Queer Ancient Ways: A Decolonial Exploration

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PART II
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THE EARTH
The Strange Case of Tlaltecuhltli

Tezcatlipoca: ynin vel teutl ipan machoia, noujian
ynemjian: mictla, tlalticpac, ylhuicac.

el Dios, llamado tezcatlipuca: era tenido por verdadero dios, y invisible:
el qual andaua, en todo lugar: en el cielo, en la tierra, y en el infierno.¹
— Bernardino de Sahagún, Códice florentino²

Michael E. Smith introduces one of the Nahua creation myths, concerning the cosmic battle between Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, and Tlaltecuhltli, as follows:

The giant earth monster Tlaltecuhltli (“Earth Lord”), a crocodile-like creature, swam in the sea searching for flesh to eat. The gods turned themselves into serpents, entered the sea, and tore Tlaltecuhltli in half. The upper part of her body be-

¹ “The god called Tezcatlipoca was believed to be a real god and was invisible. He walks in all places: in mictlan, the place of the dead, on the earth and in ilhuicac, the ‘sky.’ My translation here is based on both the Nahua and the Spanish texts. For a comparison between the two, see later discussions in this chapter.
² The Códice florentino was written in Spanish and transcribed into Nahuatl by the Franciscan Friar Bernadino de Sahagún with the help of numerous Nahuatl-speaking scholars at the Tlatelolco school. Because of the different ways in which Nahuatl pronunciation was transcribed, there are different spelling conventions for the Nahuatl language.
What exactly is the gender of this earth monster, Tlaltecuhtli, who, in this short paragraph, first appears as “lord,” then as a crocodile-like creature of an unspecified gender, and finally as a female body that is cut in half by the two gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca?

In this chapter, we will discuss the “strange case” of Tlaltecuhtli in the colonial/modern reception history of Nahua deities. We will review Tlaltecuhtli’s “four types of representation,” defined by the Mexican archeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, which allows us to conclude that Tlaltecuhtli could be identified as a feminine deity, given a specific context and representational style. We continue, however, to ask how an “Earth Lord” (which is the literal translation of the Nahua name Tlaltecuhtli) has come to be known only as the “goddess” or “lady” of the earth through its reception. We will analyze this question from two different but related points. First, we will insist upon the “power to signify” of the Nahua language, a power that it has been denied in modern scholarship and museum curatorship, where Tlaltecuhtli is consistently mistranslated as “Earth Lady.” Second, we will explore how the Nahua form of complementary “dualism” has been dichotomized into a masculine celestial sphere and a feminine terrestrial sphere. This critique of the heteronormatively gendered reception history of Tlaltecuhtli and Nahua cosmology reflects on larger problems concerning the issue of “coloniality,” especially the coloniality of gender, or what I call the “heteronormative dichotomous cut.” Finally, we propose to read the case of Tlaltecuhtli, or precisely its “ambiguity,” by learning to learn from the “grammatology” of the Nahua language, that is, its particular form of “writing/painting” (tlacuilolli), as well as the absence of the copular verb “to be.” This will lead to an onto-epistemological concern that is radically dif-

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fertent from the quest of Western philosophy: “what is….” This will be further explored in the next chapter through the statue (a form of tlacuilolli) Coatlicue Mayor.

3.1 The Classification and Feminization of Tlaltecuhli

Tlaltecuhli appears on many occasions and in a wide variety of places, often represented as having an intimate relationship with the earth. For example, on the underside of the colossal statue Coatlicue Mayor, Tlaltecuhli is represented as facing the earth. Thanks to a replica of the relief placed next to the statue, we are able to see this earth deity, who is not supposed to be seen by the uninitiated viewer. In Nahua mythology, Tlaltecuhli represents the earth and the characteristics associated with it, understood by the Nahuas as a powerful combination of life and death, similar to the figure of a vagina dentata that simultaneously gives and devours life.⁴ In Nahuatl, the name “Tlaltecuhli” combines tlal, meaning “earth,” and tecuhtli, meaning “lord” or “god.” Strikingly, the combination of strong feminine characteristics, especially the life-generating power associated with the earth, and the name, Tlaltecuhli, or “Earth Lord,” appears discordant.

Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, the prominent Mexican archaeologist who leads the excavation team working closely with Nahua artifacts and art works at Templo Mayor (Mexico City), summarizes four different types of representation of Tlaltecuhli.⁵ We will introduce this complex deity by referring to Matos Moctezuma’s account, and, at the same time, we will analyze the underlying heteronormative assumptions that have resulted in the problematic gendering of this deity.

