a part of) that reality itself, even if it was painted and pronounced in a form corresponding to how the human creator of the painting had understood and *seen* this reality.

To elucidate and emphasize the difference of this semiotic form to the concept of *representation*, I suggest using the term *depiction* instead of (re) presentation. In this, I follow Rabasa's adaptation of Wittgenstein's differentiation between *Abbildung* and *Darstellung* (in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*), translated by Rabasa (2011: 37–41) as "depiction" (*Abbildung*) and "representation" (*Darstellung*). According to Rabasa's interpretation of Wittgenstein, the two concepts refer to two different ways to present reality. Whereas depictions (as used in pictorial writing) show reality in the form of ideal types and characterizations of things by their attributes, the representations of naturalist Renaissance imagery show realistic situations and imitate human vision. Expanding this interpretation, I define *depiction* as a presentation of reality on the primary level, while *representation* is a secondary presentation of reality in which the signified (the presented) and the signifier (the representation) are separate from each other.

In conclusion, Nahua ontology did not recognize an ontological dualism between a transcendent divine and the material world or between an abstract rational reality and lower forms of human understanding or expression. Rather, the qualities and forces personified in the complex pantheon were immanent features of the cosmos and realized in the many different layers of reality. The sound of language and the visual appearance of pictorial writing were just two layers of this reality, interrelated by shared qualities and essences. As such, pictography presented and depicted the visual layer of reality and had the same ontological status as reality itself. Nahua semiotic theory did not separate writing and reality; painting was simply expressing the visually experienceable layer of this reality. There was no ontological separation between the signifier and the signified.

4 Interpreting Nahua Pictography

In the following section, I propose a new interpretation of Nahua pictography that transcends its typical assessment as inferior to alphabetical writing and acknowledges it as an elaborate and efficient semiotic system. To this end, I first analyze the characteristic features of Nahua pictography as a sign system, considering its relation to reality and its emphasis on visual modality. As the centerpiece of my argument, I then discuss how Nahua pictography expresses embodied reasoning, experiential knowledge, and body knowledge, and functions as a performative script. Challenging the ideas of disembodied rationality as the supreme human faculty for understanding reality and of language and alphabetical writing as direct reflections of ultimate truth, I argue that Nahua pictography reflects alternative kinds of human understanding of reality.

4.1 *Semiotic Modalities and Theories*

Each semiotic system in the world is defined by its characteristic use of distinct types of signs expressed in a particular medium, which addresses a specific sensory modality. It is also determined by a semiotic theory about the relation of signs, medium, and modality to reality. Applying this analytical frame, Nahua pictography employs iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs according to a conventional code system that is based on iconicity and graphism. It uses a medium that fuses text and image and addresses the visual modality. As such, the medium combines aspects of the European semiotic systems of writing and art, but it differs from these in its relation to reality. In contrast to alphabetical writing, it does not trace the auditory reality of spoken language. Nor does it trace visual sensory impressions in an illusionistic, mimetic way as in European Renaissance paintings. In contrast to European expressionist art, it does not focus on expressing subjective sensory and psychological experience, imagination, or sense of self, but expresses cultural knowledge in a sign system strongly ruled by conventions. Regarding its semiotic theory, it is similar to European art forms such as the grotesque, which used glyphs, emblems, ornaments, and figures to reveal the essence of things. Nahua pictography also displays some similarities to European systems employing hybrid signs between letter, script, and image (see Bedos-Rezak and Hamburger 2016), for example, the seals and epigrams from European antiquity and the ancient Near East (typically classified as "pseudo script," see, e.g., Andrássy, Budka, and Kammerzell 2009), the monograms on Byzantine churches in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, or the symbolic initial letter ornaments in Carolinian sacramentals. Regarding the function of Nahua pictography as a performative

script, it could be compared to the scripts of church dedication rituals in liturgical manuscripts of the tenth to twelfth centuries.

The semiotic theory of Nahua pictography also resembles Chinese calligraphy as a visual medium for expressing knowledge about the "organizing principles of things" and the "structure of the universe" (Gruzinski 2001: 50; see also Shoucheng 2008: 78). While Chinese characters are highly abstract, the signs used in Nahua pictography are largely iconic. Some graphic forms of Nahua pictography intend to explicitly visualize the underlying structures of reality as cosmograms reflecting the movement of cosmic forces through time and space. In this respect, they resemble not only astrological and astronomical charts but also the scientific models, graphs, diagrams, and algebraic systems of modern European chemistry or physics. This idea of the image presenting the underlying structures of reality was most prominent in the divination codices. While I believe that this theory governed Nahua pictography in general, it is nevertheless less poignantly visible in the historical genres, which emphasized narrative components and figurative codes as scripts for performances. As such, the historical genres also served as secondary semiotic systems representing the primary system of human performance.

While the Nahuas used several semiotic systems, among them elegant speech, music, or dance, Nahua pictography primarily addressed the visual sensory modality. There might be several reasons why Nahua society preferred this semiotic system to any phonographic system. First, the nonphonographic system of the Postclassic International Style could communicate meaning across linguistic boundaries in an ethnically and linguistically diverse region, a region that nevertheless shared basic cultural traits and ideas. More abstractly, the Nahuas might have preferred a system of recording that emphasized the visual modality because visuality played a prominent part in Nahua culture in general. The visible was used to mark and construct social identities and the characters of the deities. It was an important sense for the experience of Nahua rituals, since many of the participants and beholders primarily *saw* the sacrifices and the costumes and regalia of the priests and *teixiptlame*. Finally, vision was granted a high position in the Nahua cultural hierarchy of the senses and in Nahua epistemology. Accordingly, Nahuatl had a large number of terms referring to the act of seeing and to vision linked with knowledge.

Visual imagery even characterizes relevant parts of Nahuatl, a fact reflecting a strong tendency for visualizations in Nahua thinking. For example, much everyday vocabulary was based on imagery, such as a "snake looking like a worn-out reed mat" for *centipede* or "the blouse, the skirt" for *woman*. In addition, more abstract concepts had strong visual aspects, such as "the red, the black" for *cultural knowledge* and *wisdom* or the rich garden imagery of "flowers and

songs." Iconic Nahua pictography communicated this visual imagery much more easily and quickly than any phonographic system that detours through language could. In Nahua pictography, "readers" directly perceive "the red, the black" as the cognitive category for knowledge by seeing the colors red and black (e.g., in the red and black face painting of Quetzalcoatl, see Figure 13). In phonographic writing, in comparison, readers first need to reconstruct the sounds of the words "the red, the black" only to cross-modally translate these into the vision of the colors.

What is more, Nahua imagery not only employed impressions from the visual sense but also from other human senses. Arguably, all "images" presented under the category of "Nahua imagery" are simultaneously shaped by other sense impressions in addition to the visual. "The blouse, the skirt," for example, is not only *seen*, the texture of the clothes is also felt at touch, particularly in the secure environment of close relationships or in the production process of textiles. The image might also invoke the rustling sound of the textiles when the wearer moved or the specific odor of the garment worn by mothers, sisters, or wives. Similarly, the pictorial sign of the "burning temple" for *conquest* shows the visual impression of a specific type of house consumed by flames in a conventionally stylized way (see Figure 19). By activating the neural paths for this vision, I believe that it summoned a vivid mental representation of the scene and triggered associations of other sense impressions, such as the smell of burning wood or flesh, or the sounds of people crying and shouting.

With the semiotic system activating one sensory modality directly rather than representing this nonlinguistic concept through the detour of language, the imagination of the "reader" reproduced the other sense impressions more easily. The same rings true for complex cultural concepts such as *preciousness*, which is typically depicted with the symbol of a quetzal bird. Seeing the brilliant and iridescent colors of the bird's feathers painted on a page, the memory of the reader might easily produce a whole range of sensory impressions and conceptual associations connected to the idea of *preciousness*.

4.2 *Pictography and Embodied Reasoning*

The ubiquity of imagery in Nahuatl in general (and not only in "poetic" discourse) suggests that Nahua culture endowed individuals with imaginative and sensory modes of thinking that transcended the medium of language. Many image theories, however, are governed by the text paradigm, approaching images as if they were texts communicating a readable message. The German tradition of *Bildwissenschaft* (science of the image), in particular, has been strongly shaped by this approach (see Bräunlein 2004a: 204–205). Accordingly, linguistic concepts were adopted to theorize communication

through images: *Bildsprache* (visual language), *Bildsemantik* (image semantics), *Bildsyntax* (image syntax), and *Bildgrammatik* (image grammar) (see Uehlinger 2006: 179). To provide a recent example of this kind of thinking, image theorist Klaus Sachs-Hombach argued that any usage and understanding of images is fundamentally based on the faculty of speech and the cognitive capability to think in propositions. In his view, only this capability allows the beholder to abstract from the individual context of any depicted object in order to understand the general category of the depicted. In short, he stated that we need linguistic, propositional thinking to form abstract categories and concepts (Sachs-Hombach 2007: 285–286). This interpretation easily connects to the European tradition that links meaning and truth with rational linguistic thinking. Image theorists such as Hans Belting and W. J. T. Mitchell, however, have started to transcend this tradition of textualism (see Bräunlein 2004a: 205–223).

As a challenge to this tradition of reading images as texts, I focus on Lakoff and Johnson's theory of embodied reasoning. It presents a powerful alternative perspective on the possibilities of expressing thought in nonlinguistic sign systems and images. Applying this theory to Nahua pictography, we discover that this sign system provides efficient visual means to communicate embodied concepts by using its visual modes, such as lights and shadows, colors, shapes and forms, designs, and spatial relations and arrangements. Before discussing some examples, let us first recall the relevant arguments of Lakoff and Johnson's theory. The two scholars argued that embodied metaphors are one of the most basic principles of human understanding and play a constitutive role in structuring our thinking. Embodied metaphors shape our basic cognitive structures and influence both our everyday thinking and our highly abstract reasoning. Thus, our most abstract concepts and ideas are characterized by our physical, sensorimotor body experience, including spatial orientation, movement, manipulation of objects, and intrabody experiences such as ingestion. All these body experiences are typically integrated and cross-modal; we experience them with several or all of our human senses, including the visual sense. Inspired by Johnson's arguments about the expression of meaning in the arts, I believe that the visual level of conceptual embodied metaphors manifests in the visual imagery of pictography and therewith expresses the bodily foundation of abstract concepts more directly than language. By visually activating the neural patterns associated with the respective metaphorical concept, its embodied meaning can be understood by the "reader" in a more direct experiential way.

Take, for example, the basic image schemas of BALANCE and CENTER-PERIPHERY. These image schemas are rooted in our body experience of

standing erect in a posture that balances our body parts against gravitational force. We balance our body weight around a central axis, producing the schema of the CENTER, with our body parts in the PERIPHERY subject to force vectors. Typically, we hold our bodies erect in EQUILIBRIUM of symmetrical forces in relation to the body axis. If we lose axial balance, we stumble and fall to the ground, an unpleasant experience we typically seek to avoid. If our body parts have no symmetry, we actively need to counteract the disbalance to produce equilibrium (see Johnson 1990: 74–98). We experience these body sensations of balance, center, periphery, symmetry, and equilibrium not only with an inner sense of body-balance but also cross-modally with all our senses, including the visual. With our vision, we constantly check the position of our body and its parts in relation to the objects and entities in our environment. This constant balancing typically occurs on an unconscious level, and only situations of loss of balance bring it to our conscious mind. If we see an image governed by visual balance, our cross-modal body experience of balance is activated, including all sensations, emotions, and feelings we associate with the experience of balance. Thus, we *feel* the concept BALANCE rather than think it.

The image schemas of BALANCE, CENTER-PERIPHERY, SYMMETRY, and EQUILIBRIUM are among the most important conceptual metaphors employed in Nahua culture. Most significantly, the cosmos was imagined both spatially and temporally using these image schemas. See, for example, the cosmogram on folio one of the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer/Tezcatlipoca* (see Figure 2, Anders, Jansen, and Pérez Jiménez 1994). Here, the deity Xiuhtecuhtli (lord of the year and of time) resides in the center of the cosmos. The center is emphasized using the CONTAINER schema with Xiuhtecuhtli placed *inside* a square box forming a stable symmetrical center with clear boundaries. Around this central axis, the cosmic trees grow in the eight cardinal directions and stretch into the periphery of the cosmos. The four trees of the main cardinal directions are painted in a larger scale than the trees of the intercardinal directions, hence the image schema of SCALE is used to indicate relevance. The four main cardinal directions and the four intercardinal directions together form the formée cross (Maltese cross), therewith producing a balanced SYMMETRY around the central axis. Time moves in a circular motion through the eight directions. The 260 days of the ritual calendar *tonalpohualli*, presented by one dot each, form a long ribbon around the periphery. The ribbon flows in folds through the different directions so that the temporal sequence of the *trecenas* is revealed through their relative position to one another, thus using the CLOSENESS schema. If we see this diagram in its complexity, we can invoke with just one gaze the body experiences of center-periphery, balance, symmetry, and equilibrium used to conceptualize metaphorically both cosmos and time. We *see* the central axis

and the equilibrium of the cardinal directions along with the symmetry of the *trecenas* moving through the year, forming a balance of influential qualities.

