

The
FLOWER
and the
SCORPION

... SEXUALITY AND RITUAL IN EARLY NAHUA CULTURE ...



PETE SIGAL

The
FLOWER
and the
SCORPION



A book in the series

LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE:
LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS

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*Sexuality and Ritual in
Early Nahua Culture*

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For Brooke

Always challenging me to go further, to do more,
to break down boundaries, to create our new reality

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demands a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and correspondingly demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

Focusing on sexuality in early Nahuatl culture, Pete Sigal’s exploration goes beyond the time and place of his inquiry and

argument. The most striking aspect of the book is the philosophy that underlies his research and argumentation. Poring over the many Spanish-language reports that distorted the meaning of sexuality in early Nahuatl culture and digging into Aztec codices and other documents in the Nahuatl language, Sigal engages in a necessary and brutal work of restoration—not necessarily the restoration of the original meaning, but of the “difference” that Spaniards never understood, blinded as they were by Christian cosmological principles. Unveiling the colonial difference that made of Nahua sexuality a depository of devilish amoralities, Sigal’s book alerts us to what happened in subsequent centuries when British, French, and later U.S. Americans took over the control of knowledge to report on the sexuality, cosmology, habitus, and way of life of non-Western civilizations. This book is important not only for its content but for its method—the method, indeed, is its content.

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When one seeks a world that challenges boundaries, one begins to think, to want, to know, and to grow a new movement for change. Many years ago I began a journey. Many people have traveled that journey with me. We have fought against a world that cannot accept the radical alterations that our mutual existences demand, a world that forces us to lie about our lives, a world populated by people who demand the extermination of our differences. Struggling with this hostility, we fight to create a new reality.

THE PEOPLE, THE PLACE, AND THE TIME

For the reader unfamiliar with Nahua scholarship, my use of the term “Nahua” may need explanation. First, the term prioritizes linguistic unity, referring simply to people who spoke the language Nahuatl. Second, the alternative term, “Aztec,” implies some sense of national identity and cohesion that did not exist among the city-states that comprised the “Aztec Empire” at the time of the Spanish conquest.¹ Third, “Nahua” has become a term used by many academics to describe the bulk of the indigenous peoples of central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest.

“Aztec” was a term sometimes used before the Spanish conquest to describe the people of Tenochtitlan, the leading city-state of the empire. I instead use the term “Mexica” when discussing the people of Tenochtitlan. This is the term that they most commonly used, at least in written form, to refer to themselves. I reserve the term “Aztec” for discussions of the empire.

According to most accounts, the Mexica, a group of wanderers, arrived in the area now known as central Mexico sometime in the twelfth century CE, and after a series of struggles, they settled in Tenochtitlan in the early 1300s. In another hundred years, they had become the dominant city-state in an alliance that would go on to conquer vast swaths of territory throughout northern Mesoamerica.² They had great pride in a

city that they built up to be among the largest cities in the world at the time of the Spanish conquest. Tenochtitlan, a city in the middle of lake Texcoco, served both as a bustling metropolis crisscrossed by canals and as an important ceremonial center.³

This book begins with the time period immediately preceding the Spanish conquest of the so-called Aztec Empire, the military phase of which took place between 1519 and 1521. The book ends in 1650, the time when, because of increased contact between Spanish and Nahua people, we witness significant changes in Nahua culture and society. At that point, the nature of Nahua documents changes fundamentally. The year 1650 saw the beginning of what James Lockhart calls “stage three” of the process of Nahua cultural change.⁴ This period of increased bilingualism and biculturalism presumably also transformed the relationship that Nahuas had to their fertility rituals and their sexual lives, though I will leave it to others to study this process in later colonial times.

THE BATH

A mid-sixteenth-century rendition of the Nahua *temazcal*, a steam bath (figure 1), depicts a relatively minor structure, but it signifies both the difficulties that Spaniards had understanding Nahua sexual activity and the ambiguities involved in writing about Nahua sexuality when the Nahuas did not have a category that one can translate as “sex” or “sexuality”; the image of the *temazcal* thus serves as an icon for the thesis of this book. Reproduced in a codex written under the auspices of Franciscan friars and copied from a prototype produced by a Nahua painter-writer, the image foregrounds the many layers of interpretation modern scholars must use to derive meaning from such a source.

Tlazolteotl, whose image appears above the small door to the steam bath, and who is the most important goddess discussed in this book, guarded the *temazcal*, a place intended to cure individuals but one that many Catholic priests argued fomented sexual sin by allowing for secret sexual liaisons.¹ Tlazolteotl, the “deity of trash,” guarded the steam bath because she, along with a series of related fertility goddesses, controlled the process in which individuals cleansed themselves, both metaphorically, through ritual, and literally, through washing one’s body. The Nahuas did not distinguish between the metaphorical and literal cleanings, because when one cleaned

