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Embodied Religious Thought: Gender Categories in Mesoamerica

SYLVIA MARCOS

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Soon Huemac found out [that] his daughter was sick.
He then asked the women who were taking care of her
'What did she do? [. . .] How did this heat enter my daughter?'
And the women who took care of her answered,
'It's the Tohuenyo, he who's selling chili:
he has put fire in her, he's made her restless. That's how it began, that's how it is that
she fell sick'.

-Códice Matritense

Body perceptions are embedded both in gender and culture. Mesoamerican sources are particularly revealing of that relationship. Concepts like equilibrium and fluidity are fundamental to grasp perception-constructions of bodies in ancient Mexico. A review of primary sources for the history of ancient Mexico manifests a conception of corporality that could be denominated 'embodied thought'. Equilibrium, fluidity and gender define the way the body is conceptualized.

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Never before has the body played such a central role in critical theory as it does in feminist theory. Recent scholarship and the discourse concerning the body support positions that frequently question scientific rationalism and at times historicize anatomy and biology.¹ Within the framework of these critical revisions, biology, and particularly sex understood as the biological counterpart of culturally constructed gender, can no longer be regarded as 'axiomatic' categories uninfluenced by history. Gender theory often contributes to a rethinking of corporality. Contemporary theorists have begun to explore alternatives to cognitive systems centred in the mind. The role of the body in knowledge is being studied with an emphasis on its importance in the reproduction and transformation of culture.²

The women's body, previously considered the *locus* of all our oppression, has a privileged place in current theory as a source of inspiration and reconceptualization. To continue elaborating disembodied theories would be to continue 'the old masculine philosophical habit'.³ Feminist theory may be abstract, but it is in search of bodily perspectives. It is embedded in the flesh, in our female flesh with its desires and pleasures, with its potential for pregnancy and maternity, with its blood, its fluids and its juices.⁴

Due to its ability to historicize inherited conceptual categories, contemporary critical theory offers possibilities for new understandings of concepts of the body in Mesoamerican thought. The body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which are written the rules, hierarchies and even more, the metaphysical obligations of a culture.⁵

Yet, despite the differences between the 'scientific' presentation of the body and its representation in gender theory, both are quite distinct from Mesoamerican concepts of the body. The immediacy of the body, inherent to both Mesoamerican thought and critical gender theory, allows for rapprochement.

By Mesoamerican thought, I am referring to the highly developed complex of ideas and beliefs that constituted the dominant epistemological framework among the Nahuas, Mayas and other peoples of Mesoamerica.⁶

1. Género
2. Religión
3. Mesoamérica

The main sources for the present study are Books III and VI of the *Historia General de las cosas de Neuva España (Códice Florentino)*. Researchers have pointed out their depth and richness, especially Book VI, and their value in bringing us closer to the moral vision and thought of the ancient Nahuas. The contributions of Lopez Austin and Leon-Portilla to the understanding of the Mesoamerican philosophical world are of great importance for the interpretation of these primary sources. Excerpts from the *Códice Matritense del Real Palacio* and especially Leon-Portilla's recent translation of it were also examined.⁷

Modern scientific certainties are not universals but are themselves historical constructions.⁸ This understanding permits a less confined way of looking at the Mesoamerican world. From this perspective, the biology (sex)-culture (gender) divide proves inadequate for approaching this universe. The concepts of duality, equilibrium, and fluidity are integral components of the Mesoamerican universe and essential to an understanding of corporality.

Duality in the Mesoamerican Universe

The feminine-masculine dual unity was fundamental to the creation of the cosmos, its (re)generation, and sustenance. The fusion of feminine and masculine in one bi-polar principle is a recurring feature of Mesoamerican thinking. This principle, both singular and dual, is manifested by representations of pairs of gods and goddesses, beginning with Omēteotl, the supreme creator whose name means 'double god' or dual divinity.⁹ Dwelling beyond the thirteen heavens, Omēteotl was thought of as a feminine-masculine pair. Born of this supreme pair, other dual deities, in their turn, incarnated natural phenomena. Thompson, for example, speaks of Itzam Na and his partner Ix Chebel Yax in the Mayan region. Las Casas mentions the pair, Izona and his wife; Diego de Landa refers to Itzam Na and Ixchel as the god and goddess of medicine. For the inhabitants of the Michoacan area, the creator pair was Curicuaue and Cuerauahperi.¹⁰

Omechiuati and Ometecutli are the feminine and masculine halves of the divine duality Omēteotl. According to an ancient Nahua myth, they had a fight during which they broke dishes, and from every shard that hit the ground a new dual divinity sprang up. While some Mexicanists have inferred that this legend explains the multiplicity of gods, it also illustrates how the prime duality in its turn engenders dualities. Perhaps, then, gender itself—the primordial, all-pervasive duality—could be viewed as 'engendering' the multiple specific dualities for all phenomena.