The Nahuas applied this conceptual metaphor of the spatial and temporal cosmos to many areas of human life, most notably architecture, medicine, psychology, sociology, and human behavior. The ritual performance of sweeping filth from the center to the periphery was believed to affect all other areas of human life. In general, the Nahuas attempted to maintain and reestablish balance, symmetry, and a stable center. Even the Nahuatl language was organized chiefly according to these combined image schemas, arranging sentence parts agglutinatively around a central word stem and pairing verses in numerical symmetry around a common theme in the poetical diction.

Another example of conceptual metaphors in Nahua culture was the abstract idea of *time*, typically imagined as MOVEMENT IN SPACE. The cosmogram of the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer/Tezcatlipoca* places the individual days of the calendar in a sequence to produce a circular movement. Thus, the year forms a long ribbon of days, which extend around the periphery of the cardinal directions of the cosmos. In the annals, time is presented as moving in a straight line from the past into the present. In both cases, the spatial image schema SOURCE-PATH of an object moving along a trajectory path is used.

Nahua pictography uses embodied image schemas to both visualize central philosophical concepts such as *time* and the *cosmos* and for a large range of further concepts in all kinds of contexts. It employs these schemas for central patterns of organization in specific genres such as the cosmogram as well as in narrative contexts at the level of individual signs and their spatial arrangement relative to one another. For example, the painters of Cholula's history in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* used the schemas of SCALE and INTENSITY to convey the complex abstract idea that Cholula had found its glory and cultural heyday only after conquest by the Toltecs. On a folio depicting Cholula after the beginning of Toltec rule (see folio 14r, Figure 18), Cholula's three toponyms (a flowered hill topped by a frog, a stand of blue-green reeds sprouting from a pool of water, and a willow tree) are painted in brighter colors, larger scale, and in more detail than at any earlier time (see folios 9v–10r, Figure 17). Hence, the image schemas of SCALE and INTENSITY indicate the abstract concepts of *political relevance*, *wealth*, and *cultural achievements*. Most intriguingly, the alphabetical text of the *Historia* does not explicitly state this historical interpretation that emphasized the relevance of the Toltec rule for Cholula's history. Rather, the reader needs to deduct this from the complete narrative. The pictorial representation, in contrast, intensely visualizes this idea and does so at the beginning of Toltec rule, thus emphasizing and previsioning the glory of Cholula as "it should be—and will become" (Leibsohn 2009: 113).

The *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* also uses visual image schemas as conceptual metaphors for its protagonists' actions. At a crucial point in the narrative, the Toltecs visit the Chichimecs at Chicomoztoc to recruit them as allies in their battle to conquer Cholula (see folio 16r, Figure 1). In the lower part of the image, the Toltec Icxicoatl negotiates with the Chichimec interpreter Coatzin. Their intense engagement in conversation is depicted with two rows of speech scrolls connecting their mouths and going in both directions. Thus, the painter used an image schema from the experience of manipulating objects: CONVERSATION IS AN EXCHANGE OF THINGS, which is based on the primary metaphorical mappings of (1) an idea or linguistic expression as an object and (2) communication as the action of moving objects from one person to the other person. The "reader," seeing the speech scrolls going back and forth between the two people, can immediately understand the ideas of arguments and exchanging information. The footprints leading into the cave and back out show that the interpreter Coatzin is also connected to the ancestral Chichimec hero Moquihuix, who is crouching within the cave. Here, the painter employed the image schema from the experience of body closeness: NEGOTIATION IS GOING THERE AND BACK resting on the primary metaphors of (1) a social act is physical movement, (2) arguments and proposals are objects, and (3) negotiation is an exchange of objects. In the image, the interpreter appears to literally go there and back between the Toltecs and Moquihuix, but he also figuratively transports the contents of the negotiation between the two involved parties. In both cases, the dialogical nature of the contact between the Toltecs and the Chichimecs is emphasized in its visual depiction.

4.3 *Pictography and Experiential Knowledge*

In the last section, I discussed ways in which Nahua pictography visualizes embodied conceptual metaphors, and I have thus far focused on forms of *thinking*. Now, I would like to extend the discussion to the more complex processes of understanding and meaning-making, that is, to cognitive processes, drawing not only on abstract reasoning but also on experiential knowledge. Earlier, I presented Johnson's theory of embodied meaning as an alternative perspective on the modus operandi of Nahua pictography. Let us recall the main points.

Johnson argued that all human knowledge is basically experiential. Human knowledge is not only abstract, cognitive, and propositional but also social, cultural, and historical, and, what is more, its very foundations are perceptual, sensorimotor, sensational, and emotional. Knowledge is formed in daily experiences involving acts of understanding through which situations are interpreted and given meaning by thinking, feeling, and acting in a particular way.

This process of meaning-making draws on recurring, largely unconscious qualities, patterns, and structures of experience, while the reflective and linguistic experiences of meaning are only secondary (see Johnson 2007: 79). Infants learn about the meaning of their experiences in their encounters with the world in a prelinguistic way, which includes felt qualities—such as bright, warm, smooth, and abrupt—and vitality affects, such as patterns of feeling, flow, and development. Many of these sensations are cross-modal, that is, they have corresponding patterns across the different perceptual modalities, such as the visual or the haptic. This preconceptual understanding is never lost in adulthood but forms the very foundation of all our understanding, even of the most abstract reasoning. It is, however, often difficult to describe in language even after language acquisition (Johnson 2007: 70). Above that, our experience of situations is characterized by feelings of pleasure and pain, basic drives and motivations, emotions, and conscious feelings. In sum, many forms of preconceptual, nonpropositional, and bodily kinds of experiences, including qualities, feelings, emotions, percepts, concepts, images, and image schemas as well as nonliteral, figurate, and other imaginative cognitive structures, form the very foundation of our meaning-making and cognitive understanding, conceptualization, and reasoning.

The many types of human arts make use of these kinds of meanings and effectively communicate them. In Johnson's view, the arts express experiential knowledge more efficiently than language because they do so in a heightened, intensified, and integrated way, producing dense and consummate meaning. The visual arts use shape, form, color, balance, harmony, light, space, and more perceptual forces to create this meaning. If we look at an image, the visual input activates specific neural patterns that bear experiential knowledge. Activating any experience on the visual level also activates the same pattern on the other levels of experience and a whole range of percepts, sensations, emotional responses, and conscious feelings associated with these patterns in our experiential knowledge. In this way, simply gazing at one image might invoke a large complex of integrated experiences.

As discussed earlier, human knowledge draws on universals based on the biological foundation of our bodies, on one end of the spectrum, as well as on cultural, social, and individual dimensions shaped by our specific environments and our experiences in life, on the other end. Correspondingly, "reading" Nahua manuscripts creates experiences of integrated understanding by activating responses from the complete range of the spectrum. The first, most basic of these responses refers to the biological dimension and includes anthropological universals. These responses are shaped by human characteristics of living as organisms within a specific natural environment. According to

Arnheim, some visual patterns thus invoke particular feeling values universally, for example, curvilinear forms generate a visceral response associated with gentleness, while jagged lines generate feelings of harshness or agitation.

Since Arnheim, approaches from transcultural art history, anthropology, cognitive studies, and the psychology of art have produced new findings on these experiential responses to visual forms. For example, neurobiologist Margaret Livingstone (2002) analyzed specific pieces of art (e.g., Orthodox icons) with respect to the biological responses they trigger. Scholars affiliated with Danish neuropsychologist Jon O. Lauring (2014) investigated the neurophysiological and cognitive-psychological conditions of the arts and the features of responding to art, while Alfonsina Scarinzi (2015) edited a volume on aesthetic experience as a process of embodied meaning-making with contributions from several disciplines. The psychology of art has recently grown into a vast field analyzing the experience of art using mainly cognitive approaches. A recent article written by a team working with art psychologist Matthew Pelowski (et al. 2016) provides a promising entry point into this field by presenting an overview and reviewing six key approaches to contemporary psychological aesthetics (Pelowski et al. 2016). The authors visualize the main components of these approaches in unified models, which compare the theories about inputs feeding into the experience of art (such as the viewer's personality or the cultural setting), diverse processing mechanisms, and mental and behavioral consequences that arise from processing art. The latter include four clusters of dimensions: (1) basic aspects of physiological and emotional effects; (2) perception and understanding, including appraisals, judgments, or meaning-making; (3) art-specific experiences, such as feelings of epiphany or catharsis; and (4) longitudinal impacts, such as self-adjustment, guiding of social behavior, or impact on health (reduced stress) (Pelowski et al. 2016: 2–3).

The second dimension of responses to images refers to deeply habitualized socially and culturally learned patterns how to cognitively organize sensory data. As such, this dimension includes religious aesthetics and "sensational forms" (Meyer 2015: 338), that is, repeatable aesthetic configurations within particular religious traditions. Sensational forms are "body techniques as well as sensibilities and emotions that become embodied dispositions in the habitus" (Meyer 2015: 338). Every religion also employs a "visual regime" in the sense of "embodied, habitual practices of looking, display and figuration" (Meyer 2015: 335). These normative regimes structure "what may and may not be seen, under which circumstances and conditions, by any given society, group or individual, and even more, the variety and multitude of visual regimes between and within societies" (Uehlinger 2015: 402). Visual regimes include culturally conditioned forms of seeing and habitualized patterns of

accepted behavior around the act of "reading" an image. Regarding Nahua pictography, this dimension also refers to the social text practice around the manuscripts, which involves, for example, whether the image might have been "read" in an act of speculative gazing or in dramatic performance and how the people related to the material carriers of images, to paper and books.

The third dimension of responses to images refers to the more specific cultural codifications within a system of visual communication, such as Nahua pictography and references to a system of knowledge shared within larger or smaller groups within Postclassic Central Mexico, the Central Highlands, the Basin of Mexico, cities such as Tenochtitlan, or social and professional groups.

The fourth dimension refers to individual evaluations of visual sensory information and responses, shaped by memories of experiences or physiological and psychological conditions and socializations. Nahua pictography left considerable room for flexible and individual interpretation according to specific situations and contexts. Having said that, its emphasis lay in the third dimension, on employing cultural codes and conventions to express shared cultural knowledge rather than subjective feelings. This cultural aspect makes it difficult for contemporary, non-Nahua readers to understand the meaning of Nahua paintings in a similar way as the ancient Nahuas. As explained earlier, large parts of the rich and polysemous symbolism of Nahua pictography simply elude us.

Even in cases when the scholar, painter, and potential "reader" are contemporary and share the same cultural, historical, and social background, it is methodologically challenging to analyze the processes involved in understanding the nonpropositional aspects of images. How shall we access nonlinguistic and nonpropositional dimensions of meaning and processes of understanding them? In most cases, the best we can do is to rely on the reflexivity of our informants and their ability to verbalize their experiences.

Historical images present an even stronger challenge, since we cannot ask the ancient Nahuas about their responses to the images and there is no way to reconstruct the sense impressions and sensational responses of people living in the past (see Mark M. Smith 2007). One option is to work jointly with contemporary Nahuas, as Jansen and Pérez Jiménez do with the Mixtecs, or to form hypotheses by analogy to beliefs and practices of contemporary Nahuas, as analyzed by academic ethnographers such as the Sandstroms. Both methodological options are based on the idea of a *núcleo duro* and of a cultural *imaginaire* that has been passed down to today. Furthermore, information from other sources on the cultural *imaginaire* of the ancient Nahuas can be used triangularly to draw inferences, as is most typically done to decipher and analyze Nahua manuscripts. Regarding the universal aspects of responses, results

from anthropology and cognitive studies may help to determine respective elements in the images. Colors, for example, create both universal responses (red=hot, blue=cold) and culturally coded associations (red=east, blue=south).