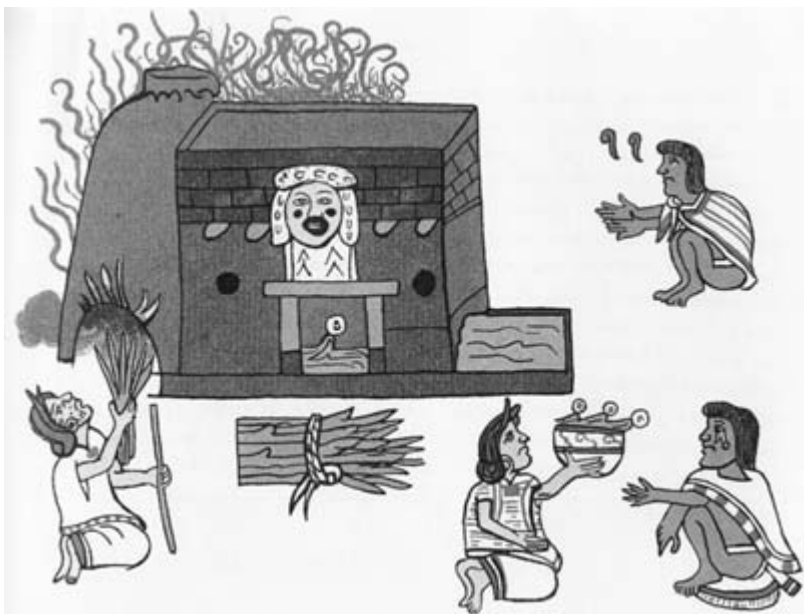


FIGURE 1 The temazcal, a steambath. From *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans* (Codex Magliabechiano, facsimile), ed. Zelia Nuttall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1903), 156.

oneself, one also kept at bay all of the other things signified by the term *tlazolli*, which I translate here as “trash.” As we will see, it is precisely this *tlazolli* that allows me to analyze colonial Nahua sexuality. Furthermore, the difficulties of translating *tlazolli* and of understanding the social significance of Tlazolteotl form the core problematics of this book.

Nahuas did not have a category that a modern scholar can responsibly equate with all the things that are meant when one uses the category “sexuality.” By analyzing Nahua fertility rituals as they existed at the time of the conquest and discussing the changes in the structures of these rituals through the early colonial years, I will show that neither the sexual taxonomies developed by colonial society nor those later promoted by modern Western peoples can capture the history of sexuality of the Nahuas.

The paradoxical question faced by all scholars studying sexuality who deal with non-Western or premodern societies is, how does one write a history of sexuality for a society that did not have sex? As others have shown, once a scholar exits the modern Western world, the parameters

that define “sexuality” immediately change.² One then faces a definitional conundrum reflected in the challenges confronted in this book; I do not wish to replicate the concept of sexuality as defined in the modern West, but neither do I wish to suggest that Nahua notions of the sexual are so esoteric that we cannot ever understand them.

Building upon this concept, this book argues that modern researchers of sexuality, following Michel Foucault, have placed far too much emphasis on the ability of the Roman Catholic sacrament of confession to change the ways in which individuals conceived of themselves and their behaviors.³ Reading and analyzing *all* of the available sources, and not only Spanish clerical documents, allow me to argue that this assumption is incorrect. The process of cultural assimilation and appropriation lasted much longer, was slow and inconsistent, and in fact is not yet complete.

The Flower and the Scorpion

Tlazolteotl was one of many fertility deities, and the flower and the scorpion are two representations of sexuality. As we will see, all of the gods and the “natural world” linked to concepts of fertility, and its corollary, waste.⁴ Nahua cosmology was a complex amalgam of different concepts in which deities had the ability to transform themselves into virtually anything, and humans and animals under certain circumstances could become gods. Underlying this structure was a particular set of beliefs about the interconnections among the earth, the heavens, and the land of the dead.⁵

Sources vary on the events that led to the division between these three realms, but for my purposes what is most important is that the mythology alludes to a set of powerful deities that asserted a feminine earth and a masculine sky but also allowed them to change genders and identities in order to access relevant levels of the cosmos.⁶ The actual substances that made up these gods could be exchanged when the god willed it.

The deities most important to this book had particular qualities that linked them most closely with fertility (Tlazolteotl, Teteo Innan, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Chicomecoatl, Chalchiuhtlicue, Tlaltecuhli) or warfare (Tezcatlipoca). The deities linked with fertility are most often deemed “female,” but we will see that such a gendered identification is deeply flawed. Moreover, while most of the deities linked with warfare are deemed “male,” Tezcatlipoca’s male “identity” is generally overstated.

Also important for my purposes are the ambiguously gendered “supernatural” figures linked with death (*cihuateteo* and *tzitzimime*).

The gods, in addition to having qualities that linked them to a broader and shared Nahua cosmological universe, were connected with the *altepetl*, the local Nahua city-state.⁷ Hence, for example, Tezcatlipoca (a powerful warrior god worshiped throughout the Nahua universe) was the patron god of Texcoco.⁸ Other gods too were patrons of some of the subdivisions of the city-states. Religion, thus, much as in early modern Europe, had both local variants and universal narratives.⁹

According to Nahua cosmology humans came upon the earth, created by the gods after several attempts. These humans needed to respect the gods by performing ritual ceremonies designed to move time forward and thus allow for the continued survival of the deities.¹⁰ These humans had bodies made up of a variety of substances that could be exchanged at particular (ritually important) moments. Moreover, the human body always maintained a very close connection to both the natural world and the world of the gods. Hence a Nahua could not view the human body in isolation from the existence of the gods or from the centrality of plants, animals, and the earth.¹¹ And humans could also alter their bodies, though only in ritually appropriate ways, and only with the support of the gods.

SINGING OF THE FLOWER

As one of the signs of sex, flowers proliferate in the descriptions of the gods and rituals.¹² The flower held central importance to Nahua constructions of their world, so much so that the great Nahuatl scholar of the twentieth century, Miguel León-Portilla, made the flower the primary metaphor for all life forces.¹³ A bit more conservatively, the linguist Frances Karttunen maintains that *xochitl*, flower, when used as a modifier, signified something precious, and that, when paired with the term for song, referred to poetry.¹⁴ It is clear that, whatever the limits of the use of the flower as a symbol or metaphor, it referred to something of great importance to the Nahuas. While the flower will remain partially unknowable, an entity that exceeds our ability to understand Nahua discourse in a foreign cultural framework, I will show that it primarily related to intimate connections with others and itself signified fertility in all of its forms.