The life/death duality pervading the Mesoamerican world is but two aspects of the same dual reality. This is dramatically expressed by a type of figurine from Tlatilco with a human head that is half a living face and half skull. On the level of the cosmos, the sun and moon are regarded as a dynamic masculine-feminine complementarity.¹¹ Likewise, during the ritual bathing of newborns, feminine and masculine waters are invoked.¹² Cosmic duality is also reflected in the fact that corn was in turn feminine (Xilonen-Chicomecoatl) and masculine (Cinteotl-Itztlacoliuhqui).

Duality as the essential ordering force of the cosmos was reflected in the organization of time. Time was kept by two calendars: one was a ritual calendar of 260 days (13×20) which some regard as linked to the human gestation cycle, while the other was an agricultural calendar of 360 days (18×20). Five days were added to adjust it to the astronomical calendar.¹³

Both Frances Karttunen and Gary Gossen describe Mesoamerican duality as dynamic.¹⁴ To the polar ordering of opposites, other authors add a complementarity that gives duality a certain 'reversibility' of terms or movement to the concept.¹⁵

Fluidity deepens the scope of bi-polarity by giving a permanently shifting nature to feminine and masculine. With fluidity, femininity is always in transit to masculinity and vice-versa.

Fluid Reality

In a cosmos so constructed, there would be little space for pyramid-like 'hierarchical' ordering and stratification. In the various Nahua narratives, whether we look at the *ilamatlatolli* (discourses of the wise old women), the *huehuetlotlli* (speeches of the old men) or review sources that speak of pairs of deities, we can never infer any categorizing of one pole as 'superior' to the other. Instead, a sustaining characteristic of this conceptual universe seems to be the unfolding of dualities. This elaboration of dualities manifests on all levels of heaven, earth and below the earth as well as the four corners of the universe.¹⁶ The continuous unfolding is always in a state of flux, and is never rigidly stratified or fixed. Thus, duality permeated the entire cosmos, leaving its imprint on every object, situation, deity, and body.

Within this fluidity of metaphorical dualities, divine and corporeal, the only essential configuration was the mutual necessity to interconnect and interrelate. In the Mesoamerican universe, above and below did not imply superior and inferior.¹⁷ Not even in good and evil, nor between the divine and earthly, nor in death and life did hierarchical values stratified into superior and inferior exist. Life, for example, is born from death:

... Life and death interplayed on Great Mother Earth, forming a cycle of complementary opposites: life carried within it the seed of death; but without death rebirth was impossible because death was the pregnancy from which life emerged.¹⁸

Whether regarded as 'dynamism' by some authors and 'complementarity' by others (Lopez Austin), this quality determines a dual ordering specific to Mesoamerican thought from which mutually exclusive, closed categories are absent.¹⁹

Not only do the deities participate in the duality that flows between opposite poles such as good and evil, but all entities play a dual role, shifting between aggressor and benefactor: '... (F)rom the four pillars of the cosmos at the four corners came the heavenly waters and the beneficial and destructive winds'.²⁰

Mesoamerican cosmology implied a concept of duality that was not fixed or static but constantly changing. An essential ingredient in Nahuatl thought, this motility gave its impulse to everything. Divinities, people, objects, time, and space with its five dimensions, had gender: they were feminine or masculine in proportions which continually modified. Gender permeating all areas of nature was itself the movement that engendered and transformed all identity.

According to Jacques Soustelle, 'The law of this world is the alternation of distinct qualities, radically separated, which dominate, disappear and reappear eternally ...' (1955).²¹ In the universe, feminine and masculine attributes weave together in the generation of fluid, non-fixed identities. The shifting balance of opposing forces that made up the universe, from society to the body itself—as its reflection and image—should be understood as a manifestation of this interpenetration of genders. From the cosmos to the individual body, dual gender is revealed as the fundamental metaphor of Mesoamerican thought. It is reflected in the plasticity and dynamism that characterize its poles and that keep them 'pulsating' as it were.²²

Duality and the Idea of Equilibrium

Equilibrium determined and modified the concept of duality and was the condition for the preservation of the cosmos.²³ This equilibrium is not, however, the static repose of

two equal weights or masses. Rather, it is a force that constantly modifies the relation between dual and/or opposite pairs. Like duality itself, equilibrium or balance not only permeated relations between men and women, but also relations among deities, deities and humans, and among elements of nature. The constant search for this balance was vital to the preservation of order in every area from daily life to the activity of the cosmos; equilibrium was as fundamental as duality itself.