At this point, it is not my intention to reconstruct patterns of integrated meaning for any one of the sources. Rather, I merely wish to point out that Nahua pictography provides resources to express and communicate this kind of meaning and understanding. I believe that Nahua pictography is a form of visual communication that stimulates experiential knowledge in a different, and stronger, way than phonographic writing. For one, Nahuas pictography employs a great amount of polysemous imagery to express experiences and knowledge, imagery that simultaneously refers to a multitude of possible meanings on different levels of conceptual abstraction. Seeing a sign such as the quetzal bird thus potentially evokes complex cultural associations and experiential knowledge around the concept of *preciousness* with just one glance. For another, pictography directly stimulates visual and cross-modal responses, while decoding phonographic writing requires a detour through an abstract secondary sign system representing the sound of language. This is not to say that words represented by an alphabetical sign system do not stimulate emotional responses or activate integrated meaning and experiential knowledge. It is my impression that Nahua pictography does so in a more direct and quicker way through the proximity of neural connections. Consequently, "reading" pictography might create an integrated *feeling* of the meaning rather than an understanding solely on an abstract and rational level. This is most obvious for the section folios 29 through 46 of the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*, a section Boone (2007: 171–210) interpreted as a cosmogonic narrative (see Figure 20). We should, however, refrain from a simplistic contraposition between the reading of an alphabetical text and the "auratic experience" of an image (see Uehlinger 2006: 170, 173–174).

Let me provide some modest examples to flesh out this interpretation. In the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, one folio presents the scene of a ritual ball game the Toltecs played after their successful negotiation with the Chichimecs (see folio 16v, Figure 10). While this ritual preparation for the war against Cholula is only briefly described in the alphabetical text (see Leibsohn 2009: 124), the pictorial part of the *Historia* dedicates a carefully painted, lushly colored, full-folio image to this event. The lower part of this image shows a conventional outline of a ball court enclosing two Toltec ballplayers and a black rubber ball. The dominating upper two-thirds of the image presents a U-shaped rectangular enclosure. The left side contains a spiral of black-and-blue liquid, while the right side contains a square spiral or single meander of red-and-gold liquid. The surface of both liquids is in waves. The enclosure with the

liquids appears to be an elaboration of the glyphs for water (maybe for a spring) and blood or fire. In their combination, the glyphs present the concept of *atl tlachinolli* (the water, the scorched earth for *warfare*) (see Leibsohn 2009: 166). Long green blades of grass grow from the bottom of the enclosure, while a large stand of reeds grows on top of it. Large bunches of two kinds of colored blossoms sprout from the sides. The enclosure is flanked by two large and densely foliaged trees.

This full-folio image is one of the most abstract images in the *Historia* and sets the scene for a conventionally symbolized ritual ball game. The allusions to the glyphs for *water and blood/fire* or *warfare* are the only propositional references in the brightly painted upper part of the image. The particular depiction of these two concepts in their abstract geometric forms appears to stimulate a response in the beholder that builds on universally felt qualities and vitality affects and on the basic human experience of the two essential elements of water and fire. The blue spiral, with its curved forms evokes feelings of coldness, freshness, and gentleness, while the red-and-gold meander evokes sensations of heat, sizzling light, and agitation. Additionally, the images of both elements emanate a strong, dynamic, and vibrant force with their turbulent surface waves and their wavy lines transporting energy outwards from the center.

Apart from these roughly sketched potential universal responses to the image, all further interpretation rests on cultural codes and symbols. The association of water and fire/blood with *warfare* is culture-specific, even if the more abstract association with scorched earth might reflect imaginations of the potential results of warfare. The interpretation of the plants surrounding the enclosure by non-Nahuas is most probably the most misleading. The beautiful plants and flowers might easily evoke associations of the pastoral idyll in a European beholder, a sentiment that was nevertheless foreign to Nahua culture. Since there are no references to this part of the image in the alphabetical text of the *Historia*, any interpretation is in large part guesswork. Leibsohn suggested the plants could simply represent the physical setting of the ball game; at the same time they could also represent an apparition that the ballplayers experienced or a metaphor for their deeds (Leibsohn 2009: 123). They might also presage the future victory over Cholula, working with their similarity to the toponym for the town (reeds growing from a pool of water, a willow tree, flowers on a hill). They could also allude to the concept of *preciousness* and to the rich garden symbolism in the Nahua *imaginaire*. However, all this symbolism remains relatively vague for contemporary non-Nahua interpreters, as long as we do not find any reference to similar imagery in other sources. The only thing we can say for sure is that the prominent role of the full-folio image in the

context of the pictorial narrative emphasizes the relevance of the nonpropositional meaning of the image.

Another surviving source recording the history of the Toltecs and Chichimecs is the detailed and skillfully painted *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*. The upper left corner of the map shows the scene at Chicomoztoc, where the Toltecs negotiated with the Chichimecs. From there on, the left side of the 109-by-204 cm map is devoted to the Chichimecs' twenty-six-day journey to Cholula (see Figure 21). The right side of the map shows how the Chichimecs, after their victory at Cholula, found their new settlement of Cuauhtinchan. Judging from several indications in the sources, we could interpret the migration presented on the left side of the *Mapa* as a transformation of the social and cultural identity of the Chichimecs from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle to the civilized lifestyle of settlers at Cuauhtinchan (see Asselbergs 2007: 125). This transformation of identity, however, was no easy endeavor. The migration of the Chichimecs to Cholula is a dangerous journey on a twisting serpent road, where they meet many ordeals; they cross rivers, violently split in two groups at a crossroad, encounter dangerous animals and figures, and need to perform human sacrifices. As Eleanor Wake (2007: 205–206) reconstructs from several sources, the Nahuas considered serpentine roads generally as unpredictable places of fear and fright, where travelers could easily slip and fall and finally face death. They also identified the human life in linguistic metaphors with walking on a slippery ground, where one could easily stumble and fall into some wrong.

On this dangerous journey, one section shows a series of particularly fierce ordeals, which might represent one of the core transformational experiences. The Chichimecs experienced a series of natural disasters: two whirlwinds, what appears to be an earthquake, and a flood (see Figure 22). Understanding the sequence of events as part of a historical record, we might interpret them as actual physical encounters with the elements of wind, earth, and water. It might be similarly reasonable to interpret them as ritual ordeals met in hallucinatory trances, as Florine Asselbergs (2007: 126) deduced from the fact that the involved Chichimecs are painted with closed eyes. After the end of this series, they performed two heart sacrifices to the sun god Tonatiuh.

The first whirlwind, painted with dark gray shadowing whirls, rips the animal hide off a then naked Chichimec man and throws him up into the air while sucking him down at the same time. The man's bow, arrows, and quiver, as his cultural attributes, are spinning wildly around together with a number of blue copper axes (see Yoneda 2007: 181). These might be part of the tools and weapons of the Chichimec; as Wake (2007: 236) suggested, they might also serve as symbols for the experience of wind sharply cutting the skin. The whirlwind is presided by the mask of the wind deity Ehecatl. Having survived the storm, the

Chichimecs passed a mysterious dark blue-green serpentine figure crossing the road until they fell into a deep, black tear in the road, one of them face-down with only his legs still visible. According to a widespread Nahua belief, this rip in the earth could have been a passageway to the underworld (Carrasco and Sessions 2007c: 432).

In the third scene, one Chichimec is carried off the road by severe flooding, while we see only the arm of another, who is possibly drowning. Finally, the Chichimecs were caught in a second tornado spinning at an even faster rate. The storm is again presided over by Ehecatl, whose mask this time carries (Europeanized) asterisks on it and who appears to be the top part of a calm center of the tornado. A Chichimec man is sucked skyward with his limbs out of control, again naked, with his clothing stripped off and whirling around together with his bow and quiver. A large feather and possibly a headband may also be flying around. As in the first whirlwind, several copper axes spin through the air, this time painted in red, perhaps indicating a different quality of the wind. In all four disaster scenes, "the human body is either stripped of its cultural elements or disappears altogether" (Carrasco and Sessions 2007c: 433). After these four disasters, the Chichimecs started to wear a headband and feather and performed a heart sacrifice jointly with the Toltec priests. These discursive elements could support the interpretation of these events as core experiences of the transformation from one social and cultural identity to another.

If we interpret the series of natural disasters as a transformation of identity, the narrative uses the complex metaphorical blending of FINDING ONE'S IDENTITY IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY. It combines several primary metaphorical mappings: (1) a social, cultural, or psychological process is an action, (2) developing one's identity is traveling, (3) the person or people finding their identity are travelers, (4) the original identity is the starting point and the new identity the destination, and (5) by defining the journey as difficult, the metaphor maps the experience of overcoming obstacles from the physical to the social or psychological domain. This conceptual metaphor is elaborated visually by depicting a meandering serpentine road. This image draws on the metaphor of a journey that is physically challenging because it does not lead directly to the destination. On this way, the travelers become disoriented by losing sight of the destination, going crisscross through the landscape, and encountering many different locations, people, and events. This cross-cultural metaphor is also strongly culturally encoded by referring to the motif of dangerous serpentine roads.

In the sequence of events analyzed above, the narrative also employs the metaphor FINDING ONE'S IDENTITY IS SURVIVING NATURAL DISASTERS. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, flooding, and powerful storms were frequent

events in the Central Mexican Highlands and were depicted in many Indigenous historical records (see Berdan 2014: 54). Consequently, they must have been deep-seated memories and involved existential body experiences. The metaphor FINDING ONE'S IDENTITY IS SURVIVING NATURAL DISASTERS maps life-threatening physical hazards to social threats potentially leading to the loss of social identity and social death. The images in the *Mapa* draw on many conceptual metaphors, which in combination form many layers of experiential knowledge and generate complex embodied meaning. Finding a new identity is apparently imagined as involving losing the old identity and being without identity before acquiring a new one.

The *Mapa* uses several metaphors to express this liminal stage. First, the two whirlwind scenes show LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY IS HAVING ONE'S CLOTHES RIPPED OFF. This metaphor combines cross-cultural experiences with particular cultural codes. Being naked is, for all human beings, a state of no protection from physical attacks by animals or fellow human beings or from the natural elements, which might cut harshly into the skin like the wind or sharp copper axes. In a cold or otherwise hostile climate, being naked might result in physical illness or even death. This metaphor was even more powerful in Nahua culture, which put extreme emphasis on clothing and dress as highly specific markers for social and cosmic identity. The Nahuas also experienced themselves to be living in a dense net of social and cosmic relationships. Losing one's place in this net and losing every marker of identity might indeed have been experienced as death.

The metaphor of LOSING ONE'S IDENTITY IS HAVING ONE'S TOOLS SNATCHED AWAY draws on a similar idea. For one, the tools of bow, quiver, and arrow are necessary instruments for the hunting Chichimecs to physically survive. And indeed, the last scene before the first whirlwind snatches the tools away is a hunting scene with deer. For the other, the tools might also represent the old social and cultural identity of the Chichimecs as nomadic hunters distinct from their later settlement at Cuauhtinchan. After the series of disasters, however, the Chichimecs do not immediately acquire the cotton cloaks of civilized settled people but continue to wear their animal hides. But these are now complemented by a headband and feather, two cultural symbols that are poorly understood thus far.

Finally, the series of natural disasters evokes a range of powerful body sensations related to the physical effects of the disasters. In the whirlwinds, the people completely lose their footing and stable balance, they are turned head over heels, sucked upwards and downwards. They totally lose control over their limbs and bodies. In contrast to the actively moving human figures in the scenes before and after, the people are passively thrown around. In the

earthquake and the flood, they are carried off their feet and swept away, they are drowned with their head under water and thus unable to breath, and they are sucked down into a large, black hole in the earth.

The *Mapa* images vividly evoke the related body sensations by visually capturing the sucking-down and sucking-up energy of the whirlwinds with their high circular force, with dust and objects flying wildly around. The blue water drowns the body, of which only an arm is still visible. The person sucked into the earth hole appears to kick around, with legs in the air, while the torso has been swallowed by the earth. All these body sensations might express the idea of temporarily losing one's identity. In this, these images are not only visual renderings of embodied metaphors but strong and powerful expressions of experiential knowledge and embodied meaning regarding the experience of identity formation.

4.4 *Pictography and Body Knowledge*

Thus far, I have discussed Nahua pictography as an efficient means for expressing elements of embodied reasoning and experiential meaning, understanding, and knowledge. The last example from the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* depicted human bodies within an imaginative narrative context. While my analysis thus far has focused on this context, the portrayal of the human body is interesting in itself, since all renderings of human bodies reflect cultural concepts of the body and body knowledge. Most prominently in Nahua pictography, the proportions of human bodies appear out of scale when viewed by eyes used to the naturalistic representation of bodies (see Figures 23, 24). This convention reflects Nahua cultural knowledge *about* the body by visualizing the concept of the central animistic centers of the human person in its interrelationship to the cosmos. In addition to that, Nahua pictography also expressed knowledge *of* the body, that is, largely unconscious knowledge residing in the body and felt through it. This body knowledge largely overlaps with the experiential knowledge discussed in the last section. In this section, I focus on its direct depiction in human figures, including the rendering of body language, gestures, and postures.