In “Tlaltecuhli: Señor de la tierra” (1997), published almost ten years before the 2006 excavation of a giant disk, identified as Tlaltecuhli in Templo Mayor, Matos Moctezuma identifies

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four types of representation of Tlaltecuhtli: group A — anthropomorphic and masculine figures; group B — anthropomorphic and feminine figures; group C — zoomorphic and feminine figures; and group D — figures with the face of Tlaloc, the god of rain. At no point in the article does Matos Moctezuma identify “Tlaltecuhtli” exclusively as a diosa (goddess), and indeed he suggests that “all the representations of the god correspond to specific moments and the diverse functions that he has.”

Referring to Mircea Eliade’s Traité d’histoire des religions, Matos Moctezuma confirms that “many deities of the earth and those related to fertility,” such as Nahua earth deity Tlaltecuhtli, “are bisexual.” Thus, his study seeks to analyze Tlaltecuhtli’s “bisexual” figuring. In the article, Matos Moctezuma does not mean “bisexuality” in the sense of one’s sexual orientation, but rather as the presence of both sexes, male and female, identifiable in the representations of this deity of earth. We will come back to this interesting conflation of concepts below.

Matos Moctezuma suggests that the figures from group A face the earth and therefore represent the male aspect, while the figures from group B and group C (though zoomorphically represented) lie on the earth facing the sky and therefore represent the female aspect. Unlike many researchers who hastily silence the literal meaning of Tlaltecuhtli and feminize it as “Lady of the Earth,” Matos Moctezuma does not reject the masculine aspect of the deity. From him, we learn that Tlaltecuhtli means “Earth Lord” from two quotations by different authors. Friar Diego Durán claims that “Tlaltecuhtli, composed of two names, tlalli and tecuhtli, which means ‘great lord,’ together means, ‘the

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6 Ibid., 36: “todas estas representaciones del dios corresponden a determinados momentos y a las diversas funciones que tiene.” All translations to English from non-English sources, unless stated otherwise, are mine.
7 Ibid., 24: “muchas divinidades de la tierra y relacionadas con la fecundidad son bisexuales.”
8 Ibid., 16.
great lord of the earth”). And Manuel Orozco y Berra confirms that “Tlaltecuhltli, of tlalli, earth and tecutli, lord, was a male god.” However, despite this being the masculine grouping, we sense that the masculine type is hovering outside of the possible significations of the “earth deity,” as Matos Moctezuma himself argues: “This group [A, masculine-identified] turns out to be very special and is essentially different from the other three [groups].” The “particularity” of group A is even more accentuated, if the earth is believed to be exclusively a feminine sphere, in a so-called female position awaiting insemination.

Even a complex and rich study such as Matos Moctezuma’s is not immune to the dichotomous classification and hierarchization of sexual differences accompanied by a reading that ultimately reduces the existing nuances. This “categorical logic of modernity,” complicit with heterosexual normativity or “heterosexualism,” as María Lugones names it, seems to have prevented Matos Moctezuma from accepting what ought to have been clear to him: the semantic meaning of the Nahua name Tlaltecuhltli — Earth Lord. He accurately translates Tlaltecuhltli in the title of his paper, “Tlaltecuhltli: Señor de la tierra.” However, he has never suggested or explained why, if the earth is identified with femininity to such a great extent, if the main function of the earth is to wait to be fertilized, and if the deity is represented pervasively in the act of laboring with a vagina dentata (a motif that simultaneously suggests death), the Nahuas

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11 Friar Diego Durán, quoted in Matos Moctezuma, “Tlaltecuhltli,” 20: “Tlaltecuhltli, el cual vocablo se compone de dos nombres, que es tlalli y tecutli, que quiere decir ‘gran señor’ y, así quiere decir ‘el gran señor de la tierra.’”
12 Manuel Orozco y Berra, quoted in ibid., 24. “Tlaltecuhltli, de tlalli, tierra, y tecutli [sic], señor, era el dios varón.”
13 Ibid., 27: “este grupo [A, masculino] resulta muy particular y en esencia diferente a los otros tres.”
14 Ibid., 36.
16 The death-threatening aspect of vagina dentata imagery is not directly associative with the feminine. However, as we have shown in Part I of this volume through the case of the battle between Tiamat and Marduk, in a
should still call Tlaltecuhltli tecuhtli, a lord. Deeply embedded in this blindness to the apparent discrepancy between “name” and “nature” is the heteronormative gendering according to which “to have a gender means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination.” For example, Matos Moctezuma identifies the ones facing the earth as being in a penetrating position, thus male; while those lying on the earth facing the sky are seen as “able to be sexually possessed.”\(^\text{18}\) The superior position is not only equated with the penetrating one, but the penetrated, inferior one is immediately feminized, “possessed.”

