

9 Unlearning the Aztec *cantares* (preliminaries to a postcolonial history)

---

Gary Tomlinson

212

Whatever else it might do for scholars nurtured in Eurocentric traditions, postcolonialism brings with it enforced, penetrating, and mystifying dialogue. It destabilizes once-solid models of subjectivity and objectivity, breaks down old orders of enclosed selves and separate others. It offers relationism, context, and parallax as means of self-definition and thus hybridizes one subject-situation with others. It is a locale of decentering strategies that travel, these days, under many names: Lyotard's paralogies, the fractal landscapes of Arjun Appadurai's transnational anthropology, Houston Baker's intertwining vernacular discourses, and Homi Bhabha's in-between spaces of enunciation, to rehearse a few.<sup>1</sup>

21 Something like hybridization inhabits our histories too. A postcolonial historiography pushes into the light of day the challenge of the encounter between historian and past subjectivities. It embraces as part of historical story-telling itself analysis of the negotiations extending between the present-day scrutinizer and the scrutinized past (a past accorded little bargaining power in an earlier historiography and referred to as the historian's "object"). It calls upon the historian to relinquish the notion of a pristine reconstruction of some past reality in favor of a hybrid construction forefronting today's strategies, intents, and desires as well as those of past others.

The move away from the goal of reconstruction is no simple matter, notwithstanding the uneasiness we feel these days at its recollections of earlier historicisms: of objective, scientific retrieval of the past and the Rankean "wie es eigentlich gewesen." The goal of reconstruction is endemic even in histories informed by post-structuralist thinking, histories now long after the "linguistic turn." It is endemic because it is necessary. What we do in thinking historically is in a fundamental way bound up in a quest for authentic knowledge of past actions and intents. To abandon utterly this quest would be to relinquish a developing ideology that has defined western historiography since at least the sixteenth century. This we have found difficult to do.

Still, a postcolonial approach to history complicates the reconstructive

urge by joining with it a newly permeable and vulnerable version of the historian's subjectivity projected onto the past. The resulting historical construction is concerned not only with past actors and actions but with why and how the historian makes them thus. It merges history, the study of the past, with historiography, the study of how we study the past. Yet the merger is shot through with productive tension: in emphasizing the meeting in dialogue of historian and historical subject it amplifies the dissonance between the pastness of the things we seek to understand and the presentness of our seeking to understand them. It magnifies the distance between our abiding self-concern and our fearful curiosity about others, opening a space for those others that we cannot fully inhabit. It is a history of the present that never relinquishes its faith in its ability to grasp a distant, other past but that is always undone or undermined by the otherness at its goal.

From this solid but unstable faith, this belief that affirms at once our comprehension and the stark, inaccessible otherness of what we comprehend, a new historical goal emerges: not to recreate a docile past "the way it really was" but to build a past that resists our intellectual attempts to occupy it even while it takes its shape from us - and, moreover, takes only the shape we give it. We build into our histories a keen responsiveness to the evidence of the historical traces we (for our own reasons) select. This responsiveness abides by our own, modern western ways of logical concatenation and sequencing, of causation and narration. It allows, in this abiding western modernity and in the particularity of the traces adduced only *this* specific story to be told. Yet we also build in our histories an overlay on this modernism that takes the form of the signs of the indelible resistance the traces of others offer to our own ways of knowing. We order those traces into a story, but at the same time we uncover in them a Derridean remainder that undoes the narrative and strikes sparks at the peripheries of our colonizing comprehension. The traces of others empower us to tell tales but do not in the process relinquish their own power; they manifest this power by undermining the tales they enable. In writing postcolonial histories we inscribe at every moment our confident mastery and the unbounded, uncanny ability of others to elude it.

Postcolonial historiography, then, is characterized by a dialogue of complementary comprehension and mystification, of knowledge at once full and thwarted. Yet in a postcolonial history of an overtly colonial encounter - a history of the encounters of Spaniards and Americans in the sixteenth century, to take the example I will be concerned with - this colloquy between historian and past other is not the only prominent dialogue. It is entangled with another one, the one between past actors

themselves, between conquerors and conquered, between colonizers and colonized.<sup>2</sup> In this dialogue, too, masterful knowledge of others and others' evasion of knowing mastery stand in productive and tense proximity. Here too the construction of others is at once controlled and elusive. Though this dialogue within the historian's dialogue is no doubt especially marked in a postcolonial history of dramatic encounters (Europeans and Native Americans, Europeans and Africans, etc.), it will also appear in other histories insofar as we can emphasize in them the innate dialogism of human communication. For this reason a postcolonial historiography might be said to be characteristically recursive its dialogism is compounded, operating along two primary axes, one from our present to an imagined past and another entirely within that past. The decentering, deconstructive potential of its dialogue is raised, so to speak, to the second power.<sup>3</sup>

The juxtaposition in our historical (and other) dialogues of comprehension and mystification, what we might call their constructive uncanniness, emerges repeatedly and with singular force from the space between speech and song. This space maps the distance between utterance marked as normal in a culture and utterance marked in any number of ways as "heightened," for want of a better metaphor. The distance seems to be recognized - if, again, in myriad ways - in all cultures, which is to say that all cultures seem to have discovered in their experiences of language the potential for a graded series of manners of utterance. The gradations typically include such hard-to-delimit things as plain speech, self-consciously formal, rhetorical, or ritual speech, incantation, chant, formalized shouts and cries, and full-fledged song. Worldwide, what we consider the nonspeech portion of this list is not very well served by our relatively recent and culturally limited coinage "music," which, if it includes much not found in most varieties of indigenous song, nevertheless excludes much marked off from many varieties of indigenous speech. But whatever we call heightened, nonspeech utterances, it is repeatedly clear that they make up some of the most captivating, challenging, and unsettling moments in our experiences of others. They are a chief locus for our mystification by others, a primary avatar of the dialogical uncanny. It is likewise clear, from many sources, that this was true for sixteenth-century Europeans in the Americas as well. In this essay I will attempt to give freer reign to such uncanniness than it has until now had by moving with certain Aztec songs along the two chief axes of postcolonial historiography.

Aztec song seems an ideal subject for such an attempt. In the first place, even though (as we will see) it has been weighed down with more

than its share of our own unexamined ideological baggage, its palpable, occasionally spectacular, foreignness begs us to look hard at the dialogue we enact with and through it. Moreover, the frankly colonial aspect of its surviving traces distances them in complex ways from the autochthonous reality they ostensibly reflect, highlighting the dialogue between colonizers and colonized. And, not least, all these traces are suffused with the deep uncanniness of others' singing.

The legacy of Aztec song is fragmentary, alienated, and alienating. It takes many forms: depictions of singing and instrumental accompaniment in both precontact and colonial picture-codices; preserved instruments now sitting mute in museum collections; more-or-less accepting, bemused, and confused reports of indigenous singing by Spanish friars and other colonizers; long and short testimonies on the functions of song and dance in indigenous ceremony both in Spanish and in alphabetized Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica and the lingua franca, insofar as one existed, of the Aztec dominion (chief among these are the testimonies in Bernardino de Sahagún's huge protoethnographic survey, the so-called *Florentine Codex*); and a substantial number of song texts transmitted in various manuscripts in alphabetized Nahuatl.

By any measure the most tantalizing document of this legacy is the manuscript entitled *Cantares mexicanos* or *Mexica Songs*, one section of a modest, late sixteenth-century miscellany now in the Biblioteca Nacional of Mexico City (MS 1628bis). It preserves the texts of ninety-one songs in alphabetized Nahuatl. The genesis of the manuscript is obscure, the dating of its contents warmly debated by Mexicanists. Some of its *cantares* clearly date from after the Spanish conquest; others may in some form antedate it; all probably reflect, if in ways difficult to gauge, traditions that reach back to prehispanic times.