One of the central embodied concepts in Nahua culture is the image of human persons slipping, losing their balance, and falling to the ground or into an abyss. The body experience associated with this image served as one of the root metaphors for human life in the Fifth Era and referred to physical, emotional, moral, social, spiritual, and cosmic layers of existence. Intuitively, we all know how it feels and what it means to lose balance and fall to the ground (see Johnson 2007: 45). In the journey of the Chichimecs to Cholula in the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*, human figures are shown falling down several times,

losing their balance because of the whirlwind, falling headfirst into an abyss, or being washed away by the flood. The divinatory marriage almanac in the *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl* includes one prediction of negative events and death by depicting not only Mictlantecuhtli but also a human body falling head down into an abyss (see Figure 23; Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1993: folio 57).

In addition to this central image of the falling person, other postures in Nahua pictography signal complex body knowledge, including specific behavior. For example, eroticism, sexuality, and lustful feelings are typically expressed by a particular angular pose in which the legs are slightly bent, the arms outstretched and bent with open hands, the upper body leaning forward, and the head twisted looking back over the shoulder (see Figure 24, see also Boone 2007: 50–51). This posture might reflect the actual body movements of a person engaged in an erotic, seductive dance. Seeing this image might trigger all sorts of sensations and feelings that the beholder associates with this form of social interaction.

Another example is the Mixtec convention of expressing kinship by linking parents and their children with an umbilical cord. It uses the bodily relationship of a mother and her child to signal the social closeness of the individuals during their lifetimes. Finally, the depiction of human figures in Nahua pictography also expresses bodily feelings of social status. The bodies of war captives are painted in a much smaller scale than those of their captors, with the latter posing impressively over them and holding them tightly by their *tonalli*-filled hair locks (see Figure 25).

4.5 *Pictography and Performative Scripts*

Finally, some Nahua manuscripts served as dramatic scores for performance and ritual enactments, in other words, for cultural forms of expression employing body language. Ritual performances that included dancing played a prominent role in the frequent large-scale ceremonies of the *veintenas*. Nahua pictography often displays figurative images and scenes that include body postures and gestures, clothing, and ritual objects. The pictography most probably also contains clues for parts of the performance that we do not yet understand, for example, dance notations, drum rhythms, or music. Anyone who has ever tried to dance or play music from a linguistic description of it knows how complicated or even impossible this process is. On the other hand, it is much easier to copy a body posture when we see a human figure posing it or to form a pattern with several people when we see the pattern visualized on a paper. In figurative scenes, performative information may combine abstract representations of movements in space and the impression of seeing oneself in a mirror.

4.6 *Conclusion*

In conclusion, Nahua pictography uses the visual modality to convey embodied concepts, experiential knowledge, and body knowledge, and in some cases presents figurative and abstract scenes as performative scripts. Most importantly, I argue that the medium of Nahua pictography offers the means of expressing preconceptual and nonpropositional embodied meaning, including percepts, vitality affects, image schemas, imaginative patterns, sensations, emotions, and feelings. Having said that, it is not my intention to contrapose Nahua pictography with alphabetical writing in a simplistic way by romantically idealizing the Nahuas as noble savages who used a wholesome type of visual communication in distinction from the modern, disenchanted Europeans, with their exclusively rational alphabetical discourse. This would be another type of Othering—a positive one compared to earlier devaluations of Nahua pictography, but still a type of Othering. There are three arguments against this simplistic contraposition.

First, Nahua pictography, as we know it from late pre-Hispanic and early colonial sources, certainly had its limits of expression. It had a restricted set of genres that were efficient for conveying some types of information, while inefficient, or even ineffective or inadequate, for others. It used a rather modest collection of signs and did not record direct speech or linguistic thoughts.

Second, Nahua pictography does not merely express experiential knowledge in the sense of being solely and only nonrational and emotional—an interpretation that is too easily combined with the idea that the pre-Hispanic American peoples possessed only minor intelligence and an undeveloped sense of rationality. In contrast, Nahua pictography is indeed capable of expressing and stimulating rational and logical reasoning. For one, the pictography efficiently visualizes embodied conceptual metaphors. For the other, the tables and diagrams of the divination almanacs are complex visualizations of rational interpretations of the cosmos. There is a reason why Boone compared these almanacs to modern European scientific visualizations, which bring order and structure into complex observations and interpretations of nature. No modern scientist would deny that visual models, graphs, and diagrams are efficient and highly valued semiotic systems that represent reality and express scientific knowledge about nature (see Huppauf and Weingart 2008, particularly Mersch 2008). Indeed, these nonlinguistic notations are, in many cases, more efficient and precise than alphabetical writing in representing information.

Third, alphabetical writing does not only express disembodied abstract rational discourse, nor do all modern Europeans—extrapolating the myth of modernity—*only* think logically and rationally. For one, Europeans throughout

their history, including modernity and postmodernity, have always used language and alphabetical writing to express nonpropositional truths, subjective experiences, and all variety of sensations, emotions, and feelings. For the other, they also used other semiotic systems and genres to express any kind of meaning, understanding, and knowledge humanity can produce.

Finally, two further arguments have been voiced against pictography's ability to reflect systematic, analytical, critical, and thus rational thinking, arguments inspired by the orality–literacy debate. First, the polysemous nature of pictographic expression has been negatively evaluated, based on the idea that alphabetical writing communicates objective facts in an objective way that leaves no room for misunderstandings or different interpretations. The main gist of the orality–literacy theories was that only the technology of writing (compared to orality) and only the technology of phonographic/alphabetical writing (compared to nonphonographic systems) allow the human mind to develop the cognitive abilities of systematic, analytical, and critical thinking. Second, the flexibility of oral discourse and of nonphonographic, polysemous writing systems was negatively understood as obstructing the systematic and sequential analysis of ideas. It might certainly be true that the invention of writing changed the discourse in ancient Greece, and it appears reasonable to assume that the invention of writing in any formerly primary oral society changes its discourse. Notwithstanding this, I find it too speculative to conclude that individuals in societies without (phonographic) writing do not have the cognitive ability to reason in a systematic and analytical way. For any statement like this, we first need to analyze our understanding of the cognitive process of *reasoning* and our concept of *rationality* and reflect whether we can use these concepts for cross-cultural analyses (see Epstein 2010). This would be a large and difficult task, which I have foreshadowed only lightly thus far by applying Lakoff and Johnson's theory of the embodied mind to Nahua pictography. Without being able to discuss this issue more deeply, I nevertheless wish to draw attention to the problem.

Unfortunately, we don't have the option today of discussing with ancient Nahua interpreters the individual stages in the "reading" process or with ancient Nahua diviners the process of reasoning involved in interpreting the divination almanacs. Nevertheless, I believe that Nahua pictography indeed allows for systematic and analytical reasoning. It is precisely its polysemous nature that inspires the interpreter early in the reading process with flexible interpretation, reflection, critical thinking, analytical speculation, and discourse. Nevertheless, it might stimulate a different mode for these ways of thinking, a mode that does not emphasize linearity, as alphabetical writing does, but rather cross-linking and connected thinking.

Furthermore, I argue that pictography emphasized integrated thinking, that is, the creation of meaning through rational reasoning and by preconceptual, nonpropositional embodied reasoning, including percepts, vitality affects, image schemas, imaginative patterns, sensations, emotions, and feelings. These kinds of meaning transcend the idea of communicating objective, propositional facts about reality (and, moreover, make it notoriously difficult to "decipher" Nahua pictography). While the apparent lack of objective communication in Nahua pictography has traditionally been used to denigrate this system, many academic approaches of the last decades challenged this approach to communication, meaning, and reality. Rather, the bodily, social, cultural, and historical embeddedness of all communication, meaning, and understanding came into view, along with the perspectival, situational, and experiential character of any human knowledge. If we take these approaches seriously, there is no need to devaluate Nahua pictography any longer.

CHAPTER 10

Interpretative Results: Nahua Religion, Scripture, and Sense of Reality

This chapter is devoted to a short retrospective of this study's journey by answering the study's objectives as presented in the original travel itinerary. Rather than providing an extensive summary of the expedition's various segments, I will highlight aspects that correlate to the expectations previously voiced and indicate where I needed to change course along the way.

In short, the study aimed at reassessing previous academic representations of Nahua religion, scripture, and sense of reality in constant dialogue with the available primary sources. I set out to reevaluate common understandings of Nahua *religion*, to analyze the Nahua concept of *scripture*, and to discern the interrelations of both by learning about their sense of reality as expressed in their semiotics. For reasons of analytical clarity, the objectives were initially grouped into three fields: religion, scripture, and the interrelationships between the two. Although these three fields have proven to be so strongly intertwined that their separation seems artificial, I nevertheless follow this itinerary broadly in the next section.

1 From Religion to Being-in-the-World

One main objective of the study was to newly examine Nahua religion and its academic representation from a perspective inspired by recent methodological and theoretical developments in the academic study of religion. The following major interests were discerned: Indigenous concepts of transcendence and immanence, concepts of "the sacred," and "divinity," and questions of immateriality or materiality in the concepts and representations of "deities." Furthermore, the role of humanity in the cosmos, including human agency and assumed responsibilities, concepts of time and history, concepts of (ultimate) reality, and Indigenous epistemology. While working on this study, I decided to drop the category of *religion* as a tool for analyzing aspects of Nahua culture. Instead, I used alternative concepts to approach Nahua being-in-the-world from different angles: the human being in the cosmos, ontology, epistemology, and pragmatism and aesthetics.

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First of all, I acknowledged a considerable cultural and religious diversity within Postclassic Central Mexico. Notwithstanding this diversity, the people shared a basic cosmovision, a system of divination, mythological narratives, attributes of deities, types of religious organization, a religious symbol set, performative aesthetics, specific rituals, and a common writing style and artistic language. Many of the surviving manuscript sources mainly reflect elite religion from the Mexica living in Tenochtitlan, and our perspectives on Nahua culture are consequently biased in this way. Some scholars designed models to reflect the potential internal diversity of Nahua religion, and while I honor and share their attention to social and cultural differences, I am critical of their specific methods and results. Thus, I am skeptical about the matter of differences between popular and elite religion, or between popular, priestly, and philosophical perspectives, as León-Portilla and others laid them out, since these interpretations are based on oversimplistic sociological models. Similarly, the strong contrast between the militaristic Mexica and the spiritual, pacifistic monotheism propagated by a philosophical school led by Texcoco poet-king Nezahualcoyotl appears to be a colonial invention. Notwithstanding this, there is evidence for a substantial intellectual tradition alongside the general practice orientation of Nahua culture, and differences may have existed between the mystic militarism of the official state cult and more philosophical approaches in the fifteenth century.

In general, we should assume a considerable degree of internal diversity based on location, social status, occupation, or gender, and even individual creativity within the frame of Nahua cosmovision, cultural knowledge, and practice. At the same time, the sources also contain many references to root concepts that inspired the everyday activities and practices of the Nahuas from all walks of life. My generalized (re)construction of Nahua cosmovision and semiotics rests on the idea that these are essential fundamentals of Nahua culture in general. All reconstructions of aspects of Nahua culture, including the interpretations proposed in this study, generalize the internal diversity. They reflect not only the specific perspective of the respectively used source(s) but also that of the scholars who attempt to make sense of a cultural reality from inconsistent and contradictory source material based on their own cultural background and who endeavor to design one inherently logical and conclusive explanation. It might well be that much more diversity in ontological beliefs and semiotic theories existed in Nahua culture, most probably simultaneously.

Generally, living in the Central Mexican Highlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries meant living in a dense fabric of cosmic and social relations. In our journey, we first followed the most widespread elements in popular depictions of Aztec religion, that is, the main surviving myths of the Nahuas.

I grouped them into myths about the genesis of the cosmos and of the human world from the perspective of Tenochtitlan. According to a recent new interpretation, the primordial cosmos was not changeless but already characterized by the movement of complementary forces. This fundamental feature of the cosmos was strongly intensified in the Fifth Era, in which the Nahuas believed they were living. The Nahua people named as their home the places of Aztlan and Chicomoztoc before their migration into the Central Mexican Highlands led by their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli. In Lake Texcoco, the Mexica group founded the later capital of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlan.

Regarding their cosmovision, the Nahuas imagined their cosmos horizontally as a four-leaved petal with a stable center and dangerous periphery and vertically as several layers of heavens and underworlds. Time and place were conceived as two aspects of the same cosmic movement, and both were characterized by different qualitative segments. In people's everyday lives, the effects of the distinctive qualities of the individual days and time units of the ritual calendar *tonalpohualli* and the solar calendar *xihuitl* played a vital role. While Nahua historiography used a linear time concept in the annals, time was believed to run in spirals according to the more abstract cosmovision. Everything existing in the cosmos of the Fifth Era was influenced by the movement of cosmic forces through time and place. In this, all entities were materializations of specific aspects of the same essence in different forms and gestalts. The Nahuas conceptualized the cosmos as a dense and extensive fabric of qualities and agents, all interrelated with and influencing one another. Human beings experienced themselves not as separate but as part of this large whole. Correspondingly, human identity was regarded as the processual composite of different influences and as the conglomeration of distinctive forces. It was also regarded as changing in time instead of as constantly maintaining the same essence.