Through this reading of different representations of the earth deity as inhabiting penetrating and penetrated positions, we understand that by “bisexual” Matos Moctezuma actually means heterosexual (intercourse). The “bisexual” deities are not only heterosexual, but are even heteronormatively coupled in the most authentic missionary position for the sole purpose of reproduction.\(^\text{19}\) By the same token, not only are the zoomorphic representations of the deity included in the feminine grouping, but a lying position of those representations of Tlaltecuhltli

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18 Matos Moctezuma, “Tlaltecuhltli” 36: “para poder ser poseídas sexualmente.”

19 “Reproductive heteronormativity” signifies not only the compulsory interpretation of all types of sexuality in terms of heterosexuality, as Monique Wittig succinctly points out (“when thought by the straight mind, homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality”), but also a coercion that compels sexual activities to “reproduce.” See Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 21–32, at 28. Calvin Thomas extends the concept of “reproduction,” and argues interestingly that “people who fuck in the name of identity, who make an identity out of who they fuck, who fuck to reproduce ‘the person, are fucking heteronormatively […] even if ‘the person’ or ‘identity’ thereby reproduced is ‘homosexual’” (Calvin Thomas, *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000], 33).
identified as feminine is also read as an invitation “to be sexually possessed.”

We can find similar examples in other sources. The slippage in Smith’s sentence, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, transforms Tlaltecuhlti from lord to monster, and then suddenly feminizes the lord/monster at the precise moment when the deity is “torn apart,” in an act readable as violent penetration. Smith’s ultimate conclusion that this is a female deity is not an isolated one. This would not have become visible as a problem, had Smith not “unnecessarily” added an accurate translation of the Nahua name Tlaltecuhlti. Many other researchers and museum presentations have rendered the problem itself invisible by presenting the deity as a “Goddess of the Earth” called Tlaltecuhlti, without suggesting that the name has a different inherent meaning. For example, French scholar Michel Graulich explains that this is the “mother Tlaltecuhlti (Lady of the Earth).”

In a discussion on “Finding the Goddess in the Central Highlands of Mexico,” Tlaltecuhlti is also identified as “the goddess” from whom “the earth was created.” Examples are also numerous outside of academic circles, for instance, the giant disk excavated in 2006 is displayed in the Museo de Templo Mayor under the title “Tlaltecuhlti: Diosa de la tierra” (“Tlaltecuhlti: Goddess of the Earth”). Some media, such as La Jornada and Arqueología Mexicana, as well as several introductory articles published by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, univocally represent Tlaltecuhlti as la diosa de la tierra.

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Certainly, we might suppose that those journalists who equate Tlaltecuhtli with \textit{diosa de la tierra} are merely reporting what scholars and archeologists have already officially agreed on, without necessarily being suspicious about what that “unpronounceable”\textsuperscript{23} Nahua word might mean. But it is difficult to imagine that experts in Nahua culture would be totally ignorant of the language, one of the most widely spoken languages in Mesoamerica before Spanish colonization and one of the numerous indigenous languages still extensively spoken in Central America.\textsuperscript{24} Tlaltecuhtli can be literally translated as “Earth

\textsuperscript{23} For example, in a Spanish radio broadcast which invited the Mexican anthropologist Marco Antonio Cervera to talk about Nahua mythology, the host asked “¿Cómo era el lenguaje de los mexicas, porque claro los dioses y los nombres son como bárbaros […] son complicadísimos de pronunciar?” (“What was the language of those Mexicas, because, of course, the gods and their names are like barbarians […] are extremely complicated to pronounce?”). See “Los dioses de los Mexicanos,” \textit{ABC Punto Radio}, April 29, 2012, http://www.ivoox.com/dioses-mexicanos-audios-mp3_rf_1195682_1.html.