Thus, Mesoamerican duality cannot be a binary ordering of 'static' poles. The idea of 'balance' can best be understood as an 'agent' that constantly modifies the terms of dualities and thereby bestows a singular quality on the opposite and complementary pairs that permeate all of Mesoamerican thought. It endows duality with flexibility or plasticity and makes it flow, impeding stratification. An equilibrium that is always re-establishing its own balance—inherent in the Mesoamerican concept of a universe in movement—also kept all other points of balance equally in constant motion. In a similar way, the categories of feminine and masculine were open and changing, as Lopez Austin seems to suggest: '... there was not a being exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine but rather different nuances of combinations'.²⁴

In a state of permanent movement and continuous readjustment between the poles, neither pole could dominate or prevail over the other except for an instant. The imperceptible 'charge' or 'load' that all beings have (Lopez Austin), whether rocks, animals or people, was feminine or masculine and, frequently, both simultaneously in different gradations that perpetually changed and shifted.²⁵

Balancing the Cosmos

The Mesoamerican concept of equilibrium had implications for living life correctly. Gingerich writes that 'The doctrine of the middle way, therefore, was a central principle in the formulation and interpretation of this ethic ... this middle way definitively is not the Aristotelian golden mean. This concept (is) profoundly indigenous'.²⁶

To stray from the middle way posed a danger to the structure and survival of the entire cosmos in Mesoamerica. Among those who have noted this sense of radical urgency that characterizes the Nahuatl collective responsibility for achieving a vital, fluid and mobile equilibrium is Burkhart, 'The Nahuas had a sense of collective responsibility ... and they believed that human actions could provoke a final cataclysm'.²⁷ The Nahuatl 'middle road', even though it was also an expression of personal virtue, was above all the fulfilment of a requirement for cosmic survival and, thereby necessarily, for participation in the sustenance of the universe.

Equilibrium thus required that each individual in every circumstance had to constantly seek the central hub of the cosmos and coordinate him or herself in relation to it. To maintain this balance is to combine and recombine opposites. This implies not negating the opposite but rather advancing toward it, embracing it in the attempt to find the fluctuating balance. In this realm of thought, opposites are integrated: cold and hot, night and day, sun and moon, sacred and profane, feminine and masculine. 'The extremes, although they did not have to be completely avoided, did have to be offset one with the other'.²⁸ This fluid position made up the equilibrium of the cosmos.

Bodily and Cosmic Stability

The collective responsibility of not only sustaining balance but also participating in its achievement produced a very particular set of moral codes. The best expression of these moral codes is found in the discourses by the elders, the *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli*.²⁹ As mentioned above, many Mexicanists regard Book VI of the *Códice Florentino* of

Sahagun as a sort of *summa* of Nahuatl thought. It is the work which probes most deeply into the beliefs and rules of this society. The *ilamatlatolli* (discourses of women elders) contained in Book VI of the *Códice Florentino* are explicitly about the type of equilibrium required in the conduct of women and men.

... (D)o not walk hurriedly nor slowly ... because walking slowly is a sign of pompousness and walking quickly shows restlessness and little sense. Walk moderately ... Do not walk with your head lowered or your body slouched, but also do not carry your head overly high and upright because this is a sign of bad upbringing.

... (Y)our garments (should) be modest, suitable. Do not dress strangely, nor extravagantly, nor eccentrically. ... Nor is it appropriate that your garments be ugly, dirty or torn ...

When you speak, do not speak rapidly ... do not raise your voice nor speak too softly ... Don't use a thin, high voice in speaking and greeting others, do not speak through your nose, but let your voice be normal.³⁰

In the *huehuettlatolli* we can appreciate balance as a constant of Nahuatl thought as it is incarnated in daily life, in relations between the genders, and in bodily attitudes.

The body's immersion in the cosmos, and the insertion of the cosmos in the body does not allow even the possibility of a body/mind split. As we will see further on in the analysis of the concepts of corporality, the symbolic realm was considered as tangible as any other. Lopez Austin points out that in all his research he has never found anything that would lead him to think that the Nahuas made a distinction between the realm of the material and the immaterial.³¹ The tangible and the intangible were intrinsically blended.

The order in this concept of duality of opposites comes from the balance achieved through constant motion, *ollin* in Nahuatl. Following, we will see how the Nahua body is the expression of this vital movement.