In the early sixteenth century, the Franciscan friar Alonso de Molina created the first comprehensive Nahuatl-Spanish dictionary, in which he had the following definitions linked to *xoch*, the Nahuatl root for flower:

Xochitl. flower

Xochtia. to utter witticisms or make people laugh

Xochuia. to enchant, bewitch, or seduce a woman¹⁵

In Molina's definitions of flower, only the third has possible sexual meaning (and even there one can suggest many other derivations for the term). Yet the flower signified ritualized fertility: ceremonial rites in which the fertile nature of human coupling extended outward to all of the natural and supernatural universe.¹⁶ Further, virtually any time ceremonial sexual activity took place, the flower signified the presence of sexual desires.

As one example, the flower in a Nahuatl song discovered in the middle of the sixteenth century links directly with sex:

Please do not stick your hand in my skirts,
 Little boy,
 King,
 Little Axayacatl.
 Perhaps I am painted,
 My little hand is itching,
 Again and again
 You want to seize my breast,
 Even my heart.

Now perhaps you will ruin my body painting.
 You will lie watching
 The coming of the green quechol bird flower.
 I will put you inside of me.
 Your chin lies there.
 I will rock you in my arms.

It is a quetzal popcorn flower,
 A flamingo raven flower.
 You lie on your flower-strewn mat.
 It lies there inside . . . no longer.¹⁷

In 1479 nobles from Chalco, a city-state conquered by the Mexica in 1464, went to their conquering city to perform this song, titled simply *chalca cihuacuicatl*, “The Chalca Woman’s Song.” Axayacatl, the Mexica leader, received the people from Chalco, and he liked the song that the men and women performed, at least according to our one source describing the reception of this performance.¹⁸

The erotic joking of “The Chalca Woman’s Song” suggests something about the sexual imaginings of the Nahua peoples on the eve of the Spanish conquest. The flower signified body parts, sexual acts, and noble sexual performances. The selection above suggests flirtation, sexual humor, intercourse, and erotic tenderness. Though it does not at first seem to hide anything, there is much hidden meaning: linguistic tricks, erotic puns, and a variety of connections between sexual desire and the manipulation of masculinity, and between warfare and sexual subjugation.¹⁹

But here we begin with the flower. The first line referring to *xochitl* states explicitly that Axayacatl watches the “quechol bird flower” as the Chalca woman places Axayacatl’s penis inside of her. Immediately following this event, she provides Axayacatl with tenderness, rocking him in her arms, perhaps during intercourse, or perhaps following it, as she will remind him that it no longer “lies there inside.” Before she does so, though, she says much about flowers: his penis is a “quetzal popcorn flower, a flamingo raven flower,” and the place where they engage in intercourse is strewn with flowers. Here the flower refers to the nobleman’s endowment and perhaps to the place where nobles perform sexual acts.

Of course such an interpretation is far too literal, but this particular songwriter, and presumably, if Chimalpahin’s discussion of reception is correct, the nobles of Tenochtitlan and Chalco (together quite representative of the worldviews of the nobles in the basin of Mexico), believed the flower signified something related to the sexual seduction of the emperor. In fact, this seduction was not a discrete historical event, but rather a ritual intended to emulate power, violence, fertility, and a discourse of noble eroticism and desire. The mention of the flower, repeated in many of the rituals, aimed to make the audience members think about the proper role of nobles in maintaining and enhancing the fertility of the universe.

CURING SCORPION STINGS

The goddess Xochiquetzal climbed up and, covering him with her *huipil*,²⁰ caused him to fail in his purpose [of chastity]. . . . [Then a warrior watching this man said to him]:

“Are you not ashamed, . . . because you have ruined things? For however long you live, . . . you will be able to do nothing upon the earth, you will be able to achieve nothing. The commoners will call you ‘Scorpion.’ ”²¹

—An incantation recorded in a Nahuatl-speaking community of Guerrero, New Spain, in 1629 by a Catholic priest

The story of Xochiquetzal and the man who became Scorpion suggests that the gods punished men for violations of chastity, and indeed that violations of particular sexual vows could lead one to stray down the wrong path—the path of excess. The incantation points to a story in which the goddess tricked a man who was preparing himself to fight for his community. Xochiquetzal’s name (“Quetzal Flower”) shows us the importance of the flower to this ceremony of commoners, a curing rite intended to coax the poison out of an individual stung by a scorpion.

More important to the structure of the story, as we shall see, was the historical power of the fertility goddesses Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl. In the early seventeenth century, when the Catholic priest Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón recorded this myth in his effort to suppress idolatry among indigenous people, Nahua commoners (probably about 90 percent of the Nahua population)²² believed strongly in the connection between fertility goddesses and their own lives. During that time they regularly invoked these goddesses in their testimonies in idolatry cases. Among other things, Xochiquetzal protected them from scorpion stings, while Tlazolteotl promoted the health of the mother and child during childbirth, and Chicomecoatl, another fertility goddess, aided men and women in achieving a successful harvest. In each case, Nahua thought connected these goddesses with sexual acts and imaginations.