\textsuperscript{24} Serge Gruzinski, \textit{La colonisation de l’imaginaire: Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol XVIe–XVIIIe siècle} (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988), 353, points out, “la diffusion du castellan fut de tout temps un objectif qui hanta la Couronne espagnole. Elle y voyait le moyen d’étendre son emprise sur les populations indigènes et de raffermer sa domination” (“the diffusion of castellan was all the time an objective that haunted the Spanish Crown. It saw there the way to extend its influence on the indigenous populations and to consolidate its domination”). The Nahua language dwells in the ambiguous status of a less-than-official language, regarded as a language of the Aztec past even though it is still widely spoken (almost two million speakers, according to León-Portilla), and therefore deprived of its official status as one of the many languages spoken in Mexico (Miguel León-Portilla, “El destino de las lenguas indígenas de México,” in \textit{De historiografía lingüística e historia de las lenguas}, eds. Ignacio Guzmán Betancourt, Pilar Máynez, and Ascensión H. de León-Portilla [Mexico D.F.: Siglo XXI, 2004], 51–70). Only in 1992 did the Mexican Constitution suggest that awareness of the coexistence of other indigenous languages had been totally ignored legislatively. It was only in 2003 that the Ley general de derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas recognized legal rights for indigenous languages equal to Spanish. For example, article 7 states: “Las lenguas indígenas serán válidas, al igual que el español, para cualquier asunto o trámite de carácter público, así como para acceder plenamente a
Lord” without much space for ambiguity. While we might expect that referring to señor de la tierra using the pronoun ella (“she”) would cause consternation — unless it were for poetic juxtaposition or something like the biblical Elohim bara — Tlaltecuhtli is in fact continually referred to as such without causing as much as a raised eyebrow or needing the excuse of “poetic justification.”

Let us take a look at another example from an encyclopedia entry, where we read: “the feathered-serpent god QUETZALCOATL and the smoking mirror god TEZCATLIPoca […] saw Tlaltecuhtli and grabbed her by her legs.” Though linguistically Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca do not automatically assume or convey any “masculinity,” because the Nahua language has no grammatical gender and their names, “plumed serpent” (Quetzalcoatl) and “smoking mirror” (Tezcatlipoca), don’t indicate a specific gender, it is not uncommon for them to be called “gods.” Especially when the cosmic battle against the feminized Tlaltecuhtli is recounted, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca are presented as masculine deities, despite, as Pete Sigal shows, the “androgy nous” or “bisexual” characteristics of both “gods.”

Certainly, I
am not suggesting an insistence on the language–gender relation, pretending that no other linguistic or ideological apparatus would suggest the gendering of certain words and expressions. Much less would I argue that a genderless language conveys a more egalitarian or less biased view on sexual or gender differences. Rather, I am asking how a clearly masculine-gendered name like Tlaltecuhtli could become automatically feminized in the process of translation, while the “neutral,” grammatically genderless, and culturally “androgynous” Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca become masculinized.

According to Matos Moctezuma’s study, the earth embodies the following functions: 1) the fertilized earth; 2) the earth as \textit{vagina dentata} that devours dead bodies; 3) the earth as the transformer who gives birth to the dead into the Mictlan, place of the dead; 4) the earth as the central point of the universe, linking the celestial and the terrestrial; and 5) the earth that rests upon the primordial water.\footnote{Matos Moctezuma, “Tlaltecuhtli,” 36.} The only exclusively “masculine” feature, according to this study, is the one related to “the center of the universe,”\footnote{Ibid., 35: “el centro del universo.”} while the one related to “femininity” is the “fertilized earth.” The “center of the universe” therefore becomes masculinized while the feminine continues to be reserved solely for the purpose of reproduction, to be fertilized or inscribed with meaning from above.

According to this particular creation myth, the “brothers” Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl transform into giant serpents, dive into the primordial water, and slaughter the earth monster Tlaltecuhtli who is eating human bones, a quintessential element for the re-creation of human beings at the beginning of the fifth cosmic age. They subsequently create the earth and heaven, using the slaughtered body parts of Tlaltecuhtli. If we assume that the Quetzalcoatl-Tezcatlipoca duo is masculine and Tlaltecuhtli is feminine (as in the expression of 	extit{diosa de la}

\footnote{“Imagining Cihuacoatl: Masculine Rituals, Nahua Goddesses and the Texts of the Tlacuilos,” \textit{Gender & History} 22, no. 3 (2010): 538–63.}
The myth can be easily read as a masculine control of the feminine/monstrous (m)other through violent killing and the appropriation of the female body, as in the case of Marduk’s slaughter of Tiamat analyzed in Part I. In the Babylonian case, the feminization of Tiamat is complicit with her monstrosification inside Enuma Elish, whose colonial undertone is repeatedly underpinned by sexist mytho-political propaganda during the period of the Babylonian Empire and reinforced by equally gender-stereotypical readings in its modern reception history. The feminization of Tlaltecuhtli, by contrast, is largely exaggerated in its modern/colonial receptions, through the silencing of the Nahua language and the cosmology expressed in it.