The vital energy of human beings was created by the cosmic forces, which influenced bodily functions, emotional experiences, cognitive processes, and behavior. As a result, the Nahua concept of person was fluid and composite, imagining the human being as primarily defined by its many relations to the world, including the cosmos and society. The Nahuas also imagined human life as moving on slippery ground, always in danger of losing balance. Accordingly, living a healthy, good, and morally upright life meant living to strict codes of conduct and continually establishing, maintaining, and reestablishing a balanced center within the constant motion of cosmic forces. This movement affected all levels of existence: the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual. Therefore, counteraction to imbalances was sought on all levels of existence.

A prominent part of many surviving sources is the presentation of complex entities that early European missionaries and later scholars interpreted as "deities." This interpretation rests heavily on European projections. The most popular aspects of this interpretation are the comparisons of Nahua "deities" with the "classical" Greco-Roman pantheon and the idea that the town of Texcoco hosted a philosophical school of pacifistic monotheism. Both interpretations, however, do not account for the baffling fluidity of Nahua deity personae and the flexibility of forms in which the deities were believed to exist. Consequently, I proposed an alternative interpretation of the Nahua concept of *divinity* as a fluid continuum of immanent forces named *teotl*, with individual deity personae representing particular qualities of the cosmos. López Austin imagined these forces as "light matter" moving through the "heavy matter" of the material world. León-Portilla even considered *teotl* as essentially transcendent, with the deity Yohualli Ehecatl the ideal-typical representation of a transcendent, ultimate layer of reality. In contrast, I proposed that the Nahuas imagined the cosmos as monistic and that Yohualli Ehecatl was merely one deity among others, who represented a characteristic set of immanent qualities. In sum, translating the notion of *teotl* with the concept of *divinity* is misleading, since *teotl* was an aspect of immanent reality.

Although Nahua ontology, according to the generalized interpretation I follow, was constitutionally monistic, *teotl* realized itself in many different qualities of things. According to the Nahua concept of *nahualli*, these distinctive qualities realized in the many different layers of existence, for example, in the celestial bodies, the natural world on earth, plant growth and animal behavior, the social world, human activities and professions, the human body, and the activities of the deities as well as in human cultural media and ritual performances. Consequently, certain human individuals had *nahualli* counterparts in the animal world with whom they shared the same quality.

The Nahuas experienced the cosmos of the Fifth Era as motion, change, and a continuous cycle of life and death. They perceived patterns of change in the cosmos in a highly abstract way and even distinguished between different types of movement (*nepantla*, *olin*, and *malinalli*). They also experienced life as transitory and painfully perishable. León-Portilla interpreted the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* as a yearning for an ultimate, transcendent reality beyond the evanescence of earthly life. This interpretation, however, appears to be a European projection. Following a different interpretation, the Nahuas considered the ephemerality of everything in existence as natural and real, as the "real reality" of the cosmos of the Fifth Sun. Although they found it difficult to live with it and constantly tried to counteract imbalances, there is nevertheless no indication in the sources that they believed in or yearned for a transcendent

layer of reality. For the Nahuas, reality was a world in motion, where ultimate reality was not the unchangeable and eternal but change and transience.

Regarding epistemology, the Nahuas apparently acknowledged different degrees of knowledge about reality. The largest part of reality was experienced by everyone through the corporeal senses and interpreted with normal everyday consciousness. Expanding these insights, objects and phenomena of exceptional beauty and brilliance—such as songs, flowers, iridescent lights, or gemstones—presented reality's inner structure in an intensified form and thus made it easier for human beings to grasp and comprehend this structure. Finally, some aspects of the deeper-lying and more complex structures of reality could be perceived only by specially gifted people with nonordinary senses in altered states of consciousness induced by dancing, fasting, or ingesting psychotropic plants. Correspondingly, the Nahuas had several types of knowledge experts, among them the wise wo/men and the painter/scribes, who drew on cultural knowledge, such as the *in tlilli in tlapalli* or the *toltecayotl*. There were also people such as the *nahualli* shaman with special abilities at seeing the underlying structure of reality. Artistic inspiration was also a form of clearing vision into the structures of reality that was believed to be induced by a strong concentration of cosmic forces in the animistic center of the artist's heart. Following this inspiration, artists (including writers) could express the inspired knowledge about reality in their pieces of art and thus make it available to others.

While it is difficult to reconstruct from the sources how much time the Nahuas devoted to abstract reflection about the underlying principles of reality, we do know of an intellectual tradition. Although the surviving sources do not contain an elaborate intellectual system discussing beliefs, this fact may be the result of the attempts by Christian missionaries in the first colonial decades to erase the old "idolatry" by burning all Indigenous books containing references to Native religious beliefs and practices. Notwithstanding this potentially biased evidence, the impression that the Nahuas spent much (more) time on the practical and aesthetical application of their knowledge about the cosmos they lived in is probably not incorrect.

The Nahua world was a world in motion, with humanity participating in the continuous movement of forces. People's identities were essentially defined by this motion and their destinies were shaped by it. People also intentionally attempted to interact with the forces and to manipulate their movement to produce beneficial effects on their lives. Contrary to traditional depictions of the Aztecs as a pessimistic, fatalistic people bowing to the unchangeable forces of destiny, the Nahuas appear to have believed in their far-reaching agency to influence cosmic processes, including their collective and individual fates. Furthermore, they felt profoundly responsible for ensuring the continued

existence of the cosmos through debt payment and by fulfilling their side of reciprocal alimentation with (human) sacrifices.

The performance of rituals was, in general, one of the most important means of interacting with the cosmos and of influencing human living conditions. There are many indications that the Nahuas considered their ritual performances as highly efficient acts. Accordingly, they devoted much time and many resources to ritual activity. This included a large range of small-scale domestic rituals, such as divination or the omnipresent sweeping, as well as the large, elaborate, and aesthetically overwhelming public performances of the *veintenas*. A large part of the academic literature characterizes the *veintenas* as a fixed set of annually repeating rituals with a kind of ahistorical and never-changing nature. A close reading of the sources, however, reveals that they were apparently highly dynamic and shifting phenomena, with spontaneous and creative situational adaptations. While they undoubtedly had agricultural references, the missing leap year most probably produced a situation in which the festivities became increasingly out of sync with the actual seasons. Eliade's ritual theory, despite its popularity, does not appear to fit with the Nahua conception of time and place. While recursive elements to the past played a relevant part in many Nahua rituals, the Nahuas had no conception of cyclical time or of a primordial past characterized as the sacred time of eternal transcendence. Nahua (public) rituals were heavily sensorial affairs stimulating all kinds of body senses and experiences and including a large range of aesthetic media. In this, the visual sense played a central role. The *teixiptla*, a localized manifestation of particular *teotl* qualities, was an important aspect of Nahua religion and played a prominent role in the public *veintena* performances. The *teixiptla* made these qualities materially tangible to human beings, who depended on their sense perceptions to understand the underlying structure of the cosmos. Accordingly, the ritual costumes and adornments were not only additional elements referring to the identity of the presented deity but essential parts of this identity. In sum, the concept of the *teixiptla* is a cornerstone for any understanding of Nahua semiotics.

2 From Scripture to Semiotics

Building on recent progress in deciphering Nahua writing, this study set off to investigate Nahua text practices and their concept of *scripture*. This included an integrated perspective not only on the modus operandi of Nahua pictography but also on the role and function of *texts* in Nahua being-in-the-world.

Nahua writing stood in close interrelationship with a strong oral tradition. The Nahuas cherished elegant speech highly and embedded both oral recital and the "reading" of texts in multisensorial performative settings, including music and dance. Some postconquest songs belonging to this tradition were recorded in the manuscripts of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España*. In the context of the reawakening national(ist) interest in the Aztec civilization in twentieth-century Mexico, these songs were taken as prime exemplars of a tradition of Nahua "literature" comparable in sophistication to Old World philosophical poetry. The songs undoubtedly reflect a highly advanced Indigenous tradition of linguistic and performative expression containing both pre-Hispanic and early postconquest elements. Applying the (European) category of "literature" to them, however, is misleading, because it projects non-Indigenous concepts associated with alphabetical writing and ignores the genre's performative aspects. Regarding the content, León-Portilla interpreted the songs as expressions of a pacifist, spiritual-philosophical, poetical aestheticism opposing Mexica militarism, whose authors suffered from the ephemerality of life and yearned for an ultimate, transcendent layer of existence. A younger generation of scholars deconstructed this interpretation through thorough historical contextualization. According to the new perspective, the songs were closely related to the dominant Mexica warrior ethic.

Unlike earlier Mesoamerican writing systems, Nahua pictography did not record the sound of language and, consequently, did not serve to transcribe the complex structure of Nahua linguistic expression. It is a pictorial semasiographic system and includes only a few phonographic references. Nahua writing uses a large repertoire of basic signs, such as pictograms and ideograms, to convey information about time, place, actors, events, objects, and abstract qualities. The signs are arranged in complex visual grammars according to several genres, most importantly in historical narratives and divinatory charts. Regardless of the genre, the visual mode and visual structure of any pictorial "text" are semantic elements crucial for the reading and interpretation. Nahua pictography reflects the high significance of imagery in Nahuatl speech. Since this imagery is highly culturally coded, it is difficult for modern non-Nahuas to understand. As such, Nahua pictography was not just a mnemonic device to better remember the oral tradition but rather a system of visual communication for transporting ideas independent of language.

The pictorial writing system by itself strongly emphasizes the act of seeing or gazing. While it tells us little about the protagonists' thoughts or motivations, it places particular emphasis on the attire, ceremonial implements, adornments, and paraphernalia of deities and deity impersonators. These

items were richly associated with qualities, cognitive concepts, emotions, activities, and cosmic relationships, which literate Indigenous "readers" could quickly perceive and imagine. The sensation of seeing played an important role in Nahua culture. The ability to perceive the underlying structures of reality was considered a special gift. Nahua texts and paintings were used to learn about these structures of reality by looking at them. Skilled readers most probably could see more than ordinary people.

The Nahuas valued their books and written documents highly as representations of wisdom and a civilized life as well as guides for living. They stored their writings in libraries and held them in great esteem. At the same time, they did not regard the book as a container for truth by itself but apparently attributed the author(s) and interpreter(s) important roles for adapting what was relevant and true according to the situation. In addition, authorship was a collective endeavor and closely related to the interpretive performance. Regarding historical truth, the Nahuas emphasized the cosmic meaning and interrelatedness of events rather than following an understanding of history comparable to the modern European concept. The materiality of the written document played a prominent role in the Nahua concept of *scripture*. The Nahuas used all three of Watts's dimensions of text practices. Written manuscripts were used primarily in their semantic dimension to "read" and discuss their contents as interpreted by the performing "readers" and singers. However, the "reading" of Nahua manuscripts was primarily an oral performance in a multimedia context, therefore, the semantic dimension was closely related to the performative dimension. We know little about a potential iconic dimension in Nahua text practices. Books and manuscripts were held in high esteem, but it is unclear whether and how intensively they were also revered as material objects. (Unwritten) paper, though, was used prevalently in Nahua rituals. It was seen in close relation to earth, water, food, and the human body and was therewith used as nourishment in the ritual feeding of several deities. Regarding the "sacrality" of Nahua writings, it should be said that they were not regarded as representing any transcendent sphere of reality (in the sense of a substantive definition of "sacredness"). Nor did they function similarly to Christian scripture with regard to depicting special centering forces for the Nahua religious tradition. Whether some texts were regarded as more relevant (thus, more "sacred") than others, we do not know.

3 Interrelationships: Semiotic Theory and Embodied Meaning

While formulating the objectives, I grouped the discussion of the interrelationships between Nahua *religion* and *scripture* into an individual chapter. In practice, however, the first two sections answered the many questions regarding these interrelationships: the role of paper and writing in the cosmos, methods of interpretation, artistic inspiration, and the significance of the senses in Nahua epistemology. Therefore, the following section discusses this study's two main arguments: (1) a (re)construction of Nahua semiotic theory, and (2) an interpretation of the modus operandi of Nahua pictography from the perspective of several approaches in contemporary scholarship.