The *cantares* have come to bear an extraordinary historiographical burden over the last sixty years or so, especially since the fundamental work on them of Angel María Garibay K.<sup>4</sup> They have been seen as important new evidence for an old interpretation of Mexican culture on the eve of the conquest. This interpretation proposes the existence of a noble, melancholic, stoic, and philosophic facet of Aztec society opposed to its warfare, human sacrifice, and cannibalism. Scholarly scrutiny of the *cantares* has immeasurably helped this interpretation to proliferate. It has encouraged our imagining of fifteenth-century poet-philosopher-rulers in Mexico musing on the ephemerality of mortal existence, rulers like Prince Tecayehuatzin of Huexotzinco, for example, or, signally, King Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco, likened in recent accounts to Alexander the Great, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and the psalm-singing King David. Some of the *cantares* have been advanced as the work of

Nezahualcoyotl and others like him. Such sage rulers, to quote a recent synopsis of the story by David Carrasco, "preserved honored traditions, produced and read the painted manuscripts, and developed refined metaphors and poems to probe the true foundations of human existence."<sup>5</sup>

Carrasco's refined metaphors are especially significant in the vision of Aztec culture fostered by the *cantares*. Already in the sixteenth century Spanish observers like Sahagún and Diego Durán called attention to the metaphorical nature, the difficulty, the obscurity, and the propensity to conceal idolatry of the indigenous songs they encountered. Garibay more than anyone else transformed this suspicion of native opacity and backsliding into a poetic virtue. He did so by universalizing the metaphors of the cantares to bring them in line with European poetic expectations (in language that recalls no one so much as the seventeenth-century theorist of metaphors Emanuele Tesauro): "The metaphor is the mother of all beauty. In essence it comes to be the nucleus of all poetry ... Nahuatl poems teem with [metaphors] ..." Garibay singled out a particular metaphorical technique that he found to be characteristic of Nahuatl discourse. This device, which he termed difrasismo or diphra<sup>s</sup>is, consists in "joining two metaphors which together yield the symbolic means of expressing a single thought."<sup>6</sup>

Foremost among the metaphors of the *cantares*, and sitting near the heart of the poetic-philosophic interpretation of Aztec culture, is an example of diphra<sup>s</sup>is. In *xochitl in cuicatl* runs its Nahuatl, meaning roughly "flower and song" and supposedly referring to poetry in particular and the poetic-philosophic mentality in general. For the most important and dedicated proponent of this interpretation of indigenous thought, Garibay's student Miguel León-Portilla, the sages - especially Nezahualcoyotl and his followers in Texcoco - captured in this metaphor a "poetic vision of the universe" that could gain and express "a view of ultimate reality." Their vision led them to question the cult of human sacrifice and to reject the "martial mysticism" of other elements in their society (especially the powerful rulers of Tenochtitlan). It brings them, for us, "near the profoundly human and universal concerns of the sages and philosophers of other times and places." In León-Portilla's writings and those of the many other authors who have followed his and Garibay's lead, *xochicuicatl* provides the perfect liberal humanism for the Aztec empire.<sup>7</sup>

Without prejudice to the achievements and complexity of Aztec society, without doubting the profound fascination it has worked on us, and without even raising the western myths of noble savagery that have always played a part in this fascination and that live on with particular

force in the humanistic interpretation, it may be said that the idea of an indigenous philosophy of *xochicuicatl* rests on very thin evidence. Indeed as much has already been said in a growing body of revisionist accounts of prehispanic and colonial Mexican society. Scholars like J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Louise Burkhart, and Serge Gruzinski have challenged analyses of the León-Portilla sort explicitly or implicitly, specifically or generally.<sup>8</sup> James Lockhart and Gordon Brotherston have doubted the ascriptions of particular *cantares* to precontact authors, problematized the notion of indigenous authorship, and questioned the reliability of the chief early source on Nezahualcoyotl's poetic tendencies, Ixtlilxochitl.<sup>9</sup> John Bierhorst has gone so far as to pronounce the whole equation of *xochicuicatl* with poetry an invention of Garibay with no earlier authority.<sup>10</sup>

All these criticisms of the poetic-philosophic interpretation are, I think, well taken. Yet the quality of the evidence at the hermeneutic level of analysis they embody is not my primary concern here. Instead I want to call attention to some ways the manner of preservation of the *cantares* has constrained our view of their nature, their expressive intent, and their makers. I want to scrutinize the way the manuscript's features have conspired with our own assumptions and presumptions to determine a part of our historical lives.

For the collective historical imagination set in motion by the *cantares* in the years since they became objects of serious study has surely been circumscribed by the brute fact of the manuscript's presence; this is true for the most part even of those revisionist scholars who have challenged León-Portilla's interpretation. *Cantares mexicanos* has appeared to us to be nothing less and nothing more than a book of poems. We have started from this seemingly unassailable premise. Yet the premise is not innocent. It carries with it many obvious and some not-so-obvious implications for our understanding and use of the manuscript. We read books; we transcribe and translate their contents; perhaps we scrutinize their physical features. As for poems, we fetishize them with a healthy dose of western aestheticism. We analyze their language, imagery, and form. We install them in canons of "literature" of one sort or another. From within such aesthetic canons we use them as evidence of the expressive aims of past authors and, more broadly, the emotional and intellectual texture of past cultures. Each of these activities has played its role in the construction of the *xochicuicatl* view of Aztec culture.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time the bookishness of the *Cantares mexicanos* has resisted other sorts of uses. The fundamental act of reading takes place within the network of our cultural assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge (a primarily visual process), the nature of language (a dual nature, spoken and written, starting from discrete, relatively little-chan-

ging words), its technology (an alphabet), and its relation to things in the world (a representative relation based on conventional, not natural, connections of words to things; two broad kinds of referentiality, literal and figurative). We tap this network every time we read; in unearthing it we recall Derrida's critique of logocentrism and begin to construct a genealogy of western regimens of reading. The other activities mentioned above pose more specific networks of constraint. Varied but compelling disciplinary stipulations are involved in criticism, poetic analysis, paleographical study, and contextual literary history. The limitations of translation, finally, are famous, its philosophical conundrums having stimulated much discussion in the "traduttore-traditore" vein. Yet even these limitations are usually viewed from within a relatively narrow conception of translation's transformative effects, one ill-equipped to address the yawning chasm between Indo-European and Nahuatl expression. (With regard to translating song texts like the *cantares* Gordon Brotherston's warning of 1972 holds true today: "The valences of words in lyrical Nahuatl, especially focal terms like 'xochitl,' are so different from those available in Indo-European grammatical patterns as to make translation a hatchet affair ...")<sup>12</sup> All these things together have compelled us to see the songs in a dim but warmly comforting western light.

Among the strategies for achieving a different view that suggest themselves I will outline two here; they are interrelated and conducive to broad refigurations of Aztec culture. First, we might scrutinize the nature of the scripted Nahuatl word itself. Second, we might ponder those elements of the *cantares* unsusceptible (or little susceptible) to written preservation, most importantly, for my present purposes, the features that distinguish them from speech, their "musical" or - the term I will adopt as a less constricting alternative - their "songish" features.

The written Nahuatl word of the early colonial period is an alienated object, suspended between two worlds and belonging fully to neither. It represents what was a signifying wisp in its unwritten indigenous form, a transiently formed air that was wrenched into a European regime soon after the conquest and preserved by its alphabetization according to the rules of Spanish orthography. From the Mexica viewpoint it must have seemed a familiar thing made radically foreign; every historian of early European encounters with Americans knows stories of indigenous wonder at "speaking books," at alphabetic writing and its apparent power to enable speech, song, and precise recall. From our own perspective and that of the Spanish colonizers it might be thought to be the epitome of a distant and unknown object masquerading as something familiar.