The Mesoamerican Body or Permeable Corporality

In dominant traditions, the very concept of body has been formed in opposition to the mind. It is defined as the place of biological data, of the material, of the immanent. It has also been conceptualized since the seventeenth century as that which marks the boundaries between the interior self and the external world.³²

In the Mesoamerican tradition, on the other hand, the body has characteristics that are very different from those of the anatomical or biological body. Most notably, exterior and interior are not separated by the hermetic barrier of skin. Between the outside and the inside, permanent and continuous exchange occurs. Material and immaterial, external and internal are in permanent interaction while the skin is constantly crossed by all kinds of entities. Everything leads toward a concept of corporality in which the body is open to all dimensions of the cosmos: a body, both single and dual, incorporates solids and fluids in permanent flux, generally immaterial 'airs' or volatile emanations as well as 'juices' and solid matter. The Mesoamerican body can be imagined as a vortex generated by the dynamic confluence of multiple entities, both material and immaterial and often contradictory, that combine and recombine in endless play.

Bodies—feminine and masculine—echoed each other and, united, they mirrored the universe: their duality reflected cosmic duality. In turn this cosmic duality reflected the duality of the masculine and feminine imbricated in each other and both incorporated in the universe. Body and cosmos reflected each other and were complementary. The head corresponded to the heavens, the heart as the vital center corresponded to the earth, and the liver to the underworld. These correspondences and interrelations were themselves immersed in a permanent reciprocal movement: the ebb and flow between

the universe and the body, and between cosmic duality and the bodies of women and men poured back again as a current from the feminine to the masculine body and from this duality to the cosmos.

Plurality of Entities

In addition to the visible body, the Mesoamerican body is made up of 'animic entities' as Lopez Austin calls them.³³ Taken together, they most closely resemble what is meant by the Christian soul. There are three preeminent entities: the *tonalli*, the *teyolia* and the *ihiyotl*. Each has its privileged—but not unique—location within the physical body. The *tonalli*, whose principal residence is the head, travels at night during sleep. The *teyolia* resides in the heart and was regarded as the center of memory, knowledge and intelligence. When the *teyolia* leaves the body, death occurs. The *ihiyotl* (breath or 'soplo') which is associated with the liver, can produce emanations that harm others.³⁴ The *ihiyotl* was the vital center of passion and feeling.

It is as part of this play of multiple emanations and inclusions that the body is conceptualized in Mesoamerican thought.³⁵ Emanations include all the material and non-material entities that can leave the body. 'Inclusions' refer to those external entities—at times regarded as material—which enter the body from other domains of nature, from the spirit world, and at times from the realm of the sacred. Frequently sickness was conceptualized as an intrusion into the body of harmful elements that, when expelled, could take the form of animals and material objects.³⁶ Health and well-being for the Mesoamericans were defined by a balance between the opposing forces and elements whose totality gave the individual his or her characteristics.³⁷

The animic centers and their flow of vital forces hardly exhaust the totality of what made up an individual. The body, teeming with activity in the greater and lesser centers that emanate and receive forces and entities, reflects, of course, the multiplicity of the cosmos it was connected with. There were many forces that could move from the outside in, merge with internal forces and then leave the body as emanations. The joints were regarded as centers of dense life force. It was at the joints that supernatural beings (of a cold nature) could attack and thus impede bodily movement.³⁸ All these entities were discernible to the Mesoamericans and were as evident to them as their own faces, hands, legs, and genitals.

The Nahua Mode of Being in the World

The world, for the Nahuas, was not 'out there', established outside of and apart from them. It was within them and even 'through' them. Actions and their circumstances were much more imbricated than is the case in Western thought where the 'I' can be analytically abstracted from its surroundings. Further, the body's porosity reflects an essential porosity of the cosmos, a permeability of the entire 'material' world that defines an order of existence characterized by continuous transit between the material and the immaterial. The cosmos emerges literally, in this conceptualization, as the complement of a permeable corporality. Klor de Alva writes:

... the Nahuas imagined their multidimensional being as an integral part of their body and of the physical and spiritual world around them.

He adds that the 'conceptual being' of the Nahua was much less limited than that of Christians at the time of the Conquest and more inclined toward forming 'a physical and conceptual continuum with others, with the body and with the world beyond it . . .'.³⁹

Metaphors for the Flesh

Metaphors make up the very fabric of Mesoamerican thought. Abundant and richly complex, metaphoric language was used in all aspects of life. Metaphors for the feminine and masculine body are found in the *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* (discourses of wise old women and men) from Book VI of *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España* (*Códice Florentino*). These discourses, replete with metaphors, vividly illustrate specific cultural attitudes towards the bodies of women and men. As several researchers have pointed out, the discourses, recited publicly when children became adolescents, contain metaphors that give expression to fundamental components of Mesoamerican thought and morals as in the following examples:⁴⁰

... (F)rom the time of the lord of Tetzcuco, named Netzahualcoyotzin, ... who asked them [two older women], saying: 'Grandmothers, tell me, is it true that you have desire for fleshly pleasure ... old as you are?'