3.1 *Nahua Semiotic Theory*

While the initial aim of the study was to (re)construct the Indigenous semiotic theory primarily regarding the writing system, it became evident that Indigenous language theory provided important clues for any understanding of Nahua semiotics. The songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* reveal the essential characteristics of Nahuatl, characteristics that were amplified in elegant speech but also present in everyday language. In general, the structure of Nahuatl sentences and elegant speech is agglutinative in a cellular-modular way rather than linear and thus comparable to the central Nahua symbol of the quincunx, or four-leaved petal. Nahuatl is also dense with sensory imagery used to refer to objects, persons, and complex thoughts, actions, or events.

Garibay and León-Portilla declared the *difrasismo* "flower and song" as a metaphor for the concept of *poetry*. In this context, they also argued for acknowledging the symbolism of Nahua "poetry" as a highly advanced medium for understanding (ultimate) reality. While I opposed the devaluation of Nahua imagery as a preliterate, prerational, and inferior perspective on the world, I nevertheless argued that Nahua imagery works in a different way than León-Portilla proposed. León-Portilla understands the imagery as metaphorical, which means that the image and the thing it actually designates are two separate items, and the image is used to highlight some aspects of the symbolized based on the similarity of the two. In contrast, I argued that many images in Nahuatl were employed metonymically, that is, the image was seen as belonging to the same experiential domain as the signified and an essential part of it. Hence, the image *in tlilli in tlapalli* (the black, the red [ink]) did not serve as a symbol for *wisdom* as a third concept separate from *black* and *red* based on the ideas that wisdom was similar in some features to red and black or that the material writing referred only symbolically to an abstract, cognitive wisdom. Instead, the material black and red were considered an essential part of

wisdom, thus, the *writing* was used in a synecdoche as a stand-in for the larger concept of *wisdom*.

Analogically, the two elements of the image *in xochitl in cuicatl* (the flower, the song) were believed to stand in a metonymical relationship to one another rather than referring to a third concept (*poetry*). Flowers and songs were believed to have a natural relationship because they shared the same essential quality, that is, they were related by spatiotemporal contiguity. In this, the linguistic signs for *flowers* and *songs* were placed into a metonymical relationship to one another, which mirrored the natural relationship between the two entities in the real world.

Going beyond this interpretation, I additionally argued that the Nahuas most probably cherished the idea of a natural language, at least regarding some oral genres. According to this idea, linguistic signs not only mirror reality (with language and reality conceptualized as two separate things), but their sounds stand in a direct relationship to nonlinguistic reality. Thus, the sounds of words were considered as natural indexes of the essential quality present in the respective sound. Consequently, ritual songwork was believed to be capable of directly influencing the movement of forces in the cosmos because manipulating the forces at the level of sound resulted in a change in the forces in general.

For a (re)construction of Nahua semiotic theory regarding their system of *writing*, I also turned to their idea of (re)presentation visible in the two related areas of the *image* and of the *teixiptla*. The *teixiptla* was understood as a localized materialization of cosmic forces. Since the Nahuas did not believe their deities existed as spiritual entities ontologically independent from their material form, the *teixiptla* was merely a locally intensified form of the respective deity. That means the material form (the human impersonator, plant, or object) was considered identical to the presented (the immanent cosmic quality), even if the presented was not limited to this particular material form alone. Thus, the signified was merged with the signifier; the essential nature of the signifier was identical to that of the signified, the signifier was part of the signified. As the many misunderstandings in the early colonial decades show, the Nahuas approached Christian images with the same idea of (re)presentation. While the Franciscans used painted images and statues of saints as placeholders for the absent saints, the Nahuas understood the statue as a localized manifestation of a particular cosmic quality. Analogically, the Franciscans used the image of the sun as a symbol or metaphor for some personality trait of the saint or for the saint's relevance and power, while the Nahuas understood the saint as the impersonation of the quality of the sun. In sum, the Natives made no difference between the representation and the represented, the image and

what it depicted, or between the signifier and the signified regarding their essential nature. This does not, however, imply that they were incapable of distinguishing between different layers of the world, such as the sun and its pictorial image or writing and extra-semiotic reality.

I believe that the Nahuas also applied this understanding of (re)presentation to the images of their writing. Hence, the Nahuas regarded the material form of Nahua pictography as a primary presentation of reality rather than a secondary representation. This means that the pictorial signs were not signifiers pointing toward an absent signified but realizations of the signified. Following this interpretation, the visual form of Nahua pictography did not arbitrarily represent abstract thoughts. Instead, in the idea of a "natural writing," visual imagery was perceived to directly mirror the object, subject, or abstract category of the real world that it depicted. More precisely, the visual form was itself part of that reality as it realized particular essential qualities. These immanent qualities were realizations of clusters of cosmic forces on every imaginable layer of reality, for example, in cardinal directions, time units, and natural elements; in material, consistency, and function; or in the visual layers of form, contour, and color. As a result, the visual was related through coessence to the other layers of reality. Scribal artists presented these essential qualities as they manifested in the visual layer in their paintings and made them pronounced. The signs were believed to clear the smoke on Tezcatlipoca's mirror, that is, they made the underlying relationships more clearly visible and tangible. In this, Nahua pictography did not represent visual reality in a mimetic, illusionistic way. Instead, it showed the essential quality of the depicted, which was not necessarily identical to what the human eye saw in ordinary perception. Categorizing Nahua signs into icons, symbols, and indexes projects a European idea of naturalistic representation. From the perspective of the implicit Nahua semiotic theory, all their signs stood in an indexical relationship to reality because they were related to reality by spatiotemporal contiguity in an existential, natural relationship. As such, Nahua pictography was more a primary depiction than a secondary representation of reality.

In conclusion, as the Nahuas ontologically did not differentiate between a transcendent divine and a material world, neither did they distinguish between an absent signified and a present signifier. Rather, the visual form of their writing had the same ontological status as reality itself. Nahua semiotic theory did not separate writing and the reality it aimed to depict; painting manifested the visually experienceable layer of this reality.

3.2 *Embodied Meaning*

Changing perspectives, I also developed an interpretative theory of the modus operandi of Nahua pictography, as seen from the perspective of contemporary scholarship. In the history of European and scholarly engagement with Nahua pictography, this system of recorded visual communication has chiefly been compared with alphabetical writing. Typically, this produced a negative result, either completely denying the existence of writing (and historiography) in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico or positioning pictography on an inferior stage within the (teleological) evolution of writing systems. This devaluation is still the most common position for many contemporary writing theorists, who use the narrow definition of *writing* as the recording of language. Only some scholars working on pre-Hispanic American cultures and beyond have argued for a broader understanding of *writing* that includes the many American semasiographic systems.

According to my sketchy genealogy, common devaluations of pictography appear to be rooted in a dominant discourse in European philosophies of language and writing that claims that rational reasoning is the supreme human faculty for (objectively) understanding reality. This position regards rationality as transcendental, that is, as offering value- and culture-neutral, ahistorical, and disembodied access to an a priori truth. According to the linguistic correspondence theory of truth, linguistic propositions mirror the logical categories into which external reality is divided. Following this perspective, literal and thus rational language is the perfect sign system for mapping reality and, derivatively, phonographic writing as a secondary system mirroring language is the best writing system for representing reality. Hence, pictography is only a primitive form of writing because it expresses rational linguistic categories and consequently truth about reality only in a rudimentary form. These logocentric philosophies of writing match perfectly with the European colonial history of degrading American peoples based on their supposed undeveloped sense of rationality.

Attempting to overcome these colonial devaluations of American civilizations, I turned to the theory of the embodied mind by Lakoff and Johnson. Johnson's expanded theory of embodied meaning presents a powerful alternative for approaching Nahua pictography from a different perspective. According to the theory of the embodied mind, every human being uses embodied conceptual metaphors as the most basic thinking and reasoning tools, both in everyday life and in highly abstract theorizing, and consequently also as blueprints for actions. Contrary to the idea of a transcendental rationality, even our most abstract concepts are shaped and characterized by our body experiences. Applying this theory to Nahua pictography, its pictorial imagery can express

the visual aspect of cross-modal embodied conceptual metaphors in a graphic way unmediated by language. For example, the image schemas of BALANCE, CENTER-PERIPHERY, SYMMETRY, and EQUILIBRIUM are among the most important conceptual metaphors employed in Nahua pictography. Further examples are the image schemas of SCALE and INTENSITY to indicate the abstract concepts of *political relevance*, *wealth*, and *cultural achievements*, or the conceptual metaphors CONVERSATION IS AN EXCHANGE OF THINGS or NEGOTIATION IS GOING THERE AND BACK. In sum, Nahua pictography offers a highly efficient means for expressing these modes of embodied reasoning.

Based on Johnson's expanded theory of embodied meaning, I argued that Nahua pictography also offers a highly efficient means for expressing forms of experiential knowledge. According to Johnson's approach, human knowledge is not only abstract, cognitive, and linguistic but also social, cultural, and historical and in its very foundations perceptual, sensorimotor, sensational, and emotional. The process of meaning-making essentially relies on recurring, largely unconscious qualities, patterns, and structures of experience, to which the reflective and linguistic experiences of meaning are secondary. These patterns of experience include cross-modally felt qualities and vitality affects along with basic drives, emotions, feelings, imaginative cognitive structures, and many more forms of preconceptual, nonpropositional, and bodily kinds of understanding. Visual arts such as Nahua pictography offer the means to express these nonpropositional kinds of meaning in an integrated way by using shape, form, color, balance, harmony, light, space, and more perceptual forces to create this meaning. Looking at an image activates specific visual neural patterns that bear experiential knowledge and are closely related to the same pattern on other levels of experience. Thus, they can activate a whole range of percepts, sensations, emotional responses, and conscious feelings associated with these patterns more directly than by taking a detour through language.

Working like this, Nahua pictography activates experiential knowledge on several levels: with universal responses; culturally and socially conditioned responses, including the habitualized patterns of religious sensational forms; and responses based on individual experiences. As Nahua pictography is a system of conventionalized signs, it nevertheless draws heavily on cultural codes. As examples, I discussed an image from the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* representing a ritual ballgame and images from the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* showing how the Chichimecs experienced a series of natural disasters, are caught in a tornado and a flood, lose their bodily balance, and are stripped of their cultural attributes. The last example also showed how Nahua pictography uses the depiction of human bodies to represent body knowledge, made visible through the outer appearance of the bodies and their postures and

gestures. Finally, Nahua pictography in some cases also served as a script for bodily performances.

In sum, Nahua pictography is a conventional code system based on iconicity and graphism in a medium that fuses text and image and that addresses the visual modality corresponding to the high significance the Nahuas gave to the visual sense. Nahua pictography uses the visual modality to convey embodied concepts, experiential knowledge, and body knowledge, and presents figurative and abstract scenes as performative scripts. Most importantly, I argued that the medium of Nahua pictography offers the means to express preconceptual and nonpropositional embodied meaning.

Having said that, it is not my intention to idealize the Nahuas for using a system of recorded visual communication that is better than the alphabet because it addresses embodied meaning. First, Nahua pictography had clear limits of expression. Second, it did not exclusively express nonpropositional meaning but also stimulated rational and logical reasoning—the whole point of the theory of the embodied mind was to show that logical reasoning is not abstractly transcendental. In addition to this point, Nahua pictography offered the means to stimulate systematic, analytical, and critical thinking, contrary to the theories proposed in the orality–literacy debate. Third, it is not my intention to contrapose the Nahuas in an act of Othering with modern Europeans imagined as using only the alphabet and thinking only rationally. The main gist of my argument is that both Europeans and the Nahuas, with their respective histories, share the same human capability for rationality, which is always embodied, and created and communicated the whole range of experiential knowledge in different systems and genres of visual communication. Regarding Nahua pictography, it is nevertheless our main task to acknowledge it as a system of recorded visual communication that works differently from the alphabet and challenges us to overcome the (alphabetical) text paradigm.

Conclusion

After reaching a momentary end to our journey, I wish to present a short conclusion regarding the subject of *scripture* as well as a summation of my initial objectives and an outlook for potential future research.

One of the most important arguments of this study was to include non-propositional kinds of knowledge and ways of being and acting in the world in our understanding of *religion*. The human being is not a disembodied mind but a sensory being with a body and multiple kinds of experiential sensations, emotions, and feelings acting in the world in many forms of practices. Above this, we use various types of media and material objects in a wide range of ways, challenging the idea that these serve only as a "medium" for mediating and communicating (propositional) meaning. I started this study with an interest in *scripture*, which is traditionally defined as a particular type of "sacred" text. In popular discourse, *scriptures* identified with "sacred texts" are predominantly regarded as the central medium for learning about other religions, and even within the academic study of religion, the concept has only recently been criticized.