The aim of my critique here is neither a “correction” of what archaeologists have wrongly identified, nor a proposal of a “truer” answer to the question “What is Tlaltecuhtli?” In fact, the problem and confusion might well stem from this particular question, which tries its best to delimit and control the meaning(s) of Tlaltecuhtli through the seemingly inevitable verb “to be” (I will return to this question below). Tlaltecuhtli, far from being merely a name, has a semantic meaning clear enough for any Nahuatl speaker: “Earth Lord.” Similarly, for a Hebrew speaker, ‘adam in Genesis would clearly mean “the human” rather than the male name Adam.30 While ‘adam becomes widely translated as Adam, always and certainly not coincidentally gendered male, Tlaltecuhtli has been widely represented also as merely the name of an earth deity, de-gendered (the tecuhtli part marking masculinity ignored or maybe “castrated”) and re-gendered as feminine. In both cases, the inherent meanings of the Hebrew and Nahuatl words are neglected.

Smith’s and Matos Moctezuma’s cases are somehow special, as they indeed translate the word correctly, but then immediately appear to forget or ignore the gendered implications of that

translation in the same sentence. What we want to ask is how Tlaltecuhtli became known as a goddess and how an exhibition title such as “Tlaltecuhtli: diosa de la tierra” became possible. I argue that both scholarly works and museum presentations are not free from the colonial matrix of power and knowledge. Because of this, even when the meaning of the silenced language is made clear, its cosmological and philosophical specificity cannot have a place in the interpretations of the mythologies conceived in it. The modern gender system, with heteronormative sexuality and universalistic “archetypes” as the epistemic monopoly, where other knowledges and forms of being are overlooked, only permits the understanding of the earth deity as “goddess” or the feminization of any deity related to the earth.

At the same time, we need to further complicate the issue by acknowledging the fact that Tlaltecuhtli *can* be, and often is, identified as feminine. That is to say, a “correct” translation of Tlaltecuhtli as the “Earth Lord” would be equally inadequate in conveying all the possible meanings, representations, and metamorphoses of this earth deity. The next section will scrutinize the coercive modern gendering founded on (biological) dichotomous dimorphism through a critique of the classification of Nahua deities into the so-called celestial and terrestrial ones, not surprisingly gendered as, respectively, masculine and feminine ones.

3.2 Performing “Castration” for Tlaltecuhtli

Scholarly research and museum curatorship do not provide merely constative “observations” about what there is and how things are represented. They are also performative and constructive forces that inscribe normative discourses into what the observed “objects of study” are said to represent. Put differently, the readings of Smith and Matos Moctezuma, among others, which I have shown are imbued in heterosexualist assumptions,
construct a particular normative discourse that gains validity and intelligibility precisely through repetition or reiteration.\textsuperscript{31}

Such discourse construction implies a double process of naturalization and exclusion. Naturalization takes the form of asserting “how s/he/it naturally is”\textsuperscript{32} and is accompanied by an exclusion of other possible readings that would, for example, take the \textit{tecuhtli}-ness of Tlaltecuhltli seriously without censoring this particular disruptive element. In this section, we will analyze how modern scholarship performs “sex assignment” for Tlaltecuhltli through the castration (in the sense of cutting off the penis/phallus), that is to say, the silencing of the inherent meaning of \textit{tecuhtli}. We will accentuate the disruptive voice that strives to be heard at the surgical moment of castration, when Tlaltecuhltli is translated/transformed into “Earth Lady,” who is to be slaughtered by the masculinized deities in order to fit into the heterosexualist myth of the feminine earth and the monstrous \textit{vagina dentata}. This symbolic/phallic meaning of \textit{tecuhtli} has to be repeatedly castrated in order to feminize the “monster” (which, of course, always also serves to monstrify the feminine at the same time), so that the haunted phallocentric sexual dissymmetry can still work to define its very centrality. This “phallus castration,” we need to notice, is performed on a colonized language, Nahuatl, and by the modern/colonial knowledge system written in European languages. Such feminization of the colonized is not a new story.\textsuperscript{33} Certainly, these discursive operations function under a naturalized idea that

\textsuperscript{31} See Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 11.