What is entailed in reading such a word as a trace of indigenous culture? Clearly something different from what is involved in reading Milton's or the *National Enquirer's* or even a trouvère's words as traces of their respective authors and cultures. In reading alphabetized Nahuatl of the early colonial period the space between what we read and its imagined source is qualitatively different from such space in our more usual readings. For the *cantares* do not merely reflect in writing an oral practice, do not (more specifically) crystallize an oral tradition that lived in the midst of a larger context that included notions of fixed authorship and alphabetic writing. They do two things whose implications are less ponderable for us than this. They endow Aztec voices with a certain discrete and stable western subjectivity that has no necessary point of reference within indigenous discourses and ontologies, prehispanic or colonial; that is, they fix by means of the text the authority Foucault famously called an "author-function." (I will return to this point later.) And they inscribe oral practices of a people for whom alphabetic writing was not conceivable.

Writing always effects an alteration of spoken or sung language, of course, a change we tend to imagine as a fixing, solidification, or crystallization. However, in the instance of the *cantares* and other early Nahuatl documents, this solidification is of a sort that could not have been foreseen in prehispanic culture. It granted to the language an independent material volume of a sort that must have been utterly foreign to indigenous linguistic usage. The inconceivability of this particular volume in the Nahua mind – or, put positively, the existence there of other valences between utterance, inscription, and the world – challenges at a deep level expectations of linguistic commonality that are basic to our usual modes of historical understanding.

In saying this I do not intend to endorse general analyses of the differences between oral and written cultures like those of Walter J. Ong and Jack Goody.<sup>13</sup> These, notwithstanding the many insights they yield into relations of speech and writing and perceptions of the world involved in each, are too sweeping, too near to older teleological views, too prone to structuralist reification, and too distant from specific language practices in particular cultural situations to be of much help here.<sup>14</sup> Instead I wish to locate in the meeting of Mexica and Spaniards the borderlines of different manners of linguistic registering of the world and to begin to chart the distances between territories in the larger realm Derrida called *écriture*. When Nahuatl was written in Latin characters its ties to a whole view of reality were subtly undone. It was, so to speak, coerced from one inscriptive territory toward another.

The ties that were thus loosened seem once to have brought prehis-

panic Nahuatl into intimate contact with the material world. What we might imagine as its ephemeral, immaterial orality, that is, probably seemed to the indigenous speaker something more like a voluminous intersection of numerous worldly realms in the structures of Mexica life. Prehispanic Nahuatl, as Serge Gruzinski has put it, "in addition to expressing itself through oral speech and the written word, ... adopted an architectural, iconographical, choreographical, liturgical, musical, ornamental vocabulary that makes doubtful and inevitably partial any attempt at exegesis in our writing."<sup>15</sup> From this multiplicity of reference, this contact with many realms of reality, indigenous Nahuatl gained its own material semantics distinct from the meaningfulness of European written languages. So we must try to conceive Nahuatl in terms that are for us paradoxical. What seems to us its ephemerality as an unalphabetized language must be understood within the larger context of its worldly materiality, its intimate bond to structures external to speech.

Such worldly contact is evident at the level of fundamental grammatical formations. Nahuatl is an agglutinating language, laden with prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, building up lengthy compound words and stringing them together in various ways to put across messages of syntactic or conceptual complexity. Yet even the most basic kernels of this complex grammar, the units that western linguists present for pedagogical convenience as their stems or roots, are not absolute or abstract in the sense we are accustomed to from our experience of Indo-European languages. They do not have the semantic generality and neutrality we expect in Indo-European roots. Instead of infinitives, the simplest form of a Nahuatl predicative word already assumes a substantive: *cuica* means not "to sing" but instead "he/she/it sings." Instead of absolute nouns, the simplest form of a substantive includes a predicate: *cuicatl* means not simply "song" but something closer to "it/there is a song." The most basic words are, in J. Richard Andrews's term, "sentence-words," irreducible to absolute grammatical abstraction, and he warns us against eliding this difference in our necessarily westernizing translations.<sup>16</sup> Before European contact such irreducibility must have assured that every Nahuatl utterance reached outward to an external context. It reflects a smaller distinction between the linguistic denotation of things and the actions involving them than we habitually presume and binds both tightly to the world around. It marks a material volume fixed in the language and the perceptual modes underlying it.

The solidification brought about by alphabetic writing fostered in Nahuatl a different sort of materiality than this, one at odds with its autochthonous connectedness to things. It created a materiality of a sort that was at that moment consolidating its already substantial hold on the

European mind and closing out other possibilities: the materiality of an independent, representative linguistic system running parallel to the things it denotes. This kind of materiality distanced Nahuatl from the world. In its written form the language came quickly to seem more a means of representing a reality separate from it (like Latin or Spanish) than a constituent part of reality. The precontact valences pertaining between words and things were altered, twisted toward modern western valences.<sup>17</sup>

Of course Mesoamerican cultures had their own systems of writing. These, as Brotherston has warned, must not be minimized either in some teleology that recognizes only alphabetic writing as effective or in the general logocentric suspicion of writing (or rather transcendental exaltation of speech) to which Derrida has drawn our attention.<sup>18</sup> The complex pictographic systems of Mesoamerican writing, preserved on various monuments, in the few prehispanic painted codices that remain, and, in altered forms, in many colonial documents, seem only to underscore the (for us) paradoxical material immateriality of indigenous Nahuatl. They inscribe the world in a palpable, substantial medium not itself distanced from the things it encodes. Gruzinski has written eloquently of the ritual substance the painted codices assumed in prehispanic times and of the rupture of their bond to the broader world that occurred when, after the conquest, their contents were alphabetized. The transference from painting to writing was in his view precisely a loss of the materiality that bound the codices both to the world and to the ritual speech and song they recorded.<sup>19</sup>

Inga Clendinnen pursues a slightly different line of thought. She describes the indigenous view as one in which the experienced world was made up of ephemeral images of a somewhat more stable and enduring sacred reality behind and beyond them. Thus material things in the world – butterflies, quetzal plumes, obsidian knives, *tamales* – were already images of a more real reality; they had the same ontological status as pictures in the codices. “Our art–nature distinction,” Clendinnen writes, “lapses where nothing is ‘natural’”; in such a view “our world is not the measure for the ‘real,’ but a fiction, . . . its creatures and things called into transitory existence through the painting and the singing of an elaborate pictorial text.”<sup>20</sup>

This formulation smacks of a familiar Platonism – Clendinnen even calls the perceived Mexica world “a representation composed out of representations” (214) – and may seem suspect as an interpretation of a Mesoamerican mentality. However, I believe there are important notions lurking in it, especially the ideas of the equivalent constitutive powers of painting and singing and of the absence in indigenous perceptions of the

art-nature dichotomy that has served as the basis for western aestheticism. (Oddly, Clendinnen does not pursue very far the implications of this latter notion; it comes at the beginning of a chapter on Aztec "aesthetics.") We may rescue these ideas and alienate Clendinnen's formulation from its Platonic associations with two related qualifications. First, we might insist on the palpable and substantial, not ephemeral, constructive powers of indigenous singing and painting. Clendinnen herself acknowledges (if she does not lengthily explore) the substantiality of Mexica song when she speaks of native "worlds sung into existence" (349).