The old women replied with a long explanation ending in a metaphor:

'... (Y)ou men when you become old no longer desire carnal delights ... but we women never tire of these doings nor do we get enough of them because our bodies are like a deep abyss, a chasm that never fills up; it receives everything ... desiring more and asking for more ...'.

In Book XVIII, there is the following advice for daughters:

'... Look now, don't choose from among the men the one that seems the best to you like those who shop for mantas in the market ... and don't carry on like people do when the new corn is just fresh, looking for the best and tastiest cobs ...'⁴¹

Such metaphors about the bodies of women and men reveal aspects of the culture and were selectively eliminated by the first chroniclers and missionaries because they clashed with their own moral values. However, the metaphors surviving in everyday language probably seemed innocent enough and passed for mere poetic adornment of language. Sahagun would qualify them as 'very delicate and exact and adequate'.

Metaphor carries the imprint of the value system. For example, socially accepted desire for the body of another is evident in the use of the metaphor 'the best and tastiest cobs'. It is evident likewise in the image of women's bodies as 'a deep abyss, a chasm that never fills up'.

These metaphors, along with the Tohukenyo narrative analyzed below, give us an idea of the bodily pleasures accepted in the Mesoamerican world. *Tlalticpacayotl*, translated as carnality or sex, literally means 'that which pertains to the surface of the earth'.⁴² As with all that pertains to the earth's surface, erotic pleasure is earthly identity. Not only is it accepted, but it defines the inhabitants of Mesoamerica as dwellers of the four intermediate levels of earth's surface. This abode of women and men is the place of the flesh, its joys and concerns. The earth would be inconceivable without the corporeal dimension.⁴³ To speak cosmically of eroticism is to speak of the dimensions belonging to 'the surface of the earth' and its central position in the Nahua cosmos.

Narrative and Metaphor: Nahua Corporality in the Florentine Codex

The narrative of the Tohukenyo or the Foreigner is a choice example for understanding body and gender in Nahua thought. Found in Book III of the *Códice Florentino*, it forms part of the wealth of documentation in Nahuatl about sixteenth century Mexican culture. The story was collected from indigenous informants by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun in Tepepulco (Tetzaco region), Tlatelolco and Mexico beginning in 1547.

The 'normative discourses' of the *huehuetlatolli* can not be understood without narratives such as this in which the cosmic meaning of pleasure manifests itself. The story, part of epic narratives concerning divinities, is surprising for its bodily images and metaphors, as well as for the prominent place given to desire and carnality as expressed by a young girl. Leon-Portilla comments:

It has been said at times concerning our indigenous culture that there is a lack of erotic themes (. . .) But, contrary to those who think this way, there are some old texts in Nahuatl, collected from native lips at the time of the conquest.⁴⁴

This text was probably one of 'those old Nahuatl "texts" with a certain rhythm and measure that was learned by heart in the Calmecac or other Nahua centers of superior education . . .⁴⁵ Nahuatl youth in these centers received intellectual training as they listened to the *tlamatinime* (the wise men/women or philosophers) express the highest values of their culture. It was also a place of training for the priesthood. . . . (T)here is no doubt that the teachings directed at the most select of Nahua youth included the highest thinking, often contained in the songs and discourses learned by memory'.⁴⁶

The story of the Tohuenyo concerns the erotic ardor that, without hyperbole, overcame a Toltec princess.⁴⁷ Here then, in Leon-Portilla's recent translation, is an excerpt from the story of the Tohuenyo.⁴⁸

The Story of Tohuenyo

(. . .)

He went about naked, his thing just hanging,
he began selling chilies,
setting up his stand in the market, in front of the palace.

(. . .)

So then that daughter of Huemac
looked toward the market
and saw the Tohuenyo: there with his thing hanging.

As soon as she saw him,
she went into the palace.

Then, because of this, the daughter of Huemac fell sick.

She became filled with tension, she entered into great heat,
feeling herself deprived of the Tohuenyo's bird—his manly part—

(. . .)

Soon Huemac found out:

his daughter was sick.

He then asked the women who were taking care of her

'What did she do? What's she doing?

How did this heat enter my daughter?'

And the women who took care of her answered,

'It's the Tohuenyo, he who's selling chili:

he has put fire in her, he's made her restless.

(. . .)

That's how it began, that's how it is that she fell sick'.

And the lord Huemac, seeing this, gave orders and said,

'Toltecs, look for the chili vendor,

find the Tohuenyo.'

And immediately they went about looking for him every where.

(. . .)

They turned all Tula upside down

and even though they made every effort,

they didn't see him anywhere.

So they came to tell the lord that they hadn't seen Tohuenyo anywhere.