\textsuperscript{32} Certainly, even using “s/he/it” has to be constrained within the possibilities language offers, which would in a similar manner reiterate the “natural” division between she and he, between s/he and it, etc. The Nahuas do not have this linguistic problem, as there is only one pronoun regardless of gender. For example, see James Lockhart, \textit{Nahuatl as Written: Lessons in Older Written Nahuatl, with Copious Examples and Texts} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.

there are two “opposite sexes.” In the following sections, we will revisit some discussions around the coercive sex assignment of intersex subjects in modern society, and see how it reveals both the uncertainty and the violence of modern/colonial dimorphic system of gender (and sex).

3.2.1 Modern Sex Assignment Surgery on Intersex Subjects
The idea of intersex functions as abjection, which is necessary for the emergence of the two supposedly oppositional sexes. Intersex thus marks the liminality of this dimorphic division. What happens if we take “gender” into consideration? By gender, we mean the discursive practice that performatively constructs the very bodies onto which gender is said to have imposed its “constructions.”34 The constructiveness of gender does not leave the idea of sex untouched. We follow Butler to further argue that “sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations” and are never simply a “fact or static condition of a body” but materialize “through a forcible reiteration of […] regulatory] norms.”35 Taking these considerations into account, intersex points to the instabilities that are both inherent in and resistant to the materialization complying with a regulatory norm that “is never quite complete.”36 In modern normative societies, intersex people are mostly treated as abnormal, in need of “correction” in order to satisfy normative sexual dimorphism. Their fate clearly shows the power and violence of modern heteronormative hegemony, but, at the same time, reveals its innate instability. This is where the possibilities of subverting heteronormativity lie.

Modern society continues to assume that there are only two sexes despite a considerable part of the world population being intersex.37 Julie Greenberg shows that US legal institutions “have

34 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, passim.
36 Ibid., 2.
the power to assign individuals to a particular racial or sexual category.”38 She argues that the assumption behind such sexual and racial assignments is the binarism of race and sex, as well as the belief that “race and sex can be biologically determined […] despite scientific evidence to the contrary.”39

The deep anxiety provoked by the existence of intersex people becomes evident in the practice of the surgical “corrections” of their bodies. We call this intervention “sex assignment,” in which the pathologized intersex subject’s sex is altered to align with normative expectations soon after birth. This anxiety is similar to the “colonial anxiety” analyzed by Bhabha and reviewed in Part O. It is a result of modern categorical logic. This brings us back to the issue of race. Greenberg reviews the “one-drop” policy in US legal policy, which classifies an infant with “one drop” of blood from a black parent or ancestor as “black” rather than “white.” The racial puritanism and anti-miscegenation undertone cannot be clearer. However, it shows that white men’s fear of racial “pollution,” and of feminization in general, is an effect of the realization that the very concept “white man” is inherently unstable and contestable.

Butler argues that “castration could not be feared if the phallus were not already detachable, already elsewhere, already dispossessed.”40 Transposing her deconstruction of castration fear to the case of race, we soon realize that the very purist concept of “white man” is not prior to the event of “corruption” or fear of the encounter with the monstrified “other,” which is usually claimed to happen “later,” but it is in fact constructed at the very moment of that encounter, as a result of the fear of feminization/racialization.

Unwanted surgical intervention on intersex bodies is a brutal one, literally inscribed on the flesh. It reiterates the normativity

39 Ibid., 103.
and authority of gender dimorphism at the expense of the lives inconceivable by such a norm. By inconceivable, I mean that a certain body that does not confirm the regulatory norm is not regarded as livable or legitimate and is in danger of either being altered or killed.

What is at stake here is the realization of the very contingency and inconsistency within the regulatory rule of reproductive heteronormativity. Without making this clear, the illusory fantasy of heterosexualism will lure us into believing that “gender trouble” is a modern fuss, strictly alien to a non-modern, pre-colonized culture, like the Nahua’s. And if the illusion of heterosexualism fails to be recognized, the colonized indigenous cultures might be dangerously assumed to be in a “natural state” of “heterosexuality,” because the straight colonizing mind “takes for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality.”

Readings that split the organic and transformative Nahua theology (and sometimes, the same deity, like Tlaltecuhltli) into coupling gods and goddesses reiterate the sexist cliché of the passive feminine who invites penetration, as if heterosexuality and the missionary style were truly ahistorical and cross-cultural.