The evidence related to the rituals performed by commoners indicates the persistence of distinctly Nahua ways of understanding sexual acts. After the Spanish conquest, the Spaniards prohibited the grand state ceremonies such as those that nobles had performed in Tenochtitlan.²³ Catholic priests actively sought to coopt noble Nahua children, and,

despite the ability of these children to maintain some semblance of a connection with Nahua tradition, the priests often succeeded in preventing them from leading traditional ceremonies.²⁴ During the first generation after the conquest, the Spaniards actively and violently suppressed noble support for non-Catholic religiosity.²⁵ But the documents suggest that the views of the bulk of the indigenous population did not change so radically that they would willingly give up their traditions.²⁶

How could the commoners and those nobles who did not adhere to Catholic religiosity continue to support the belief system in place at the time of the conquest? First, the Nahua religious system had a dynamic and adaptive structure, which could change, sometimes quite radically, depending on circumstance.²⁷ Second, Nahua commoners, like nobles, could adapt Catholic ritual to meet some of their needs—and they could suggest the similarity of such ritual practices to preconquest concepts.²⁸ Third, hidden rites, whether in caves or in churches when priests were not looking, could serve the function of maintaining religious practice and knowledge.²⁹ Finally, commoners in particular could maintain small-scale ceremonies, in houses and fields, to continue to worship the deities most central to their daily survival.

In the scorpion story, the man went to the mountains to fast and, most important, refrain from any sexual activity. If he successfully maintained his vigil, the gods would give him the power to kill his enemies. Upon Xochiquetzal's successful seduction of the man, however, a warrior beheaded him and turned him into a scorpion. Thus the story signified the ability of the gods to give and take away the powers of humans and animals.

When a scorpion stung an individual, that person would go to a curer who would recount the story to him or her. The curer then would coax the scorpion's poison out of the individual by simulating sexual intercourse with that person, thus suggesting that the curer is Xochiquetzal, the body of the one stung just a conduit for the scorpion. The curer, as Xochiquetzal, then reminds the scorpion that, because he failed to maintain his vigil, he cannot kill this person.

People in Guerrero in 1629 faced scorpion stings on a somewhat regular basis, and they designed rites to control the power of the scorpions to kill them. The evidence suggests that, when sick, these commoners went to medical practitioners of various kinds as well as traditional shamans and Catholic priests.³⁰ When they went to the traditional shamans and

curers, these individuals invoked many Nahua gods and goddesses, including Xochiquetzal. Seventeenth-century commoners, who provided for most of their own sustenance through farming, worshiped those deities that had a direct effect on daily life; they linked these gods and goddesses to quotidian survival.³¹

In many cases the stories told by the Nahuas in such localized ceremonies (and this in some senses is similar to local religious practice among the Hispanic population during colonial times) link to sexual activity.³² In the tale of the scorpion we find a warning: a violation of a vow (in this case, the man's vow not to have sexual intercourse) can lead the gods to disempower you (turn you into a scorpion). But the performance of the ceremony contradicts this rather chaste discourse: only through the simulation of sexual activity can the shaman cure the individual. The curer gains power in this ritual, while the sick individual gives his or her body over to that curer. Further, Xochiquetzal's seduction of the man and consequent disempowerment of him saved humankind. Thus, sex in particular circumstances (even involving trickery and seduction) can maintain life, while sex in other circumstances can destroy and disempower.

Unpacking this story related in Nahuatl to a Catholic priest by a Nahua commoner over three centuries ago has become my central fixation over the past decade and it speaks directly to this book's focus: the persistence and gradual change of indigenous knowledges regarding what Western peoples later would come to term sexuality. How did such a myth become part of colonial history? How could a (shaman representing a) Nahua goddess have sex with an ostensibly Catholic man or woman in order to rid him or her of a scorpion's poison? How can we interpret such a story, mediated by historical change, recorded partly in Spanish and partly in Nahuatl? How can we understand its place in the archive? Following this, how can we comprehend the process in which this text (and sex) became written?

The History of Sexuality

When the Nahua texts tell stories of people singing to the king who conquered them ("The Chalca Woman's Song") and a curer calling upon a goddess to help an individual stung by a scorpion (the Xochiquetzal incantation), even the most astute reader may be blind to the eroticism in

the stories, because we can read the erotic and the sexual³³ only as filtered through our own notions of sexuality.³⁴ Here we have two stories in which individual actors feign or describe—whether or not they perform—sexual intercourse.³⁵ But how can I provide a responsible historical analysis of these stories, asking what they mean to the writing of a history of early colonial (sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century) Nahua communities? Asking this question in a slightly different way, *can* I write the early colonial Nahua history of sexuality?³⁶

Since the Nahuas did not have a concept of sexuality, the epistemological problems incurred in writing a book such as this seemed daunting to me.³⁷ However, other sexuality studies scholars have shown that in all times and places in which the modern West has not dominated, the responsible scholar must question the role of sexuality as a given category. Karma Lochrie, in her analysis of medieval European literature, usefully argues that we cannot understand medieval peoples as heteronormative because, during medieval times, concepts of sexual normativity did not exist. This does not mean, according to Lochrie, that medieval society was a utopian fantasy in which “anything goes,” but rather suggests that medieval understandings of behaviors that modern societies deem sexual did not conform to such categorization.³⁸ Similarly, Helmut Puff shows that even when social taxonomy changed by the early modern period, sodomy in Germany and Switzerland did not fit easily into the categories that we have deemed “sexual”; but neither did the early modern peoples form categories so esoteric that we can say that they do not relate at all to modern notions of sexuality.³⁹ Instead, Puff shows, allegations of sodomy could be seen as fundamental challenges to the construction of self: “Sodomy was a particularly disruptive and therefore potent suspicion undermining the fabric of hierarchically organized social relations. Such accusations could be effective, because sodomites were not viewed as a distinct category of human beings. Potentially, all Christians, especially Christian men, could act as sodomites and be typed as . . . sexual heretic[s].”⁴⁰

When the scholar moves beyond Europe, questions related to the import and even existence of something that one can call “sexuality” come immediately to the forefront.⁴¹ The now classic study of Melanesian fellatio by Gilbert Herdt shows that concepts of homosexuality are so culturally contingent that a younger boy fellating an older youth in Melanesia signified masculine exchange and maturation, not sexuality.⁴² Mary