But a little later Tohuenyo appeared on his own
(...)
Then the lord said to him:
You have awakened that yearning in my daughter,
You will cure her'.
(...)
And right away they cut his hair,
they bathed him and after this
they rubbed him with oils,
put a loincloth on him and tied on a cloak.
And when Tohuenyo went to see her,
he immediately stayed with her
and with this she got well that moment.

Tohuenyo later won the recognition of the Toltecs and led them to victory in many battles. The story of his extraordinary war deeds becomes part of an epic myth about the adventures of supernatural beings of whom Tohuenyo is one. In the middle of these heroic deeds comes this 'remarkable story of the Tohuenyo' as Leon-Portilla calls it.⁴⁹ It still surprises us that, despite the moral scrutiny and expurgation that the vestiges of erotic Nahua art suffered at the hands of the clerical chroniclers, this has survived.⁵⁰

To find a text with an explicitly carnal content leads us to another level of understanding about the role of the body and desire in Nahuatl thought and culture. These expressions are very far from any sort of fear of the power of feminine desire, or from the fear of inexhaustible sexuality as found in Europe in the *Malleus Maleficarum*.⁵¹

Generally historians emphasize the disciplined and to a certain degree repressive (as we would say) character of Aztec culture. Without a doubt, there were norms with respect to sex. At the same time, we cannot simplistically declare that no space existed for eroticism. In a culture and thought produced by duality, by the alternating presence of opposites in motion, the demands of discipline were enriched by the possibility of and esteem for carnality. The one-sided emphasis on rigor and discipline is more a product of the values of the missionary historians than a true reflection of the data and realities of that ancient world. What Sahagun recorded in Chapter VII, Book VI of the *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España* balances the picture:

'... They worshipped Tlazulteotl, the deity of lust, the Mexicas did, especially the Mixtecs and Olmecs ... and the Cueztecs worshipped and honored Tlazulteotl, and didn't accuse themselves of lust before him, because for them lust was not a sin'.⁵²

Some fragments that here and there escaped the inquisitional filter along with the study of metaphors and narratives they contain can reveal to us aspects of this culture—such as corporality and carnality—that were censored in the majority of sources.

Conclusion

The emphasis here has been to view concepts of the body, its metaphors, bodily constraints and eroticism in Mesoamerican thought. It is appropriate to emphasize that in these Mesoamerican concepts, women's bodies are not only recognized and venerated for their reproductive capacity, but they also appear as 'subjects of desire'.⁵³ We have seen the case of one woman—the young daughter of Huemac—whose desire provoked concern and action and affected the mythic and political history of her time.

The body, abode and axis of delights and pleasures, the dual body of women and men, fluid and permeable corporality, the body as the principle of being on earth, fusion

with the immediate surroundings and also with the origin of the cosmos, this feminine and masculine body manifests itself in remnants of epic poetry, songs, narratives and metaphors. Finding even vestiges of it can begin to reveal incarnate universes that escape the master narrative of spirit over flesh.*

Notes

*Jacqueline Mosio assisted in the preparation of the English version and the bibliography.

- 1 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1990; Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1991; Rosalind Petchesky, 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', in *Feminist Studies* 13 (1987).
- 2 See especially the following: Genevieve Lloyd, *Man of Reason*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1993; Susan Bordo and A. Jaggar (eds), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 1989; Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1986; Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, New York, Columbia University Press 1988; and Laqueur.
- 3 Teresa de Lauretis, 'The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy', (introduction) in *Sexual Difference, A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1990.
- 4 Jane Gallop.
- 5 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, New York, Pantheon 1982.
- 6 The Aztecs were one of the Nahua groups. Despite linguistic differences, the peoples of ancient Mesoamerica (Central America) formed a world as different from the indigenous groups of the North as from the Andean empire of the South. Mesoamericans were united by cosmology, mythical and ritual legacy, by cultural centers, and by a similar concept of time and space. Regarding other points of commonality, please see Alfredo Lopez Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, 2 vols., Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press 1993, and Paul Kirchhoff, 'Mesoamerica: Its Geographic Limits, Ethnic Composition and Cultural Characteristics', in *Heritage of Conquest: The Ethnology of Middle America*, Sol Tax (ed.), New York, Cooper Square Publishers, 1968 (Reprint. Originally published by Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois).
- 7 Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España (Primera versión íntegra del texto castellano del manuscrito conocido como Códice Florentino)*, Alfredo Lopez Austin and Josefina García Quintana (eds), 2 vols., Mexico, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes and Alianza Editorial Mexicana 1989; and *Códice Matritense del Real Palacio*, as cited in Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Toltecayotl, Aspectos de la cultura Nahuatl*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica 1980. For a discussion of the origin of Sahagun's work and the complexity of dealing with the sources, see Sylvia Marcos, 'Gender and Moral Precepts in Ancient Mexico: Sahagun's Texts', *Concilium*, No. 6, (1991). Excerpts from primary sources are the author's translation.
- 8 Duden, Petchesky. Barbara Katz-Rothman, personal communication, Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, 1994.
- 9 Andres de Olmos, 'Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas', in Angel M. Garibay, (ed.), *Teogonía e Historia de los Mexicanos. Tres opúsculos del siglo XVI*, Mexico, Porrúa 1973; Sahagun, *Historia General*.
- 10 Eric Thompson, *Historia y Religión de los Mayas*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica 1975; Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, introduction by Angel Garibay, Mexico, Ediciones Porrúa 1966; Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, *Apologética Historia*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas) 1967.
- 11 Felix Baez-Jorge, *Los oficios de las diosas*, Xalapa, Universidad Veracruzana 1988.
- 12 Sahagun, *Historia General*, Books I and II.
- 13 Furst, Peter T, 'Human Biology and the Origin of the 260-Day Sacred Alamanac: The Contribution of Leonhard Schultze Jena (1872-1955)' in Gary H. Gossen (ed.), *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas*, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, Albany, State University of New York 1986. Also, in Andres de Olmos. '... (T)hey counted by twenty days from the first day, which was their month; they counted up one year then left five days, thus a year only had three hundred and sixty days ...'