3.2.2 “Correcting” the Sex of Tlaltecuhtli
The reference to modern surgical interventions is pertinent to our discussion of the Nahua deity of the earth, because scholarship and museum curatorship similarly continue to perform “sex assignment” on Tlaltecuhtli, whose “gender” and “sex” do not seem to correspond to each other neatly. The sex assign-

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41 Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” 24. The straight colonizing mind is actually not as straight-forward as one would want to believe. Today, homosexuality, or more precisely the so-called “tolerance toward homosexuals,” has become evidence of the deviance of a given culture. While 19th-century British travellers condemn the “immoral” sexuality of sodomy in Muslim society as proof of its decadence, contemporary neo-liberal discourse uses the same rhetoric to feed the Islamophobic imagination. See Joseph Andoni Massad, ed., Desiring Arabs (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Jin Haritaworn, Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places (London: Pluto Press, 2015).
ment is performed through “castration” in order to fit the heterosexualist expectation of the earth, a monstrous, destructive yet productive symbol, as exclusively feminine. The discourse is well protected by the rhetoric of “exception” when evidence of the contrary is revealed to the researcher. This is why I believe, as in the case of US legal policy on racial and sexual assignment, that showing “scientific evidence to the contrary” alone could not adequately prevent the imposition of normative gender law.

Cixous summarizes how phallogocentrism works through hierarchical dualisms, and argues that in Western philosophy, woman is always on the side of “passivity.” Zainab Bahrani, in her exploration of gender and representation in Babylonian art, similarly observes that “woman serves to define the masculine in the Symbolic, and whatever is excess or lack can be located in her as Other: thus anxiety, threat, extremes of good and evil all come to be localized at the body of woman, as the site of alterity.”

Curiously, in our “strange case,” the masculine symbolic centrality is attained not because of the possession of a “phallus,” but as a result of the castration of the Nahua phallus/logos. If we compare the troublesome tecuhtli part of the Earth Lord Tlaltecuhtli to the phallus or the symbolic power to signify, tecuhtli itself has to be castrated, that is to say, silenced and eradicated of meaning. Only then is it possible for the masculine-identified “creation gods” Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca to be regarded as the central figures. More interestingly, a heteronormative understanding that associates the earth (or the “terrestrial sphere”) as exclusively feminine with the position of awaiting penetra-

42 For example, as previously mentioned, Matos Moctezuma, “Tlaltecuhtli,” 27, believes that the masculine-identified Group A of representations of Tlaltecuhtli “turns out to be very special and is essentially different to the other three [groups].”
tion by the consequently masculinized heavenly (or “celestial”) gods, is, paradoxically, bought at a price: that of castrating Tlatelcuhtli’s phallus.

Matos Moctezuma argues that the masculine aspect of Tlatelcuhtli represents the “center of the universe.” If he is right, the desirable masculine centrality, which we can call its phallocentrism, is actually haunted by the very tecuhtli-phallus. That is because Tlatelcuhtli’s symbolic, that is, phallic power to signify shows nothing more than the fact that the earth deity is a tecuhtli, a “lord,” not a feminized “goddess” as the heteronormative gendering would have it. In his eyes, the phallus tecuhtli becomes simultaneously the abhorrent symbol that resists at every moment of appearance any direct association with the earth (and thus the so-called terrestrial deities) and the feminine. Paradoxically, the semantic phallus of tecuhtli has to be castrated in order to keep the colonial phallus of masculine power in/as the center of the universe.

This “castration” is often performed secretly in the equations of Tlatelcuhtli with the “goddess of the earth,” while explicitly, but very quickly, in some other cases. Elizabeth Baquedano and Michel Graulich, for example, invite us to imagine “how exactly Tlalteotl was killed” through the “decapitation” allegedly represented by Coatlicue Mayor, which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter. They refer to Tlatelcuhtli as Tlalteotl and translate the Nahua word as “Earth Deity,” that is to say, genderless. The cosmic slaughter of Tlalteotl is, however, recounted with a clear gendering: “[A]t the beginning of time Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca brought from the heavens a ‘savage beast’ with her joints filled with eyes and mouths, Tlateotl (‘Earth Deity’) and put her in the primordial water.” In a nutshell, the slaughtered deity is feminized.