Weismantel argues that tenth-century sexually themed pottery produced by the Moche on the coast of what is now Peru presented fertility as a social process, not a singular “sexual” act.⁴³ Anjali Arondekar, studying colonial Indian sexuality, focuses on the archive, where she shows that if one studies the process of archivization, one will find that both modern scholars and colonial authorities have certain investments in creating and maintaining the category of sexuality as a singular truth.⁴⁴ Afsaneh Najmabadi shows that early twentieth-century Iranian notions of sex and eroticism could not fit into the paradigms put into place by notions of modernity coming both from Europe and from certain sectors within Iran. Thus, the veil, for example, signified (and continues to signify) a particular contestation over the very definition of modern sexuality: “There is yet another location in which this contest is positioned: the veil as a marker of the homosocial, homoerotic affectionate world of men and women. Its association with backwardness . . . stood for the backwardness of homosocial and homoerotic affectivity.”⁴⁵ Whether analyzing the sexual heretic or the veil, these historians of sexuality studying diverse places and time periods present one vital concept: what modern Western peoples take for granted as “sexuality” signified different things in pre-modern and non-Western societies.

WRITING COLONIAL NAHUA SEXUALITY

To understand this different order of signification, *The Flower and the Scorpion* focuses not on the recovery of the sexual lives of the Nahua people during the colonial years, but rather on the ways that writers, both indigenous and Hispanic, produced ideas about Nahua sexuality. The book decodes this writing process, arguing that the links between sexuality and writing tell us something about the ways in which the writers and the people who influenced them understood and helped to produce the changes in meanings related to sexual acts during the late preconquest and early colonial years.

In this study I draw on an archive of pictorial manuscripts, clerical texts, chronicles, and legal documents to show the development of a sexual system in which many indigenous people, particularly commoners, did not place sexuality within the framework of colonial distinctions, but instead related their sexual lives and imaginations not just to concepts of sin and redemption but also to pleasure and seduction, as well as rituals of fertility and warfare.

The Nahuas constituted a variety of relations as ones in which the human couple would engage in bodily activities related to fertility. These activities included categories that modern Western peoples would invest with sexual meaning: vaginal and anal intercourse, manual and oral stimulation of male and female genitals, imaginary conditions designed to allude to these activities and stimulate a genital response, and the use of nonbodily objects in these actions. Yet these elements also included activities that modern Westerners would not consider sexual: the ritual killing of humans and animals; burning of maize, incense, and other items; letting of blood; and sweeping houses, streets, and other areas. Nahua categories linked all of these activities together and suggested that they formed a part of the matrix of sacrifice.

Much Nahua thought at the time of the Spanish conquest envisioned sexual relations as elements of a larger set of ritual practices designed to promote fertility: of gods, humans, animals, and the earth.⁴⁶ A cultural history of these rituals also shows that Nahuas closely linked the maintenance and expansion of the political system with fertility rites.⁴⁷ The logic of ceremonial warfare such as the “flower wars” (ritual wars fought primarily between the nobles of rival city-states designed to weaken the enemy—with the eventual, but not immediate, goal of conquest—and to gain captives for sacrifice) suggests that these were meant to expand the power of the state through a type of violence envisioned as promoting the fertile nature of the empire.⁴⁸ Indeed, this system links sexual pleasure, fertility, violence, warfare, and sacrifice. This book will examine such connections, and we will see that Nahuas linked all of these elements within a single cultural matrix.

Two main principles organized Nahua thoughts about the sexual.⁴⁹ First, sexual behavior related directly to the fertility rituals, ceremonies large and small, in the many realms described above, promoting the notion that everything and everybody must exude fertility in order for the community to survive. Second, an individual’s sexual possibilities divided between those acts deemed moderate and those deemed excessive. Nahuas considered moderation in sexual activity a virtue, excess a vice.⁵⁰ Ceremonial performances, from those of the household to the grand state rites, as well as ritual and quotidian discourse, marked both the encouragement of fertility and the distinction between moderation and excess.⁵¹

In no way, however, did Nahuas before the conquest equate sex with sin, at least the way that Catholic clerics understood the term. The con-

cept of sin, as Louise Burkhart has shown, did not adequately translate into the Nahuatl language, much less the cultural framework for that language.⁵² Simply put, Nahuas did not believe that sexual activity, or any other activity based on human choice, could place them in spiritual danger. Rather, the only things that could influence one's position in relation to the gods were carefully honed skills and particular types of luck.⁵³

Representatives of the Catholic Church who encountered the Nahuas deemed their views of sexual behavior problematic, and they engaged in a focused debate over how to change behaviors. The result of that debate was the attempt to link sex with sin, often using particular indigenous concepts (trash, dirt, dust, damage, disorder, and excess being the most common) as signifiers of sinful behavior. The means for such a linkage was the discourse of confession, whether through the actual confessional or through advancing such an analysis in the broader social field.⁵⁴ The attempt, through the confessional, at conquering thoughts about sexuality largely failed, instead eventually producing a hybrid sexual system that still survives today in many indigenous Mesoamerican societies.⁵⁵

The means by which the Catholic Church attempted to enforce changes, however, were altered during the sixteenth century. At this time, the Catholic Church as an institution engaged in significant reforms, most prominently represented by the Council of Trent. The mid-sixteenth-century (1545–63) Tridentine reforms in particular mandated that only a Catholic priest could provide the sacraments, including confession. The bilingual confessional manuals that I cite in chapter 3 are part of this effort, in which the hierarchy worked to assert more control over the administration of the sacrament and to make sure that parishioners understood the priest's power in this regard.⁵⁶ But, as Stuart Schwartz has recently remarked, historians often forget that the original settlement and colonization of Latin America took place before the Council of Trent, and it proved impossible to impose the Tridentine reforms on the Hispanic, much less the indigenous, populations.⁵⁷