Second, more broadly, we might note that Clendinnen's idea of a fictive, made world need not entail its immateriality but could just as easily, in the absence of Platonic ontologies, suggest the opposite. That is, we might see the whole indigenous world – godly and human realms, pictures, words – as pervasively materialized. This would shift Clendinnen's dichotomy of mundane ephemerality versus supramundane solidity toward a fully material, fully voluminous, and (by the way) fully sacred dichotomy somewhat like that envisioned by Brotherston: a dichotomy between material presence and (material) absence, between palpable fulness and privation, between "precious tactile splendour and emptiness."<sup>21</sup> Such a shift would have the advantage of distancing us from the suspiciously familiar, nostalgic, and melancholic version of ephemerality that has, as I noted before, played a large role in interpretations of the *cantares*. It would also seem to be warranted even in explicitly sacred indigenous ceremonies, with their emphasis on *ixiptlayotl*, the incarnation (not "impersonation" or "representation," as it is often described) of deities by chosen humans.<sup>22</sup>

At any rate, whatever the material status of pictures and things and sacred truths, Clendinnen suggests that the relation of pictures and things to one another was intimate in Aztec perceptions. The materiality of quetzal plumes and the materiality of pictographic glyphs were equivalent. This equivalence once more conflates the distance between language and things. It makes the glyphs presentations rather than representations of "real" things. Glyphic writing did not set itself apart from the world it presented but rather was absorbed back into it. Its syntax was the syntax of things, not a separate system by which things might be represented.<sup>23</sup>

In this integrated place in the world, this location in the midst of material entities, glyphic writing resembled spoken Nahuatl. This is true of all three sorts of glyphs Mesoamericanists customarily distinguish: iconographic, depicting persons or objects (for example a ruler, palace, or temple); ideographic, depicting concepts or ideas (a volute coming out

of a mouth to connote speech); and phonetic (a glyph for water, "atl," to signify the sound *a*, a picture of a bean, "etl," to signify *e*). It is particularly worth lingering over the case of phonetic glyphs, since scholars have most aggressively assimilated these to western forms of writing. At least by the early colonial period (their prehispanic provenance is unclear) these glyphs functioned in a rebus-like manner, the sounds of the words for things depicted adding up to the desired names of places and persons. In the most teleological view they have sometimes been seen as the first step in a progress that would have led inexorably, even in the absence of European contact, toward western alphabetic abstraction. Gruzinski has rightly cautioned against such Whiggishness.<sup>24</sup> In avoiding it we should note at least one crucial distinction between indigenous phonetic glyphs and European phonemes: the glyphs never relinquish their bond to things in the world. They convey the sound of the word for the thing they depict - water, beans, and so forth - and in doing so they bind the person or place they name to the material entity whose sound-essence they borrow. They are not abstract and unworldly in the manner of the phonemes of Indo-European languages, and in this they enhance rather than undermine the material union of language and the world.

There is every reason to believe that this unity of language and the world and the material immateriality of spoken words embraced also sung words and accompanying sounds. This brings me to my second strategy for loosening the conceptual constraints imposed by the manuscript of the *cantares*: a consideration of the elements that set them apart from speech and written poetry, what I have called their songish elements.

Other than their many selfconscious references to singing, accompanimental instruments, and so forth and some enigmatic sequences of syllables that seem to record percussion cadences for the primary Aztec drums, the *huehueltl* and *teponaztli*, the *cantares* do not inscribe their songish traits. In this circumstance discussion of these traits is, to say the least, difficult. In the face of such inscrutability many interpretations of the *cantares* have chosen simply to leave "musical" matters to one side with only the most peripheral mention. Other accounts have dwelled on the "musical" aspects of the *cantares* separately from their "poetic" features and in general fashion, amassing colonial descriptions of indigenous singing, information on Aztec musical instruments, and so forth in hope of shedding light on performances of such "poems." Some few accounts, finally, have attempted specific interpretations of the percussion cadences - interpretations that, in the absence of much

evidence apart from the cadences themselves, range from informed speculation to extravagant historical fantasy and bring little insight to the relations of sung words and percussive accompaniment.<sup>25</sup>

All these treatments, it seems to me, miss a very basic aspect of the *cantares*. They approach these song texts as if "music" and "poetry" are in some way distinct and distinguishable in them. Yet the distinction emerges only as an artifact of the Europeanization of the *cantares* – that is, of the alphabetization and inscription that pries them apart from their sung delivery. This process encourages us to comprehend the *cantares* within a specifically European musicopoetic ideology that we have little reason to think should be relevant. It sets up a hierarchy of poetic words and distinct music, with words the primary means of signification and music only a feebly signifying conveyance for them.<sup>26</sup>

In this treatment of the *cantares* the European-style sovereignty of words as independent, representative entities is not challenged. Therefore the absence of their delivery as song with instrumental accompaniment becomes a superficial loss; we can translate and read the songs and analyze their content with scant attention to their songish features and still reassure ourselves that we possess everything essential. The temptation of such reassurance is great. Even Gruzinski, so perceptive on the nature of indigenous language and the differences between painted and alphabetic transmission, sometimes succumbs to it with only slight resistance. In *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*, for example, he contrasts the *cantares* with pictographic expressions because the *cantares* were "easily fixed" in alphabetic writing with only "a crystallization and a Christianization of the oral tradition" as the result (77). It is as if the crystallization were not a fundamental metamorphosis, as if it did not alter the significance of the *cantares* inevitably and at every point. Here again the nonsongish, western materiality of the *Cantares mexicanos*, its palpable presence as a book of poems, limits our hearing, leading us to push the specifically indigenous sung materiality of its contents to the edges of our thought.

Elsewhere Gruzinski voices a different position, one closer to the subtlety of his analysis of pictography. He suggests the profound mutation involved in the alphabetic crystallization of Nahuatl: "The reduction to alphabetic writing leads one to believe that the medium . . . is simply the vehicle of the idea of which it is in fact an integral part, from which it is so indissociable as indeed to be the idea."<sup>27</sup> To view the *cantares* in a modern western poetic guise, apart from their songish nature, does not merely render them less vividly communicative than they once were. It brings about more basic changes. It places them in a paradigm of linguistic significance, a particular vision of the relations of words, music,

and the world, that is entirely distant from them. It shifts them, once again, into a foreign province of the realm of *écriture*. It insists upon their ability to speak with unfamiliar accents even while aggressively familiarizing them, even in the absence of singing and instrumental accompaniment (not to mention dance, ritual circumstances, etc.). In doing so it robs them of a chief source of their deep, uncanny otherness and alters dramatically their meanings. To enable the *cantares* to speak in a manner less familiar to us we should seek the conflation suggested by Gruzinski of their medium and their significance – elements that it may only be a western habit, after all, to separate.

In restoring to these songs a foreign voice we should seek also, more broadly, the conflation of language and the world implied in Clendinnen's view of the pictographic codices. Where there is no space between pictures or words and things in the world, neither can there be any separable ontological niche for sung words and their accompanying sounds. These then take a position alongside pictures, words, and material objects. Sung words and the things that came along with them in the Mexica world – the introductory finger-whistling; the deep intonations of the *huehuetl*; the resonant wooden thong of the *teponaztli*; perhaps the rhythmic clatter of rattles, the scratchy whisper of rasps, the wail of conch trumpets; the synchronized kinetics of dance; the torchlit incandescence of jeweled, plumed, flowered, and painted costume – all these things that we insist on setting apart as “music” or in some other category were as fully engaged in immanent material reality as words and pictures, as fully pregnant with sacred truths as any other material things.

Prehispanic cultures have left suggestive traces of the unity of their songs with the world. These are the elaborate volutes extending from the mouths of singing deities pictured in some of the codices. Figure 9.1 reproduces a famous example from the Codex Borbonicus, most likely of Mexica origin from around the time of the conquest.