Analyses of Nahua culture challenge the traditional concept of *scripture* in several ways. First, Nahua written texts were so deeply embedded in oral performances that common distinctions between oral and literate societies do not match. These performative contexts draw our attention to the bodily and material aspects of semantic expressions. Confronted with Nahua ways of reading, we become aware that our contemporary practice of silent reading is by no means the only form for engaging with "texts" (and images). Consequently, engagement with the Nahuas motivates us to reflect and study the history of media usage in Europe more extensively. Second, Nahua texts challenge the idea that thoughts are best expressed linguistically, an idea related to the ideology of alphabetical writing. They do so because Nahua pictography also visually employs other forms of thinking, such as embodied conceptual metaphors. As a consequence, Nahua pictography also challenges ideas of knowledge that exclusively focus on the linguistic expression of propositions. Finally, the generally high significance of practice and aesthetics in Nahua religion draws our attention to the many ways of being religious beyond creedal beliefs and intellectual engagement.

Contemporary academic semiotic theories are deeply rooted in the European history of ideas and in many cases are strongly influenced by the debates within European religions about the proper use of different media. Within Christianity, extensive disputes about the ontological nature and

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representational function of images led to several schisms. In Plate's judgment, no other religion has spent so much time on these questions and established such a "vast theological corpus of doctrines on images" (2002b: 55). Although the European arts were increasingly secularized after the Renaissance, the evolving new theories of representation were still deeply rooted within this discursive tradition. Similarly, many contemporary academic theories about the relationships between signs or images and reality are firmly located within European ontological and epistemological frameworks. Drawing on the Western tradition of suspecting the image, many scholars within the field of Visual Culture caution against the manipulative power of images. With a background in critical theory, some of these scholars are openly critical of the increasing oculocentrism within contemporary mass media and fear the related loss of alphabetical literacy among the populace, which is equated with the loss of the intellectual achievements of the Western-European civilization (see Peter Bräunlein 2004a: 199–202; see also Uehlinger 2015: 389). Analyzing and reflecting the discursive roots of European theories about images and writing systems should be the first task of any academic research in this field.

Correspondingly, we need more awareness of the fact that people in non-European cultures often developed different semiotic theories embedded within specific cultural aesthetics and complex epistemologies and ontologies. Annette Hornbacher (2014) convincingly demonstrated this using the example of esoteric script mysticism in Bali. Interestingly, many religious image practices do not consider the image as a passive object made (merely) by human hands but attribute agency to it. For example, in Catholicism, statues of the Virgin Mary weeping tears or blood are popular. In India, deity statues have the capacity for *darśan*, that is, the power of the auspicious sight (see Eck 1998). In general, religious images are attributed with many different forms of agency; the most prevalent appears to be the power of healing (see, e.g., Sax, Quack, and Weinhold 2010). Furthermore, there are diverse, sometimes elaborate explanations about how images or statues enter into a state of agency (see Apostolos-Cappadona 2005: 4280).

In colonial Mexico, the Franciscan image doctrine declined in the second half of the sixteenth century while the belief in the agency of images grew. The worship of the "miraculous image" reached its climax in the seventeenth century, when images were "endowed with their own life, capable of regulation and autoregulation" (Gruzinski 2001: 129). This image concept incorporated many aspects of the pre-Hispanic idea of the *teixiptla*, which attributed agentive power to images and statues. We do not know whether the pre-Hispanic Nahuas also assigned agency to written texts in their materiality, while they did so to paper in its unwritten form. This is different from many material text

practices in other traditions, in which efficacy is endowed to paper only through the signs written on it. There are, for example, contemporary practices of ingesting paper inscribed with text from the Qur'an for healing purposes (Wilkens 2017) or the practice of wearing amulets enclosing written texts for protective purposes in the Roman Empire (Hornbacher, Frese, and Willer 2015: 95–97).

The belief in the agency of images and the efficacy of texts in their materiality is one important aspect of Indigenous semiotic theories awaiting cross-cultural comparison. Another aspect concerns the assumed relationship between the sign and reality and the question of which part of reality the sign might represent. According to my interpretative theory, Nahua semiotics was based on the idea that the sign presented the underlying structures of the cosmos. This idea resembles a specific interpretation of Chinese calligraphy as a visual medium for expressing the organizing structures of the universe. While the mandalas of Tibetan Buddhism are generally believed to represent intrapsychic sceneries and the cycle of reincarnation (Valentin 2010: 22–23), Islamic calligraphy, according to the semiotic theory by Lois Ibsen Al-Faruqi, seeks to "express the nonrepresentableness, the inexpressibility, of the divine" and to "suggest infinity" (Plate 2002c: 95). Thus,

> Islamic calligraphy is the visual embodiment of the crystallization of the spiritual realities (*al-haqa iq*) contained in the Islamic revelation. This calligraphy provides the external dress for the Word of God in the visible world but this art remains wedded to the world of the spirit, for according to the traditional Islamic saying, "Calligraphy is the geometry of the Spirit." (Nasr 2002: 113)

These examples only superficially sketch emic semiotic theories; what is needed is a thorough comparison of differences and similarities.

Taking the complexity of emic semiotic theories and the fundamental differences in their related epistemologies and ontologies into account, any academic theory with cross-cultural aspirations may easily fall short. It may turn out that the academic theory is simply one more semiotic theory embedded within its respective culture, in this case within the secular ontology and epistemology of the modern Western sciences. Along these lines, I see some shortcomings in the theory proposed by Meyer. She understands media and materiality in the context of religion as mediations "between the levels of humans and some spiritual, divine, or transcendental force" (Meyer et al. 2010: 210). Correspondingly, she defined *religions* as "the ways in which people link up with, or even feel touched by, a meta-empirical sphere that may be glossed

as supernatural, sacred, divine, or transcendental" (Meyer 2008: 705). Taking "the material and sensory dimension" as an intrinsic feature of *religion*, she understands *religion* "as a practice of mediation that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensational forms" (Meyer 2008: 714). Specifically regarding images, Meyer proposed that these make the invisible visible, represent "an absent signified," and "operate as symbolic forms that mediate that signified and in so doing constitute reality" (Meyer 2015: 355). Although Meyer aimed at disengaging the antisomatist and antimaterialist tendencies in the study of religion, this semiotic theory nevertheless maintains a European ontological dualism that is not necessarily cross-culturally applicable. As I have argued in several places, it does not apply to Nahua monist ontology.

The theory *could* apply to Nahua ontology, however, if we exclude its ontological statement about matter mediating the transcendent and reduce it to state merely that the image or sign presents the "invisible." After doing so, the theory could be related to a more secular academic semiotic theory arguing that signs might be able to represent the ineffable, in the sense of a "quality or state that applies to things that are incapable of being expressed in words" (Knepper 2017: section 1). The ineffable, understood in this way, could include mystic experiences of "the sacred," as Rudolf phrased it, or visions gained in altered states of consciousness but also philosophical ideas of "contradiction, paradox, and impossibility" (Knepper 2017: section 1). Finally, it could also refer to kinds of nonpropositional knowledge that are difficult to express linguistically. In this way, my interpretative theory of Nahua pictography could be regarded as a more secular variant of a contemporary academic semiotic theory, because it argues that Nahua pictography offers a means to express embodied conceptual metaphors and other kinds of body knowledge.

The theoretical approach discussed in the last paragraph focuses on one aspect of human media usage, the semiotic aspect theorizing the relationship between the sign and reality and defining which aspect of reality the sign is believed to mediate. This idea of semiotics appears to be closely derived from the traditional understanding of material objects as symbols mediating a nonmaterial meaning and also from the traditional understanding of media as a means of communication that transports a message like a parcel from the sender to the recipient (see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2010: 255–259). Searching for a more radical shift in perspective, we might turn to approaches theorizing the many other ways in which human beings use, relate to, interpret, and make sense with media and material objects, approaches that understand meaning-making as an integrated bodily process. One approach along these lines is Schilbrack's recent introduction of the theory of material culture as cognitive prosthetics into the study of religion (Schilbrack 2014b: 40–47).

After these concluding remarks about the study of semiotics in the context of the aesthetics of religion, it is time to summarize the work done in this study. One of its central academic objectives was to start an interdisciplinary dialogue between Mesoamerican studies and the study of religion. On one hand, I intended to change the perspective on Mesoamerican cultures by seeing it from viewpoints recently developed within the study of religion. On the other hand, I intended to test whether theories from the study of religion hold ground when applied to Mesoamerican cultures. In sum, I followed Mignolo's intention: "In writing this book I was more interested in exploring new ways of thinking about what we know than to accumulate new knowledge under old ways of thinking" (2010: xv).

The temporary endpoint of my journey into the world of the pre-Hispanic Nahuas was to propose two interpretations: first, an interpretative (re)construction of Nahua semiotic theory based on their sense of reality and, second, a theory about the modus operandi of Nahua pictography seen from the perspective of contemporary academic theories. In this, I opted for an interdisciplinary approach and, consequently, faced the impossibility of doing justice to the sophistication that some theoretical debates have reached within their home disciplines. I am aware that in many cases I only scratched the surface of these debates and surely missed many ideas that have already been thought. Furthermore, I surely missed complete discussions that would have matched my objectives, regarding both my interpretation of Nahua culture and the theoretical scenery I painted in the last chapter. Finally, I more or less deliberately excluded fields of research simply because I needed to establish an end to an already long journey. One of these fields, for example, is formed by German-speaking image theories, another by recent German research projects on the materiality of writing (see, e.g., Strätling 2006). Unfortunately, I was unable to include results of the Research Training Group *"Notational Iconicity": On the Materiality, Perceptibility and Operativity of Writing* (German Research Foundation) located at the Freie Universität Berlin,[1] although it followed a theoretical agenda similar to my own. Similarly, the results of the running collaborate research project on material text cultures (*Materiale Textkulturen. Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen in non-typographischen Gesellschaften*)[2] at

1 "Fachbereich Philosophie und Geisteswissenschaften/DFG Graduiertenkolleg 1458 'Schriftbildlichkeit'," Freie Universität Berlin, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/v/schriftbildlichkeit/>.

2 "Materiale Textkulturen. Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen in non-typographischen Gesellschaften," Universität Heidelberg 2010–2017, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.materiale-textkulturen.de/>.

Heidelberg University await further discussion (see, e.g., Meier, Ott, and Sauer 2015).

Other fields include research on epigrams and seals in ancient history or analyses of the many different writing systems of the world done in several area studies. I have sketched in broad strokes only the European history of philosophies of language, writing, and the arts, and largely excluded extensive details of the philosophical debates based on Kant, Wittgenstein, or Derrida. Furthermore, I touched only briefly on the field of (comparative) semiotics, which might have provided interesting perspectives on my research material, at least in those cases in which it is cross-culturally applicable and translatable for interdisciplinary dialogue. Furthermore, I only quickly mentioned the promising research field of the psychology of art and aesthetics (see, e.g. Tinio and Smith 2014). The main intention of the study was not to cover all those fields comprehensively but to open up interdisciplinary dialogue and to provide a springboard for further discussions.

As a consequence, there is much work left to do in future studies following the theoretical perspective of this study. Specifically, I see a large potential in the transdisciplinary dialogue between the studies of religion, art history, aesthetics, visual studies, perceptual psychology, cognitive science, and many area studies that discuss the ways in which human beings make meaning from and with visual systems of communication and the ways in which they position themselves within the world through the visual sense. More generally, I dream of expanding our academic and scientific knowledge about the sensorial, bodily, emotional, medial, and material ways of being and acting in the world in the context of religious and cultural traditions and their interrelationships with cognitive processes and among one another. This also includes comparative studies between different religious and cultural aesthetics, semiotic theories, and epistemologies.

There is also much work left to do in future studies on the culture and religion of the pre-Hispanic Nahuas as well as on contemporary Nahuas and their colonial and postcolonial history and, more broadly, on Mesoamerican cultures and their histories in general. Specifically with respect to the pre-Hispanic Nahuas, one central objective of this study was to reassess previous academic representations of Nahua religion and semiotic concepts. In this, I put great emphasis on the analysis and reflection of secondary literature on the Nahuas. Future studies are needed to test my interpretations and theories on more and specific primary source material.

All in all, my prime motivation was to understand a little better the pre-Hispanic Nahua sense of reality. Much has already been written about the question whether historical and cross-cultural understanding is possible at all.