The relationship between the church and the indigenous population also faced intense debate at this time. After an initial period during which the Inquisition imposed harsh penalties on indigenous leaders in central Mexico, the Indians were exempted from the Inquisition's authority. Other measures were taken to control indigenous religiosity, of course, but these too led to great controversy, as witnessed in the debates around the extreme penalties imposed by Diego de Landa on the Maya popula-

tion for alleged idolatry and human sacrifice.⁵⁸ In all, these debates led to great variation in attempts to alter indigenous religion because panics regarding idolatrous practices would pop up from time to time, leading to more efforts to exercise clerical control, followed by long periods of calm during which many indigenous communities would see few priests.⁵⁹

Though conscious efforts by Spaniards to alter Nahua ideas of sexuality did not succeed, much change did occur as the Nahuas came into daily contact with Hispanized peoples and, by the middle of the seventeenth century, we witness in various sources (in both Nahuatl and Spanish) Nahua descriptions of sexual acts and categories largely consistent with views then common in Hispanic popular culture, though not in official Catholic discourse.⁶⁰ In the same time period, however, Nahua commoners continued to connect sexual desires with preconquest gods and goddesses, and both nobles and commoners had great difficulty understanding the clerical concept of sin.

As I note throughout this book, Nahua nobles on the eve of the Spanish conquest believed that the *flower* signified, among other things, excessive sexual desire. One hundred years later, some Nahua commoners believed that the existence, life, and death of the *scorpion* showed them the ways in which the gods manipulated human sexual behavior. These two stories alone, related to Nahua metaphor and myth, demonstrate that indigenous understandings of sexuality were different from the views of the Spanish colonizers and that these concepts will remain at least partially unknowable to us. However, a careful analysis of the place of sex within the text will allow us to see the ways that these myths and metaphors constructed particular relationships between Nahua culture and individual sexual imaginations, desires, and acts.

Sources

Our knowledge of Nahua sexual desire and subjectivity, indeed of Nahua history and social reality in general, is necessarily contingent. I have worked with Nahuatl-language texts, with some information from Spanish-language sources; but we should never assume that Spanish authorities did not mediate the postconquest Nahuatl-language documents.⁶¹ And, even when Nahuas wrote the documents outside of Spanish influence, we must note the internal conflicts and external power relations involved in the production of these texts, whether pre- or post-

conquest. Further, as preconquest Nahuas wrote in pictographic form, these sources require significant decoding of the painting process, and even this decoding has its limits.

Most people who ask me about my research first query me about the nature of the documentation, which they assume must be limited. The Nahuas produced a diverse array of texts related to sexuality, first in the form of pictorial manuscripts that described in great detail ritual ceremonies, then, during the colonial years, in the form of alphabetic texts (often incorporating visual imagery) that discussed changes in ritual structure as well as quotidian behavior. The most central texts include the pictorial manuscripts, the Florentine Codex, idolatry cases, Catholic religious texts, and the texts of indigenous intellectuals. These are supported by other sources, including Inquisition documents and criminal trials.

The pictorial texts begin chronologically with the Borgia Group (the Borgia, Laud, Cospi, Fejérváry Mayer, and Vaticanus B), a set of preconquest codices, read in screenfold fashion, and produced from the bark of a tree. While the provenance of the Borgia Group is contested, these manuscripts unquestionably emanate from before the Spanish conquest, and from an area outside the basin of Mexico. Some argue that they come from the Tlaxcala region, while others suggest a Oaxacan provenance. It seems likely that they come from some combination of areas, and that they were copied from prior versions of the same texts. These manuscripts produce a coherent and relatively consistent cosmology, though with some significant differences in style.⁶²

The Tonalamatl of Aubin also was produced as a screenfold but emanates from the basin of Mexico. The date of this text is controversial as it may be the only example of a preconquest document from the area around Tenochtitlan. According to Karl Nowotny, "It is painted on bark-paper and of very poor quality. It comes from the hands of a simple shaman who used it as an instrument of divination."⁶³ It contains only the *tonalamatl*, the divinatory calendar.

The Codex Borbonicus, a key manuscript for this book, was also produced in screenfold fashion, but likely written in the basin of Mexico (probably from the region to the south of Lake Texcoco, the lake upon which Tenochtitlan sat) soon after the Spanish conquest. We find some evidence of stylistic changes in the depictions, but the Borbonicus appears to be a good copy of earlier manuscripts. The Borbonicus contains

minimal annotations in Spanish, and it provides depictions of gods, calendrical rounds, and a series of rituals.

The Magliabechiano Group (the Magliabechiano, Tudela, Ixtlilxochitl, and Vaticanus A), a set of manuscripts produced in the mid- to late sixteenth century under Franciscan sponsorship, was based on a prototype produced by a traditional Nahua painter-writer. The images show significant deterioration from preconquest texts and were not produced in traditional Nahua fashion. The books themselves were produced in Hispanic style, with one side of most pages containing an image, the other side a descriptive text in Spanish.⁶⁴

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis was produced in the 1550s in an interactive framework, in which a Nahua painter-writer, Dominican friars, and Hispanic notaries worked together to produce an extensive pictorial manuscript with many Spanish annotations. Those painters and writers were often somewhat at odds with one another, but the collective effort of at least seven different people included one well-trained Nahua artisan.⁶⁵