The interconnected, integrated world-conception of indigenous culture – its conflating force, seen from a European perspective – operates at many levels in this image. First is the contiguity of speech and song. The volute in Figure 9.1 is only a more elaborate version of the speech volutes found in the Borbonicus and other sources. The contrast of plain and ornate volutes seems to convey the differing gradations of formality in verbal utterance I discussed above. However, it does not betoken any simple or rigorous distinction of song and speech since, in the first place, the ornate volutes seem to have been used in some cases to depict rhetorically heightened speech and the plain volutes to depict song and since, in the second place, the complex formality (and even modest tonal

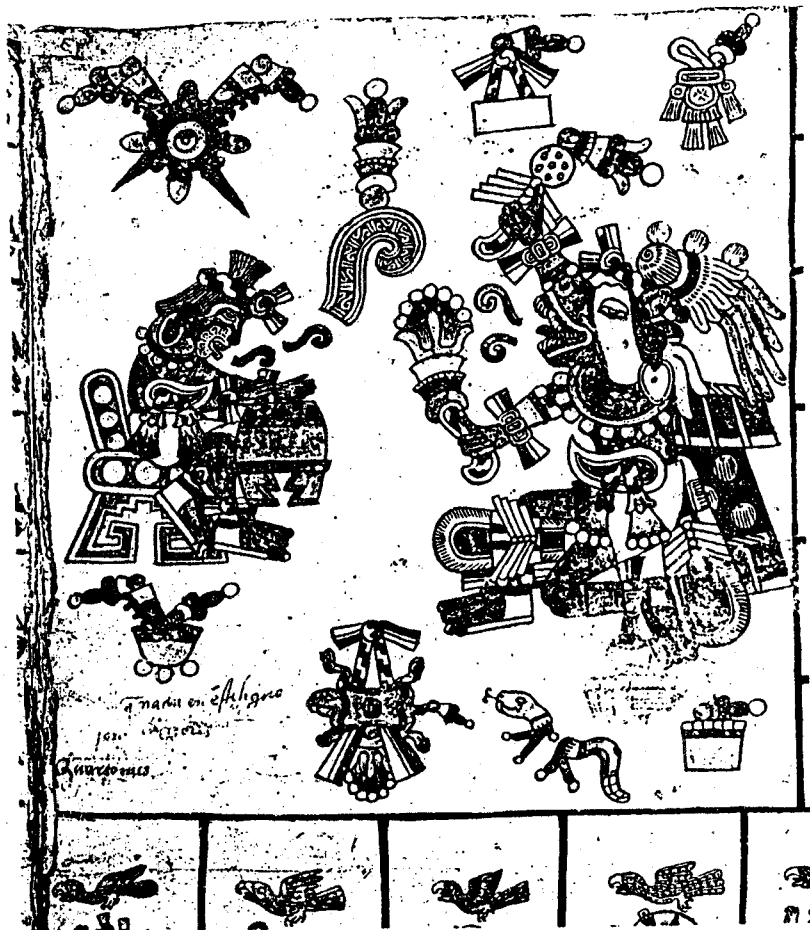


Figure 9.1 Codex Borbonicus, p. 4, detail.

elements) of elite spoken Nahuatl probably narrowed the distance between speech, formal speech, and song all told. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the plain and ornate volutes expressed the unbroken spectrum inhabited by both speech and song at the same time as they registered in various ways graded differences along it.

A second integration evident in the song volutes is the union of song and paint. The paint in the codices was, as I have argued along with Gruzinski, a solid, voluminous presence binding the glyphs to the material things they depicted. It was the medium through which the

glyphs took on a materiality equivalent to things outside the codices, through which they came to be presentations rather than representations of the world. The plain and ornate volutes drew song (and speech) into this loop of equivalent substances. From our perspective they seem to materialize song, conflating it with painted substance in the encoding of the world. From the indigenous perspective they probably affirmed a self-evident propinquity of the materialities of paint and song.

In doing so they seem also to have affirmed the material linkage of song to other things that can appear in paint. The third connection evident in the ornate volutes is a particular case of this linkage: they joined song with flowers. In fact the ornate volutes often include indigenous images of flowers; iconographers among students of Mesoamerica have identified particular species thus depicted. The ornate volutes presented speech blossoming. They connected song to another of the material substances basic to Mexica ritual.

The flowers in the volutes may even have had a quite specific ritual significance – and this indicates a fourth material union expressed in the song glyphs. Abraham Cáceres has argued that the flower atop the volute in figure 9.1 is the *heimia salicifolia*, *xonecuilli* in one of its Nahuatl names, one of a number of hallucinogenic plants employed in Mexica ritual to aid the priests in their shamanic contacts with sacred realms.<sup>28</sup> This interpretation is in some of its particulars more than a little speculative, to be sure, but the identification of *xonecuilli* in the song glyph seems well founded. It hints at a sacred reality immanent in the worldly materiality of the glyph. It suggests a final, sweeping embrace that might have operated in this volute, a hallucinogenic embrace of song, flower, and paint as avatars of sacred truths.

The joining of flower and song in painted volutes can be interpreted, then, as a powerful manifestation of the integrated, materialized indigenous world. Yet it also anticipates precisely the “flower-and-song,” *xochicuicall* imagery of the *cantares*, and it might seem to lead us back toward León-Portilla’s humanistic interpretation of Aztec culture. So it does, for example, in Cáceres’s work.

Instead, I think, it turns this interpretation on its head: rather than confirming it, it has the effect of denying altogether a place for León-Portilla’s metaphorical play in indigenous sensibilities. The idea that flower and song could be a metaphor for poetry and for a wider poetic philosophy depends on the perception of flowers and song as distinct, disjunct realms of reality. In a manner basic to all metaphor, that is, it requires an *a priori* separation of things that may then be joined. Yet there is little evidence of such separations in the prehispanic Mexica mentality. They seem to be so many more ghosts of European habits of

thought. Instead of disjunction, what we sense in Aztec thought is connection: not a seamless merger of all things into all other things, to be sure - this would negate all difference and with it all perception - but rather a circumscribing of the sorts of differences westerners habitually perceive, within a stricter-than-western integration of things. Our effort should not be to divide Aztec flowers from Aztec song so we can put them together again in a metaphorical emblem. It should be to see, however hazily, a perception of the world in which flower and song were always already connected; in which flower was in contact with song and therefore able to present it in some aspect and song adjacent to flower and likewise able to present it; in which the question of the connections of parts to a whole stood in place of the question of relating unrelated things. Our effort, in short, should be to see a culture not of metaphors but of metonymies. These, not metaphors, might be the useful tools for us to understand a material world seen as a varied, complex, but nonetheless closely integrated whole.

This view pushes us to a reconsideration of Garibay's notion of *difrasismo*. It is a metaphorical notion that needs to be remade in antimetaphorical terms of proximity, participation, and the partial habitation of one thing in another: not *difrasismo* so much as a redoubled *monofrasismo* of a sort we do not easily comprehend. Likewise, and more generally, the whole European discovery of complex metaphors at the heart of Nahuatl discourse, a discovery dating back to earliest colonial times, as I have noted, needs to be questioned. More generally still, the metaphorical foundation of the *xochicuicatl* interpretation of the *cantares* and of Aztec thought as a whole needs to be reimagined. How do the juxtapositions of different (to us, sometimes, distant) objects in these songs function? What is their relation to the world when they are conceived as confirmations of perceived affinities rather than as poetic images spanning distance in unexpected ways? How then do we rethink the world they reflect?

Among writers on Aztec culture Clendinnen comes closest to dissolving western categories that yield metaphors. "The puzzle," she writes,

is to know when [the Mexica] were speaking, as we would say, "merely" metaphorically, and when they were speaking literally, simply describing the world as they knew it to be. In certain tropes, as when maize is invoked as human flesh, we casually take the linked concepts to be so widely separated that we assume we are dealing with metaphor and the cognitive *frisson* of overleaping difference. Then comes the jolting recognition that the Mexica might well have been stating a perceptually unobvious but unremarkable truth: maize was flesh.