Being aware of the limitations of this understanding, I am still interested in listening to the Nahuas rather than giving up on the matter by thinking that I could, in the end, only understand myself. Most certainly, there are aspects of unconscious Othering in my work and failed attempts to transcend my own concepts and thinking patterns. I hope that my colleagues, contemporary and future, Nahua and non-Nahua, will have a clearer vision to finding these projections and misunderstandings. Furthermore, I reached my interpretative theories through high levels of abstraction from the data given in individual sources. Consequently, my theory homogenizes individual, social, regional, ethnic, and historical variations in a complex culture that was rapidly expanding, diversifying, and transforming. Generalizing these differences to construct underlying characteristics of a shared culture involves high degrees of interpretation and most probably also of projection. Hence, the resulting interpretation that I offered is not only abstract but also probably different from what any individual pre-Hispanic Nahua would have thought. While my intention was to stay close and truthful to the primary sources and not to work *against* their evidence, I also used the interpretations of my scholarly predecessors and sometimes reached highly speculative ground. My intention was to make better sense of Nahua culture based on the available sources than earlier interpretations could. Notwithstanding this, I do not claim to have any better access to Aztec affect, sense, and thought than those earlier interpretations. I simply offered a new attempt to search for cross-cultural historical semiotic understanding.

In all this, I am aware of the intrinsic paradoxy of my understanding of academic knowledge. While the basic drive of my academic research echoes positivist and teleological interests because it searches for approaches and theories fitting and explaining reality better than earlier ones, at the same time it is deeply postcolonial and postmodern because I am quite aware of the limits of human understanding. The only solution to this dilemma appears to be to adopt a ludic attitude, as Sam Gill proposed in his discussion of Jonathan Z. Smith's methods of comparison:

> Play, as demonstrated to us by Smith as a double-face, is holding at once comic and tragic perspectives, the oscillatory and iterative negotiation of fit, the acknowledgment that we must stand somewhere despite knowing that there is ultimately no justifiable place on which to stand to comprehend the world. To embrace this absurdity is particularly suited, one might even say singularly so, as the attitude for the modern academic study of religion. It is the perspective from which we can simultaneously embrace two or more opposing positions without declaring ourselves mad. (Gill 1998: 307)

Figures

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FIGURE 1 Chicomoztoc. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, folio 16r
COURTESY OF THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONAL DE FRANCE

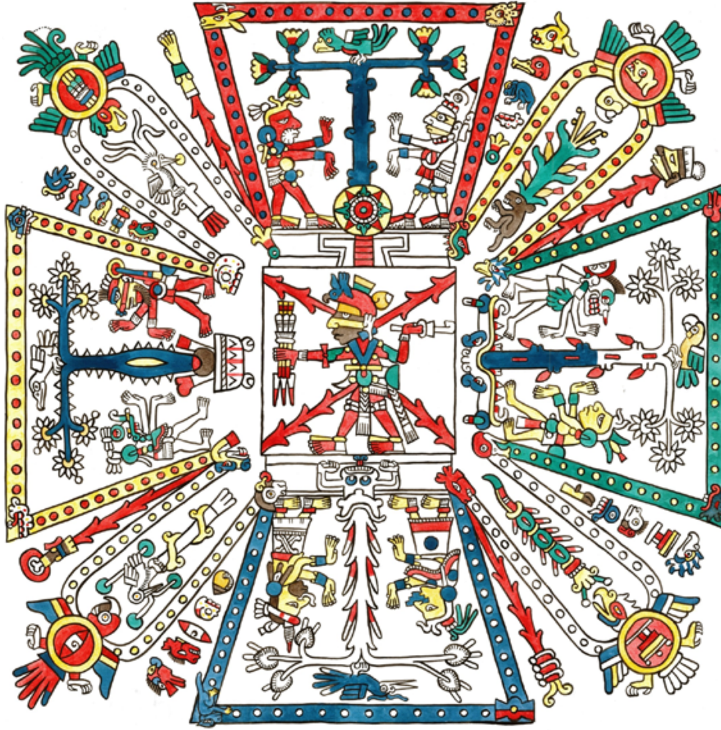

FIGURE 2 Cosmogram. *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer/Tezcatlipoca*, folio 1
DIBUJADO POR LACAMBALAM 2014

FIGURE 3
Cosmic tree with bird. *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*, folio 51
1898 LOUBAT FACSIMILE EDITION

FIGURE 4
Stargazer. *Codex Mendoza*, folio 63r
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 5 Increasingly Europeanized representation of Chalchiuhtlicue. Left, *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl*, folio 5; center, *Primeros Memoriales*, folio 263v; right, *Florentine Codex*, folio 33
LEFT, 1899 HAMY FACSIMILE EDITION. CENTER AND RIGHT, DRAWINGS BY AUTHOR.

FIGURE 6
Female *tlacuilo. Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 30r
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 7
Sign *altepetl. Codex Boturini* (stylized)
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 8
Sign for war. *Codex Mendoza* (stylized)
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 9
Sign for combat/war. *Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada* (stylized)
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

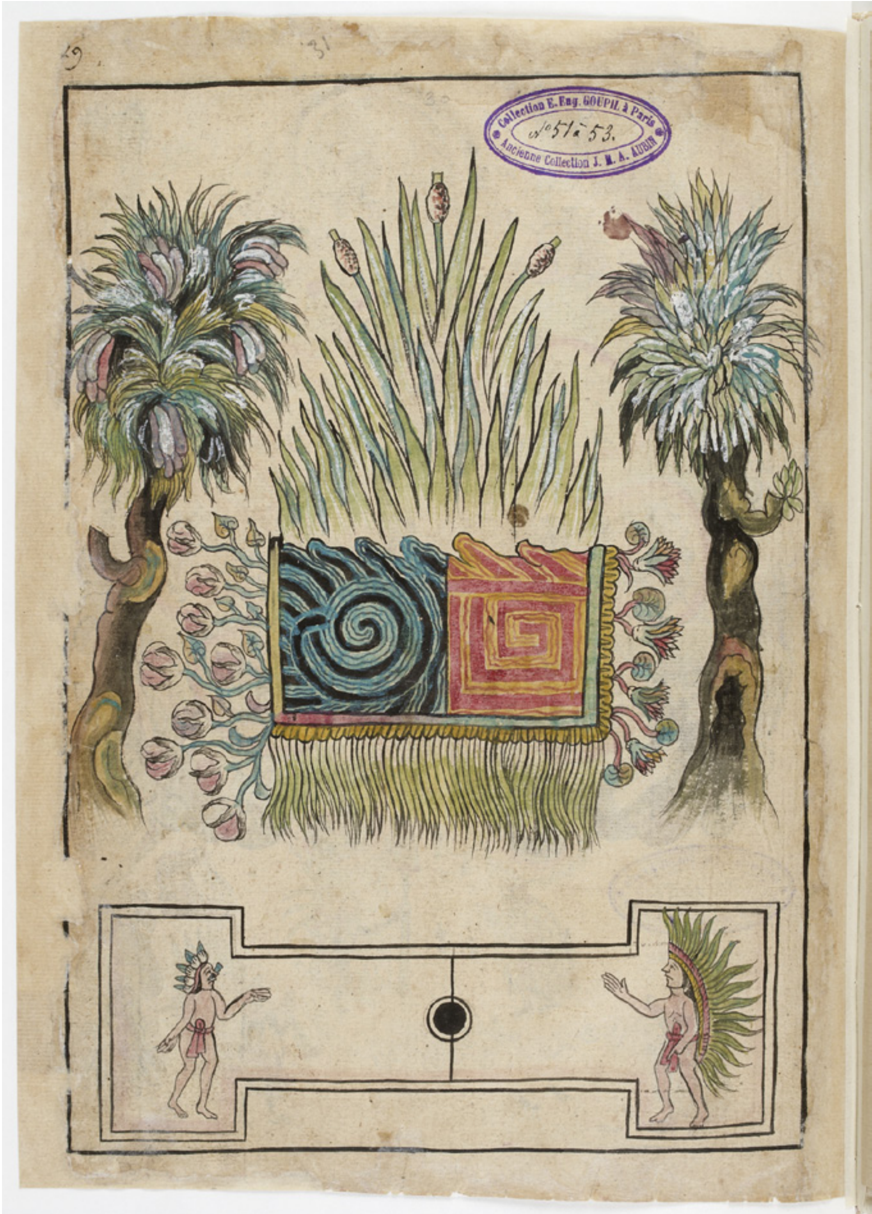

FIGURE 10 Elaborate sign for war and ritual ball game. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, folio 16v
COURTESY OF THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONAL DE FRANCE

FIGURE 11
Ruler sitting on a serpent mat. *Florentine Codex*, book XI: folio 84r
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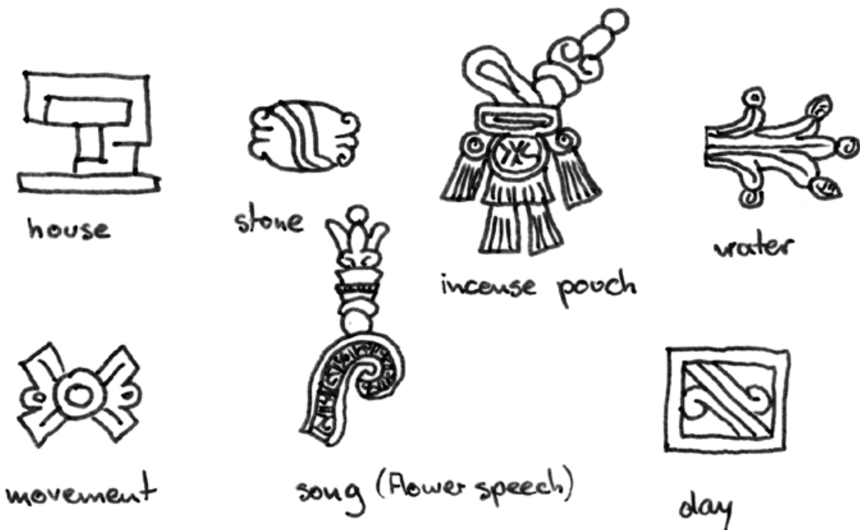

FIGURE 12 Common basic signs. *Codices Mendoza* and *Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl*
DRAWINGS BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 13 Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. *Codex Borbonicus/Cihuacoatl*, folio 20
1899 HAMY FACSIMILE EDITION

FIGURE 14
Sign for Chapultepec. *Codex Boturini*, folio 18
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 15 Europeanized depictions of persons. *Florentine Codex*, book X: folio 66
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 16
Frontal depiction of Bishop Juan de Zumárraga. *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 44v
DRAWING BY AUTHOR

FIGURE 17 Cholula in dark colors. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, folios 9v, 10r
COURTESY OF THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONAL DE FRANCE

FIGURE 18 Cholula after the Toltec conquest. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, folio 14r
COURTESY OF THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONAL DE FRANCE

FIGURE 19
Sign for conquest. *Codex Mendoza*, folio 10r
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FIGURE 20 Cosmogony. *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*, folio 30
1898 LOUBAT FACSIMILE EDITION

FIGURE 21 Left side of *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*
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FIGURE 22 Series of natural disasters. *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2*
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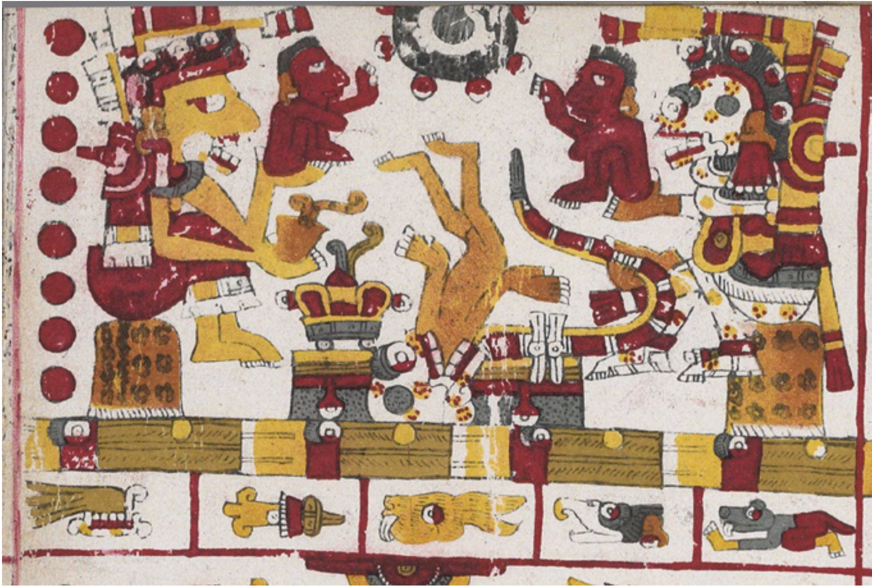

FIGURE 23 Person falling into an abyss. *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*, folio 57
1898 LOUBAT FACSIMILE EDITION

FIGURE 24
Lustful posture. *Codex Borgia/Yoalli Ehecatl*, folio 64
1898 LOUBAT FACSIMILE EDITION

FIGURE 25
War captive. *Codex Mendoza,* folio 64r
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