In chapter 3 I discuss extensively the production of the Florentine Codex, which was produced by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his indigenous aides, comparing it with the ethnographic texts produced by the Franciscan friar Motolinia and the Dominican friar Diego Durán. Each of these texts was produced in the mid- to late sixteenth century by friars interested in ethnographic discovery but primarily in instructing indigenous people in Catholic principles. The texts themselves, however, betray the hybrid nature of their production. The Florentine Codex, for example, was produced in Nahuatl based on extensive testimony over two decades from Nahua elders in three communities, interviewed by the indigenous aides, then transcribed from notes into Nahuatl text and (partially) translated into Spanish.⁶⁶

The idolatry cases I have used include one well-known case from the year 1629, mentioned above, and a series of other cases spanning from the mid-sixteenth century through the early seventeenth century. These cases show a concerted effort on the part particularly of Nahua commoners to continue worshipping fertility deities and other gods associated with daily survival. One should always be mindful of the cautions urged by Dennis Tedlock: in many cases the alleged idolaters only tell their interrogators what they think they want to hear.⁶⁷ The methodology I outline below and through the next two chapters suggests, however, that

the interactions between the Nahua commoner and his or her interrogator nevertheless yield some knowledge about the place and voice of the Nahua within the colonial institution.

Catholic religious texts, primarily sermons and confessional manuals, discuss a variety of ritual practices and all of the sexual activities that the Catholic Church deemed sinful. Here I have used texts produced in Mexico from the early sixteenth century through the middle of the seventeenth. The sermons that I use, primarily those produced by Sahagún, Andrés de Olmos, and other Franciscan friars, were written in Nahuatl to be used by friars and priests during services in indigenous communities. Franciscans, Dominicans, and secular clergy produced the confessional manuals used here. They were based on European models, but often had some changes specifically addressing the indigenous population. The manuals had parallel Nahuatl and Spanish columns.⁶⁸

Finally, I use some texts produced by Nahua intellectuals in the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth. These intellectuals varied in their affinities and their connections to Nahua communities. The most important for my purposes, don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin, wrote in Nahuatl and expressed a close connection with the Nahua altepetl (city-state) of Chalco.⁶⁹

Voice

My historical project seeks to uncover the voices of Nahua commoners, however refracted through the prism of the written text. If we read *only* the clerical documents, such as the reports of the priests and friars, sermons, and confessional manuals, or only notarial sources, such as criminal records and petitions—in *whatever* language—we would incorrectly believe that the sexual conquest succeeded. Tlazolteotl became reconfigured as a demon; sex became reconfigured as sin. But if we leave our analysis there, we forget that the quotidian experiences of Nahua commoners, the vast bulk of the indigenous population, involved neither priests nor courts. We fail to understand the nature of notarial creativity in a society dominated by oral tradition. And we never pursue the problematic inconsistencies of our concerned clerics.

Some modern scholars have said that the Nahuas engaged in a “moral dialogue” with priests, while others have asserted that the act of con-

fession destroyed the traditional sexual ideologies of Nahua peoples.⁷⁰ My work, while building on the scholarship of Louise Burkhart, Serge Gruzinski, Noemí Quezada, and Alfredo López Austin, alters these historiographical trajectories by showing that the Catholic priests could not assert such influence over the sexual beliefs of Nahua commoners.⁷¹ Hence, a more appropriate description of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sexual discourse, at least as it affected those Nahuas outside of a small and select group of intellectual elites trained by the Franciscan friars, would be a series of mutual monologues.

While some dialogue took place (as Burkhart shows), much of it was so misunderstood that the primary motor for change was not clerical discourse, but rather daily contact between Nahuas and people of the Hispanic world, who had their own popular views of religion (views that the Inquisition would find bordering on heresy).⁷² Moreover, as we will see, when clerics did discuss sex with Nahuas, they needed to use a language that Nahuas understood. Thus they used the language of *tlazolli* (trash), entering squarely within what I call the *tlazolli* complex, to warn Nahuas of the dangers of trash and dust; the Nahuas heard the terms the clerics used, and they interpreted those terms as parts of the *tlazolli* complex.

Most important with regard to my methodology in understanding commoner voice, filtered through the voices of the clerics, is the issue of translation.⁷³ Since I work with many sources in Nahuatl and Spanish, I focus on translation between an indigenous language and a European one. I particularly question the techniques the translators, often priests and notaries, used to render one social reality into another. I show ways in which translation, both in the sense of translating oral discourse into writing and translating Nahuatl into Spanish, was a fundamentally political act that altered the meaning of the original utterances.⁷⁴

In this book I provide a method that links sex to the broader cultural histories of the early modern world. I read the sources against each other such that we can envision the ways that a sixteenth-century Nahua commoner connects sexual discourse with his or her everyday experiences and material well-being. Thus, by analyzing the pictorial manuscripts, idolatry investigations, clerical literature, and notarial documents together, I complicate our understanding of subaltern voice, deal with the relationship between oral discourse and writing, and enter into the imaginary and material worlds of the Nahua commoner.

Tlazolli Theory

While I began this book by translating *tlazolli* as trash, already I find my own translation inadequate because the Nahuas in fact developed a complex set of meanings related to the term. The tlazolli complex links closely with the notion that while excess is necessary for the continuation of the community, ritual practitioners must always work to control the nature of the tlazolli or else the community will become infused with excess and disease. This is no place better represented than in Nahua and Spanish analyses of the *temazcal*, the steam bath. In figure 1, the old woman on the left stokes the fire as another woman cures the sick men on the right side of the image. The *temazcal* serves as a curing ground, a place in which one can remove filth from the body. Still, Nahuas during the colonial period also used the *temazcal* for other reasons, particularly to engage in sexual behaviors that had become illicit.