- 14 Frances Karttunen, 'In Their Own Voice: Mesoamerican Indigenous Women Then and Now', Austin, Linguistics Research Center, University of Texas at Austin 1986; Gary H. Gossen, 'Mesoamerican Ideas as a Foundation for Regional Synthesis', in Gossen, *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*.
- 15 This complementarity means that every pole is the other's referent: masculinity, for instance, is only defined in relation to femininity and vice versa. The same holds true for the secondary dualities such as hot/cold, right/left, day/night. Hence the mutual distance between the poles determines the distinctness of their opposition with a growing distance allowing for diminishing contrast, for ambiguity and even the reversibility of one (e.g., 'hot') into the other ('cold').
- 16 Yolotl Gonzales Torres, *Diccionario de Mitología y Religión de Mesoamerica*, Mexico, Larousse 1991: '... 4[symbolized] the four directions of the universe, 5 [symbolized] the four directions plus the center, 9 was associated with the underworld and 13 with the levels of heaven. ...'
- 17 Nohemi Quezada, personal communication, DEAS Conference, January 1990. See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metáforas de la Vida Cotidiana*, Madrid, Catedra 1986, p. 50 and following. To transpose these values to the Mesoamerican universe would be a serious error. It was the missionaries who, in their need to find familiar elements in the world so 'other' that they encountered, called the upper and lower levels of the Nahuatl universe 'heaven' and 'hell' respectively. Yet Tlalacan, a place filled with birds and streams where those who died by drowning were privileged to go, was located in the eastern part of the Nahuatl underworld. Here was a place of election and privilege not located in the heavens.
- 18 Alfredo Lopez Austin, 'Cosmovisión y Salud entre los Mexicas' in A. Lopez Austin and C. Viesca, (eds), *Historia de la Medicina en México*, Book I, Mexico, UNAM, Facultad de Medicina 1984, p. 103.
- 19 I had just written this article when I discovered that Louis Dumont describes the categories of Hindu thought in terms of fluid 'segmentation' and 'openness' of concepts. See Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*, Paris, Seuil 1983, p. 245: '(... A)s I was saying to you concerning India, the distinctions are many, fluid and flexible, they run by themselves independently in a web of reduced density; likewise they are variously accented according to situations, appearing at times in the forefront, at other times almost vanishing in the background. For us, we generally think in black and white, projecting ourselves on a vast field of clear disjunctions (either good or bad) and employing a small number a rigid, thick frontiers that define solid entities.' (Author's translation).
- 20 Lopez Austin, *Historia de la Medicina*.
- 21 Jacques Soustelle, *La Pensée Cosmologique des Anciens Mexicains*, Paris, Herman et Cie 1955.
- 22 For a discussion of Greek thought in relation to Nahuatl modes of thought, see Sylvia Marcos, 'Categoría de género y pensamiento mesoamericano: un reto epistemológico', in *La Palabra y el Hombre*, Jalapa, Veracruz, Universidad Veracruzana, October (1995).
- 23 Lopez Austin, *Historia de la Medicina*; Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth. Hahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press 1989.
- 24 Lopez Austin.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Willard Gingerich, 'Cipahuacanemiliztli, the Purified Life in the Discourses of Book VI, *Florentine Codex*', in J. Kathryn Josserand and K. Dakin (eds), *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma Sullivan*, BAR International Series 402, 1988, p. 522.
- 27 Burkhart, p. 79.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 130–31.
- 29 For an extensive treatment of the *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli* in relation to gender in Mesoamerica, see Sylvia Marcos, 'Gender and Moral Precepts in Ancient Mexico: Sahagun's texts', *Concilium*, No. 6, December (1991).
- 30 Sahagun, *Historia General*, Book VI.
- 31 Lopez Austin, personal communication, Mexico City, 1989.
- 32 Bordo, Duden.
- 33 Lopez Austin, *Historia de la Medicina*.
- 34 Remi Siméon, *Diccionario de la lengua nahuatl o mexicana*, Mexico, Siglo Veintiuno Editores 1988 (First edition 1977). (First edition in French, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Nahuatl ou Mexicaine*, 1885).
- 35 Silvia Ortiz, 'El Cuerpo el Trance entre los Espiritualistas Trinitarios Marianos', Presentation at the Symposium on Symbol and Performance in Healing: The Contributions of Indigenous Medical Thought (Symposium organized by Sylvia Marcos), PreCongreso CICAIE, July 1993.