Here our parsing of the world is, for a moment, effectively challenged. But still Clendinnen holds out the possibility that the Mexica perceived a

duality of literal and figurative relations between language and the world. Still she assumes that the Mexica "lived by" metaphors: "On other occasions," she continues, "... they might well have been 'speaking metaphorically.' In a differently conceptualized world concepts are differently distributed. If we want to know the metaphors our subjects lived by, we need first to know how language scanned actuality."<sup>29</sup>

I would push farther Clendinnen's insights. It seems likely that the duality of literal and figurative language is, all told, a western importation to the Mexica mentality; that the indigenous construction of the world connected things to other things in a network of extraordinary, more-than-western complexity and intimacy; that the expression of one thing in another was, therefore, a real connection - a metonymic one, again, involving the interplay of adjoining parts of a whole; and that the surmounting of distance and difference basic to metaphorical understandings of the world was simply not an issue.<sup>30</sup>

If this carries Clendinnen's view of indigenous metaphor farther than she might take it, it nonetheless affirms her most general thesis about the place of the individual in precontact Mexica culture. Here I return, finally, to the caveat I broached above about the western authorial subjectivity we project onto a text like the *Cantares mexicanos*. Clendinnen argues that the individual subject was a "highly vulnerable social construct" in Mexica life, "made or unmade through a series of public acts." In a manner foreign to emerging Early Modern subjectivities in Europe, the Mexica self was permeable, opening out to fortifying, terrifying, sustaining, and destructive sacred powers and defined by its changing relations to them embodied in ritual. This view of the self originated in conjunction with an eschatology widely dispersed through Mesoamerica that involved a cyclic world order and periodic destructions of the cosmos. The Mexica harped with particular insistence on this eschatology; though they lived in relative abundance, as Clendinnen says, "they represented themselves as ... toiling along a windswept ridge, an abyss on either hand."<sup>31</sup> The fluid Mexica view of individual subjectivity is apparent also in the (to us) vague borders of selfhood in the complex Aztec pantheon, where a deity seemingly distinct and individual at one moment can reemerge as a single aspect of a different deity at another. It is also evident in the permeable borders between sacred and human selves in Aztec ritual, where chosen humans, as I remarked before, became this god or that.<sup>32</sup>

The integrated, metonymic construction of Mexica perceptions I have advocated here sits well with this notion of subjectivity. The permeable boundaries of Mexica selfhood echo and redouble the operative adjacencies at the edges of all things. The self takes its place in the numberless

proximities that allow the connections I outlined before among song, flower, paint, words, and world. The "eclipse of subjectivity" Clendinnen finds at crucial moments of Mexica life, the "deep cultural predilection" she perceives among the Mexica "for seeking the sacred through the extinction of self,"<sup>33</sup> is the most basic ritual confirmation of the participation of human flesh and life-force in a cosmos of contact and affinity. It might therefore better be called an expansion or unfolding or dilation of the self than its extinction or eclipse. Mexica woman and Mexica man opened out at every point – just like maize, *teponaztli*, and glyph – to the material world around them.

From this vantage point, finally, we may see clearly some implications of Mesoamerican studies for a postcolonial historiography. The unlearning of the *cantares* I've tried to set in motion here suggests that we need to allow our historical constructions more latitude to reconstruct us, that we need to empower their uncanny otherness. Or, in terms that Myra Jehlen has recently developed, that we need to curtail our authority as historians in the same way we have been willing for some time to curtail the authority of the European colonizers whose accounts we use.<sup>34</sup> This undermining of mastery would then operate on both the axes of postcolonial historiography I discerned at the outset: on the axis between historian and past others as well as on the axis between others within the past. The general problem plaguing even the most enlightened Aztec studies is that their resistance to this curtailment of authority remains largely unspoken and is not made a manifest aspect of a dialogical history. (Note that I do not suggest the possibility of a history without such resistance, only the need for our innate resistance to become part of the stuff we contemplate in our histories.)

The Mexica view of the world is the perfect postcolonial "object" of study because it does something all human "objects" do but in a more radical way: it talks back, remaking itself as speaking subject even as we try to pin it down. Moreover, it talks in a tongue whose foreignness dramatically dismantles the matrices of our emerging understanding. In doing so it effectively denies us the power ever to grasp it fully, to represent completely its otherness.<sup>35</sup> It also defamiliarizes the ways we filter its foreignness through our most basic sorts of categorical grids, our most fundamental choices in dividing up and ordering the external reality that impinges on us. If we could begin to see, hear, and imagine the *cantares* in a way that promotes their reshaping of these conceptual categories, then unlearning the *cantares* might become part of a more general process of unlearning ourselves.

The constraints I've pointed out clustered around the *cantares* consti-

tute, after all, nothing other than what James Clifford has called an "ethnographic allegory," an encompassing narrative we tell ourselves in order to bring near the others we encounter. Our effort should not be to escape such allegories – impossible in any case, as Clifford notes – but to gauge carefully their force and thus, as Clifford says, to "take responsibility for our ... constructions of others and of ourselves through others." In the process we might enable others to bring *us* near, to exercise a power in their dialogue with us that we habitually arrogate to ourselves. In the process, as Clifford puts it, we might "open ... ourselves to different histories."<sup>36</sup>

In recent Mesoamerican studies perhaps the most widely read failure to see other histories is Tzvetan Todorov's interpretation of the Spanish colonization of Mexico, *The Conquest of America*. The book has been criticized, more or less vehemently, from many quarters. Clendinnen, for example, has noted how Todorov reaffirms the outlines of the conquest narrative put in place by Prescott, a century and a half ago. Stephen Greenblatt, in his book *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, has rejected Todorov's central thesis that the Europeans' possession of writing, what Samuel Purchas called their "literall advantage," was the crucial element of an epistemological flexibility that enabled them to triumph over the Mexica. Brotherston has spoken more plainly, ridiculing Todorov's depiction of "native Americans ... as illiterate and therefore mindless, and in any case incapable of recording and reflecting upon their own history for themselves." And Deborah Root has heatedly and lengthily catalogued the narrative strategies Todorov uses that coerce indigenous materials into western molds.<sup>37</sup>

From my perspective Todorov's difficulties manifest just the kind of epistemological straightjacket involved in the misconstrual of the *cantares*. Caught in one of the most pervasive western ethnographic allegories, the allegory of the alphabet and its unsurpassed capability for flexible representation, he cannot see indigenous traces as revealing a different construction of the world abundantly empowered in its own right. He cannot construct a *pictographic* advantage but is bound to see only a crippling *pictographic* limitation. The crucial difference between European and Aztec languages, I have suggested here, might have to do not with the flexibilities of their graphic versions to adapt to changing contingencies but rather with their differing immersions in the world. The dynamics of the Spanish defeat of Tenochtitlan would then need to be understood not from a perspective that automatically aligns greater efficacy with one of these immersions, but from a multivalent vantage point that struggles, harder than Todorov, to recognize the differing efficacies of each. (Of the powerful efficacy of Aztec discourse and

practice, at any rate, there can be no question; they had subjugated wide reaches of the Central American subcontinent in the century before Cortés's landing.) Todorov's version of the conquest embodies a colonizing, controlling, and finally silencing of indigenous voices rather than a postcolonial revision of ourselves in response to their accents.<sup>38</sup>

More subtly, Greenblatt also demonstrates the difficulty we have in curtailing our historiographic authority. To be sure, *Marvelous Possessions* is, unlike *The Conquest of America*, a book mainly about European views, and traveling this narrowed path it avoids many pitfalls that brought low Todorov, Prescott, and others like them. Greenblatt sets himself to analyze European ideas of the New World, their complexities and their limitations, and he does so brilliantly. Yet he cannot evade indigenous voices altogether, and when faced with them he opts for a cautious approach. He writes: "The responses of the natives to the fatal advent of the Europeans survive only in the most fragmentary and problematical form, . . . only through the mediation of those Europeans who . . . saw fit to register [them]." Such mediation so transforms the indigenous perspective that it comes close to obliterating it: "The few textual traces of Indian responses to the Europeans in the earliest years of contact are precious, but principally because they provide unusually candid and revealing access to the Europeans' own selfconceptions."<sup>39</sup>

There is no question that the traces we have of indigenous societies are mediated through European technologies, histories, and desires. But this mediation does not simply erase their autochthonous features. Traces like the *cantares*, the *Codex Borbonicus*, or Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* could not have taken the shapes they did without the participation of native voices, after all, whatever the European voices that clamor alongside them. Rather than compromising hopelessly their usefulness for an understanding of indigenous perceptions, the multicultural mediation involved in such sources might draw our attention to itself as the locus of a revised historiography, as the Archimedean point from which our constructions of others and ourselves proceed. Greenblatt raises the complex issues found along my second axis of postcolonial historiography, the axis extending in the past between colonizers and colonized, only to cancel in his caution one of its poles. He ignores the uncanny otherness of indigenous accents rather than engaging with it.