Tlazolteotl's image on the *temazcal* signified it as a structure that controlled the tlazolli, but it was only one of many places that served such a purpose: "In general, *tlazolli* consists of little bits and pieces of things, which might once have belonged somewhere but now, through processes of decay, deterioration, or digestion, have become formless and unconnected; these fragments are now scattered about, interfering with things that are new and tidy."⁷⁵ Burkhart, in dedicating an entire chapter of her book to the concept of tlazolli, suggests its central importance both to the Nahua moral universe and to the dialogue that took place between the Nahuas and the Catholic clerics. Clerics and scholars since the early sixteenth century—from the Franciscan friars Alonso de Molina and Bernardino de Sahagún, to early Nahua intellectuals (including the authors of the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*) and modern scholars of the Nahuas such as Miguel León-Portilla, Alfredo López Austin, Noemí Quezada, and Burkhart, as well as such transnational scholars as Eric Wolf—have all commented on what I call the tlazolli complex.⁷⁶

The trash, rubbish, and excrement that make up the tlazolli complex signified to the Nahuas a disruption to the cleanliness needed to function. This disruption was a necessary part of life, but it required care so that the trash did not take over.⁷⁷ Hence, as we will see in chapter 5, Nahuas viewed sweeping and cleaning as vital ritual activities. Importantly, traditional Nahua discourse and performance did not simply assert the negative aspects of tlazolli, despite the immediate connotations that Burkhart

alludes to in stating, “The term *tlazolli* covers a whole series of impurities used in moral discourse to connote negativity.”⁷⁸ Burkhart herself points out the liminal notions embedded in *tlazolli*: “The process of living inevitably brought one into contact with *tlazolli*. Maize grew from the mud, from the body of the tainted earth deity. One linked oneself with the earth by eating cultivated foods and also by acts of *tlalticpaccayotl*, ‘earthliness’—sexual activity. The souls of unweaned children free from these contaminations could go back up to the creator deity’s heaven; others were in effect claimed by the earth and had to go down into *mictlan* [the land of the dead, the underworld].”⁷⁹ “*Tlazolli*” did not simply signify vice, excess, or perversion, despite what the friars may have wished. Still, those very friars worked to use the *tlazolli* complex to instill in their Nahua parishioners concepts of sin and redemption. Indeed, the *tlazolli* complex resonated with Catholic clerics, who had their own discourse related to the filth of sin and the cleansing effects of baptism and other sacraments.⁸⁰

But we have no evidence that this clerical discourse had much of an effect in changing the views and actions of the bulk of the early Nahua population, in particular among the commoners. Rituals that took place in the seventeenth century retained much of the traditional character of the *tlazolli* complex, maintaining that from the fertile earth—itsself made up of *tlazolli*—emanated all life forces.⁸¹ Hence it would be simplistic to say that the Nahuas during the colonial period viewed *tlazolli* as a negative force to be overcome through confession and redemption. Still, it would be just as simplistic to suggest that coloniality had *no* effect on concepts of *tlazolli*. The clerics influenced the views of many nobles and some commoners, and daily contact between Nahuas and a variety of people of Spanish and African descent instilled in Nahua communities values not present before the conquest.⁸² The Nahua intellectuals who worked with Bernardino de Sahagún were instrumental in helping him argue that *tlazolli* signified abasement, and that *Tlazolteotl*, the goddess of *tlazolli*, represented sexual promiscuity and demonic influence.⁸³ Further, even for those Nahuas who preserved more traditional views of the *tlazolli* complex, “the friars’ interest in applying native moral discourse to their own purposes accounts for the preservation of some of this information.”⁸⁴ Coloniality thus had significant influence upon the *tlazolli* complex, but the complex itself exceeded the effects desired by the clerics.

Burkhart correctly focuses her discussion of tlazolli not on its “translation” as trash, but rather on two vital and more dynamic elements: first, the process of creating what I call a digested remainder, and second, the interference of that remainder with “things that are new and tidy.” In the first case, “tlazolli” signifies the excesses, including excrement, always produced in the living of life.⁸⁵ Just as one wishes to prevent these excesses from interfering with daily life activities, Nahuas wanted to prevent tlazolli from interfering with social formations. But, just as one knows or at least senses that elements such as excrement play a major role in an individual’s survival, Nahuas knew that tlazolli played a major role in the survival of society.⁸⁶ So when Nahuas discussed tlazolli, they did so not to eliminate all tlazolli from life but rather to control the placement of the undigested remainders: the forces that created tlazolli formed a necessary part of life and needed appropriate respect, but they could not and should not be unleashed in an uncontrolled manner into the community.

This social problem emanated from Burkhart’s second focal point for tlazolli, the interference with the new and tidy. While Burkhart’s implication of a division between the new and the old was something alien to the Nahua framework (in which the old always formed a part of the new, just as trash always formed a part of cleanliness), her understanding of the concept of interference is an important element in the tlazolli complex. In the Nahua universe, tlazolli always interfered with daily productivity. A commoner could never engage in his or her standard pursuits without regularly coming into contact with tlazolli. The commoner man, by farming the earth, contacted the tlazolli on a regular basis: the earth itself, the fertilizer used in conjunction with the planting, the dirt left on the harvested maize. The commoner woman, when in the household, came into contact with the tlazolli in her daily ritual of sweeping but also in her maintenance of the hearth, when she cleaned the dirt off the wood, and in her cooking activities. And all people, commoners and nobles, came into contact with excrement.

The interference of the tlazolli with an orderly life caused ritual activity: Nahua priests and political leaders put the rituals in place, and Nahua nobles and commoners performed the rituals, in order to assert some control over the tlazolli.⁸⁷ As all people came into contact with tlazolli, it asserted its necessary presence throughout all life, but not just as a nega-