- 36 Carlos Viesca, 'Prevención y Terapéuticas Mexicanas' in Lopez Austin and Viesca, *Historia de la Medicina*, Book I.
- 37 For a more extended presentation of these topics, see Sylvia Marcos, 'Cognitive Structures and Medicine: The Challenge of Mexican Popular Medicine', in *Curare*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1988).
- 38 Lopez Austin, *Historia de la Medicina*.
- 39 Jorge Klor de Alva, 'Contar Vidas: La Autobiografía Confesional y la Reconstrucción del ser Nahuatl', in *Arbor* (No. 515-16), Madrid (1988) pp. 49-78.
- 40 See Thelma Sullivan, 'A Scattering of Jades: The Words of the Aztec Elders' in: G. H. Gossen, *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*.
- 41 Sahagun, *Historia General*.
- 42 Lopez Austin.
- 43 Perhaps this was the reason why ancient Mesoamericans regarded the negation of carnal activities as abnormal since without them, one didn't belong to the earth.
- 44 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Toltecayotl, Aspectos de la cultura Nahuatl*.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press 1990 (First edition 1963). (Translation of *La Filosofía Nahuatl*, Mexico, UNAM 1983. First edition 1956).
- 47 Angle M. Garibay, *Historia de la Literatura Nahuatl*, Mexico, Porrúa 1953.
- 48 The original Nahuatl narrative as transcribed by Sahagun is in Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, *Códice Matritense del Real Palacio*, Vol. VII, phototype by Hauser y Menet, Madrid 1906. The translation into Spanish by Leon-Portilla is from his *Toltecayotl, Aspectos de la Cultura Nahuatl*.
- 49 Leon-Portilla.
- 50 Sahagun's translation of the Nahuatl into Spanish (in 1577) is from Book III of his *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España*. In his translation, which is a summary of the narrative, adjectives and metaphors are toned down, even altered. With the help of a questionnaire that Sahagun elaborated to obtain information about the Nahuatl world, his assistants collected material in Nahuatl (*Códice Matritense*) and this is the source Leon-Portilla used for his Spanish translation. Noting the changes this poetic story underwent at the hands of Sahagun allows us to suppose that other texts with bodily and erotic implications underwent similar alterations by other missionary chroniclers. Yet Sahagun was much more respectful than some in preserving, albeit modified, the teachings and discourses that did not agree with his moral values. The changes made by Sahagun and other chroniclers were subject to the evangelizing purpose of their writings, the pressure exerted by the Inquisition, and the shame or reserve the monks could have experienced when faced with certain Mesoamerican expressions of eroticism.
- 51 *Malleus Maleficarum*, in Latin, by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, both Dominicans, appeared in 1484 (or 1486 according to other authors). From this sadly renowned document, written to help hunt 'witches' and later condemn them to the Inquisition's fire, comes the idea of women envious of masculine genitals, insatiable, and thus dangerous for men. The work almost seems to imply that all men are near saints and that only the evil influence of women keeps them from dedicating their lives to the service of God or to the elevated (bodiless) activities of the mind. The document is an unrestrained harangue against the body and its activities.
- 52 Sahagun, p. 328.
- 53 Laqueur.

SYLVIA MARCOS is visiting professor of Mesoamerican Religions and Gender in the Religion Program of Claremont Graduate University, California. She has recently been awarded the H. W. Luce visiting professorship at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. She is a member of the Permanent Seminar on Gender and Anthropology with the Institute for Anthropological Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Her research on gender issues in ancient and contemporary Mexico has been widely published.