Greenblatt's caution is motivated by that residual yearning to hear clear and pure others I described before. "I catch myself constantly straining to read into the European traces an account of what the American natives were 'really' like," he writes, "but I have resisted as much as I can the temptation to speak for or about the native cultures as if the mediation of European representations were an incidental con-

sideration, easily corrected for."<sup>40</sup> Here the impossibility of authentic reconstruction does not lead into the thickets of dialogical history. Instead, ironically, it obscures our responsibility to converse at all.

Postcolonial historiography (and Greenblatt's own histories, when it comes to the European voices he mostly attends to) takes fuller account than this of our inability to hear others, near or far, speak to us with a pure voice. It places at the heart of our historical methods the pervasive hybridity of our encounters, colonial or otherwise – their messy inter-subjectivity; their habitation of a foggy, dialogical, and essentially linguistic middle-ground between us and them, me and you; their distortion by the static of transmission, their coercion by the *a priori* presence of one or another linguistic matrix, and their bafflement by mystifying difference. In such a history Mexica, voices will speak to us anew. They will be heard, paradoxically, to be no different in the nature of their colloquy with us than the most familiar western voices, whatever the vast differences in the things they say. The perfection of Mexica subjects as postcolonial subjects resides, then, in this: that they confront us so dramatically with the vacillation, endemic to all our communicative acts, between distance and familiarity.

820  
1 hour 8

## NOTES

- 1 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984); Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2 (1990), 1–24, and "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, 1991), pp. 191–210; Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1984); and Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen, eds., *Questions of Third Cinema* (London, 1989), pp. 111–32.
- 2 In an important statement of 1979 on ethnohistorical method Dennis Tedlock lamented our tendency to ignore this dialogue in our pursuit of "truly aboriginal" views; see *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 333–4. The tendency has been redressed in the many recent studies that have taken the interactions of colonizers and colonized as their subject. In Latin American scholarship three such studies of special importance are Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule* (Princeton, 1984); Serge Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l'imaginaire: sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988); and Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, 1991). A monumental new contribution along these lines, which reached me too late for consideration here, is James Lockhart's *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and*

*Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, 1992).

- 3 Or even to the third, as we begin to make dialogues in present-day scholarly and broader communities an integral part of our histories. My sketch of postcolonial historiography remains a wholesale simplification since it does not address such dialogues, which are couched in terms at once ideological (political, disciplinary, etc.) and emotional. Neither does it address the multiplicity of dialogue within each of my general axes, nor the complexity of interaction between them.
- 4 The manuscript first came to broad scholarly attention in the late nineteenth century, with Daniel Brinton translating some of the songs into English in 1890 (*Ancient Nahuatl Poetry*, Philadelphia) and Antonio Peñafiel issuing a photographic facsimile in 1904 (*Cantares en idioma mexicano*, Mexico). But it was not until the efforts of Leonhard Schultze Jena (*Alt-Aztekische Gesänge*, Stuttgart, 1957) and Garibay (*Poesía náhuatl*, 3 vols., Mexico, 1964–8) that substantial portions of the collection were translated (into German and Spanish respectively). Garibay's interpretation of the *cantares* is embodied chiefly in his *Historia de la literatura náhuatl* (2 vols., Mexico, 1953–4). John Bierhorst's recent edition and translation into English, *Cantares mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs* (Stanford, 1985), is the first complete translation into any language. His long introduction contains an overview of earlier work on the *cantares*; it also advances a controversial interpretation of them as ghostsongs of a postcontact revitalization movement with scant direct connection to prehispanic Mexica culture. For objections to this interpretation see James Lockhart, "Care, Ingenuity, and Irresponsibility: The Bierhorst Edition of the Cantares Mexicanos," *Reviews in Anthropology* 16 (1991), 119–32.
- 5 Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco, 1990), p. 79. The poet-philosopher-king portrait of Nezahualcoyotl has deep roots, counting among its earliest sources writings from shortly after 1600 by his descendant Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl. Indeed these writings, especially the *Historia de la nación chichimeca* (ed. Germán Vázquez, Madrid, 1985), are important sources for the poetic-philosophic interpretation all told. Because of Nezahualcoyotl's rulership of Texcoco, across Lake Texcoco from Tenochtitlan, the interpretation has tended to take on a geographical dualism, with philosophical Texcoco playing Athens to martial Tenochtitlan's Sparta (see for example William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* [New York, n.d.(1843)], Book 1, ch. 6). For the persistence of this dualism in Miguel León-Portilla's writings see below; for its permeation of popular accounts see Gary Jennings's recent (and vast) historical romance, *Aztec* (New York, 1980); for an older novelistic biography of "poet-king" Nezahualcoyotl dependent on Garibay's early work see Frances Gillmor, *Flute of the Smoking Mirror* ([1949]; Salt Lake City, 1983); and for a strongly voiced challenge of the poet-king portrait see Bierhorst, *Cantares mexicanos*, pp. 103–5.
- 6 Garibay, *Historia*, I, pp. 19, 76. For sixteenth-century references to the metaphors and obscurity of indigenous songs see Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva-España e islas de la tierra firme*, quoted in Garibay,

*Historia* I, p. 74; and Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (12 vols., Salt Lake City, 1950–82), I, p. 81.

- 7 León-Portilla has expressed these views in various writings. For an influential summary version see *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman, Okla., 1963); for the quotations here see *The Aztec Image of Self and Society: An Introduction to Nahua Culture*, ed. J. Jorge Klor de Alva (Salt Lake City, 1992), ch. 5; for specific stylistic discussion of the *cantares* see "Cuicatl y tlahtolli: las formas de expresión en náhuatl," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 16 (1983), 13–108, and, in a more popular vein, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, trans. Grace Lobanov (Norman, Okla., 1969), pp. 76–89; and for the most recent framing of his ideas, his critique of John Bierhorst's opposed conception of the *cantares*, and his translations of some of the song texts see *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* (Norman, Okla., 1992).
- 8 See Klor de Alva's introduction to León-Portilla's *Aztec Image*, "Nahua Studies, the Allure of the 'Aztecs,' and Miguel León-Portilla," where he summarizes his own differences with León-Portilla and those of Burkhardt and Gruzinski.
- 9 See Lockhart, "Care, Ingenuity, and Irresponsibility"; Brotherston, "Nezahualcōyotl's 'Lamentaciones' and Their Nahuatl Origins: The Westernization of Ephemerality," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 10 (1972), 393–408.
- 10 In *Cantares mexicanos*, p. 17. Inga Clendinnen's *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1991) does not figure in this list of revisionist work because it rather too readily accepts much of León-Portilla's *xochicuicatl* aesthetic (see in particular ch. 9). Nonetheless I should say that I consider it the most eloquent and thoughtful overview of its subject since Jacques Soustelle's *La vie quotidienne des aztèques à la veille de la conquête espagnole* of 1955 (trans. as *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, Stanford, 1970). At some points Clendinnen's account approaches the postcolonial perspective sketched here; I will have more to say about her book later.
- 11 For literary canonizing see Garibay's *Historia*, lengthily concerned with the *Cantares mexicanos*. For a suggestive cultural interpretation of the *cantares* couched, however, from within western aesthetic sensibility see David Damrosch, "The Aesthetics of Conquest: Aztec Poetry Before and After Cortés," *Representations* 33 (1991), 101–20. For formal analysis of the *cantares* see Francis Karttunen and James Lockhart, "La estructura de la poesía náhuatl vista por sus variantes," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 14 (1980), 15–64.
- 12 Brotherston, "Nezahualcōyotl's 'Lamentaciones,'" 404.
- 13 See among their many writings on the subject Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for a Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis, 1981), chs. 2 and 3; and Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 1.
- 14 For an intriguing recent musicological use of such dichotomies that does not, however, avoid the hazards of their decontextualized generalization see John Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (Cambridge, 1991), part 1.

- 15 Gruzinski, *Man-Gods in the Mexican Highlands: Indian Power and Colonial Society, 1520-1800*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Stanford, 1989), p. 18.
- 16 Andrews, *Introduction to Classical Nahuatl* (Austin, 1975); see for instance p. 204.
- 17 On the degree to which our presumption of the separateness of words and things continues to underpin our narratives of discovery see Mary C. Fuller, "Raleigh's Fugitive Gold: Reference and Deferral in *The Discoverie of Guiana*," *Representations* 33 (1991), 42-64; esp. 45-7. On the solidification of representational linguistic modes in Early Modern Europe see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), chs. 2 and 3; and Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago, 1993), ch. 6. For related issues in the development of logic and dialectic see Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).
- 18 See Gordon Brotherston, "Towards a Grammatology of America: Lévi-Strauss, Derrida and the Native New World Text," in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, and Diana Loxley, eds., *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-84* (London, 1986), pp. 190-209.
- 19 *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*, pp. 77-8.
- 20 *Aztecs*, p. 214.
- 21 "Nezahualcōyotl's 'Lamentaciones,'" p. 402.
- 22 We should strive to understand literally Soustelle's assertion that in *ixiptlayotl* ceremonies "it was the god himself who died before his own image and in his own temple" (*Daily Life of the Aztecs*, p. 8). In translating the notion of *ixiptlayotl* Clendinnen wavers between a westernizing "god-representation" or "god-image" (*Aztecs*, pp. 77, 99) and the more effectively defamiliarizing "god-presenter" (pp. 104, 110). She summarizes our perceptual problems in dealing with this phenomenon on pp. 251-3. For a good discussion of similar issues in the colonial period see Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*, pp. 325-6.
- 23 With regard to Mesoamerican writing and painting Arthur G. Miller has developed this dichotomy of representation and presentation along different lines (see *The Mural Painting of Teotihuacán*, Washington, D.C., 1973, pp. 26-8). He sees the two-dimensionality of Mesoamerican images as "presentational" in opposition to "representational" western perspectival technique. Presentational painting eschews western naturalism and with it the "intermediary step between the painted image and what it represents, i.e., what it symbolizes." It forges a direct, symbolic connection between the image and the idea of what it depicts and is distanced from the world by this unmediated connection ("Teotihuacán painting ... is a presentation whose meaning is *in the image* and not anywhere else ..."). This is a more expressly Platonic view even than Clendinnen's. I would argue that the unmediated connection of image and what it depicts functions, in a world observed in a non-western, fully materialized fashion, to draw image and world together rather than to separate them; the image conveys a part of the world in its iconic, semantic, and material substantiality.
- 24 *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*, p. 54.

- 25 For examples of general avoidance of musical matters see Garibay, *Historia*, I, pp. 79-83, and Karttunen and Lockhart, "La estructura de la poesía náhuatl." Samuel Martí's discussion of the *cantares* in *Canto, danza y música precortesianos* (Mexico, 1961), pp. 118-51, is a compilation of primary and secondary sources heavily indebted to Garibay's *Historia*; Robert Stevenson's *Music in Aztec & Inca Territory* (Berkeley, 1968) is a more thorough survey of colonial testimony and organological evidence with, however, less to say concerning the *cantares*. Both Martí, pp. 140-8, and Stevenson, pp. 46-54, offer speculation on the percussion cadences; for a somewhat better-grounded attempt to interpret them see Bierhorst, *Cantares mexicanos*, pp. 72-9.
- 26 I have argued elsewhere that alternatives to this hierarchy existed in the Early Modern era even within European traditions; see Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, ch. 4.
- 27 Gruzinski, *Man-Gods*, pp. 18-19.
- 28 "In *xochitl, in cuicatl*: Hallucinogens and Music in Mesoamerican Amerindian Thought" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1984), ch. 2.
- 29 *Aztecs*, p. 287. Clendinnen's indecisiveness is apparent also in comparing pp. 143 and 182, where she accepts "metaphors" as pervasive ways all societies conceive the world and themselves, with p. 251, where she faces "the implication that [a] metaphor might not be metaphor at all." In her discussion of the *cantares* Clendinnen pronounces metaphors a basic technique of Mexica poetry (p. 215) but also glimpses a less familiar view, where she senses "a marvellous concreteness in what we would call 'metaphors'" (p. 220).
- 30 In *Man-Gods*, p. 21, Gruzinski touches on an insight similar to Clendinnen's: "The Nahua perceived totalities," he writes; "even if it meant confusing, as sometimes happened, the signifier with the signified, the object with its representation." Gruzinski returns to the subject in *La colonisation de l'imaginaire*, pp. 325-6, broaching it now as a fundamental indigenous mode of perceiving reality and correcting (p. 330) his earlier ethnocentric imputation of confusion to the Mexica.
- 31 *Aztecs*, pp. 143, 29. For the sources of Clendinnen's image see Anderson and Dibble, *Florentine Codex*, VI, pp. 101, 125. Here Clendinnen pursues a theme raised by Soustelle in his *Daily Life of the Aztecs*. Mexica existence was perilous at the most fundamental level, according to Soustelle, for "their fragile world was perpetually at the mercy of some disaster" (p. 101). This threat configured every ritualized gesture of Mexica society as "a continually renewed white-magic operation, a perpetual collective effort without which nature itself would be destroyed" (p. 147). "The common task," Clendinnen writes in developing Soustelle's view, "was to sustain a social order sufficiently in harmony with the 'natural' order to exist within it, with women and men pursuing their separate and dangerous paths, to maintain humankind's precarious purchase on existence" (p. 209).
- 32 Clendinnen is particularly eloquent on the permeability of borders between sacred and mundane realms and the role of ritual in controlling border-crossings; see esp. *Aztecs*, pp. 50-4. She discusses the fluid identities of Mexica deities on pp. 248-9.

- 33 *Aztecs*, pp. 258-9; on the warrior's escape from subjectivity see p. 150.
- 34 "History Before the Fact; or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993), 677-92; p. 691.
- 35 Homi K. Bhabha has rightly insisted that even the deepest western critiques of our ethnocentrism (for example Derrida's analysis of logocentrism) do not provide us a neutral ground from which to represent others. See "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in Barker et al. *Literature, Politics and Theory* pp. 148-72; esp. pp. 150-51, 154.
- 36 James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in J. Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 98-121; see pp. 121, 119.
- 37 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1984); Clendinnen, "'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico," *Representations* 33 (1991), 65-100, p. 66; Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 9-13; Brotherston, "Towards a Grammatology of America," p. 195; Root, "The Imperial Signifier: Todorov and the Conquest of Mexico," *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1988), 197-219.
- 38 This is not to question an assertion like Jack Goody's that "human capacities are enhanced by employing various instruments of a material and intellectual kind," for example writing, an alphabet, etc. (*The Interface*, p. 290). This is the sort of generalization, unimpeachable in itself, that stands behind and stimulates an analysis like Todorov's. I wish only to insist that in putting to use such generalizations we habitually underestimate the enhancement of capacities enabled by other people's instruments.
- 39 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, pp. 145-46, 192.
- 40 *Ibid.* p. 7.