47 Baquedano and Graulich, “Decapitation among the Aztecs”; Smith, The Aztecs. I will return to Banquedano and Graulich’s article in the next chapter.
48 Baquedano and Graulich, “Decapitation among the Aztecs,” 164, emphasis mine.
Matos Moctezuma’s take is more complex. In the separate analysis of each of the four groups of his classification, he states that group D (representations of Tlatelcuhtli with the face of Tlaloc, the rain deity) is clearly feminine, yet has the typical features of the figures from group A, i.e., the masculine one. He concludes, quoting Bonifaz, though with reservations, that Tlatelcuhtli-Tlaloc is “feminine and masculine, as it would like to be seen; the two are the same: Tlaloc is Tlatelcuhtli, Tlatelcuhtli is Tlaloc.”\textsuperscript{49} However, when it comes to deciding the essential functions, the author attributes exclusive masculinity to the Tlaloc group because the “rain” or celestial water/semen is believed to fall down from above to fertilize the earth (group B and C, the “feminine” and “zoomorphic”). Put another way, group A (masculine) and group D (with the face of the rain deity Tlaloc) suddenly ascend to the masculinized celestial level in order to fertilize groups B and C, the feminized ones (of course by overlooking group C’s zoomorphism).\textsuperscript{50} Being subjected to an allegedly penetrative position, these different representations of the same “Earth Lord” unavoidably slip into the penetrating males and the feminine ones who are “facing up, in the position of [maternal] labouring, but also in the position of being fertilized.”\textsuperscript{51}

In a nutshell, the hierarchized, dichotomous sexualization/gendering of representations of the same deity becomes naturalized spatially and symbolically as the separation between heaven and earth. We have argued several times, following Lugones, that heteronormativity is intersected with coloniality, for which she coined the word “heterosexualism.” The highly problematic

\textsuperscript{49} Matos Moctezuma, “Tlatelcuhtli” 29–30: “Feminino y masculinos, como quiera que se vistan, ambos son lo mismo: Tlaloc es Tlatelcuhtli, Tlatelcuhtli es Tlaloc.”

\textsuperscript{50} When I say overlooking I don’t simply mean ignoring, but conveying another interesting point to explore, that is, the relationship between femininity and animality. However, engaging with this critique goes beyond the scope of this book.

\textsuperscript{51} Matos Moctezuma, “Tlatelcuhtli,” 30: “personajes femeninos que están boca arriba, en posición de parto, pero también en posición de ser fecundadas.”
grouping of Tlaltecuhtlis around the idea of “vaginal penetration” should be analyzed through this lens of heterosexualism. In his discussion of the challenge that Latin American sexualities pose to the globalization of the History of Sexuality, Pete Sigal creates the concept of “the colonialism of vaginal intercourse.” He explains:

[B]oth Catholic priests and Hispanized people from all walks of life provided a culture framework in which the most intimate carnal relations between people were supposed to center around the penetration of the vagina by the penis. [... However, the] Moche pottery and the Nahua ritual suggest that centering sexuality on vaginal intercourse was a fundamentally colonial maneuver that did epistemic violence to the relationship between sexuality and history in non-Western societies.52

The coercive mimeticism of “vaginal intercourse” also relates to the simplistic categorization of the Nahua cosmos into the celestial and terrestrial spheres, which, unsurprisingly, are respectively masculinized (the celestial) and feminized (the terrestrial). In order to contest this coercive division and gendering, we return to Nahua cosmology and to Ometeotl, the supposed terrestrial deity. With the feminine Omecihuatl and the masculine Ometecuhtli, Ometeotl in tlatxicco ónoc — “spreads from the navel of the earth.”53 According to León-Portilla’s explanation, based on the Códice florentino by Bernardino de Sahagún, the supposedly celestial Ometeotl and their two gendered aspects, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl, dwelling on the highest level of the thirteen skies, also originate (ono) from the navel of the earth (tlatxicco: tlal, “earth”; xictli, “navel”). Surprisingly, we also find that the lord and lady of the “underworld” (more

precisely, “place of the dead”), Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlcancihuatl (or Mictecacihuatl),\textsuperscript{54} dwell on the sixth level of the thirteen “skies,” supposedly reserved only to the “celestial” deities.\textsuperscript{55} For example, in the 16th-century French manuscript \textit{Histoyre du Mexique}, possibly a translation of the lost book \textit{Antigüedades Mexicanas} by the Franciscan friar André de Olmos,\textsuperscript{56} we find the following description:

The Mexicans and many of their neighbors believed that there were thirteen skies, […] in the sixth [sky lived] Mictlantentli, who is the god of hell […] and in] the eighth Tlalocatentli, god of the earth.\textsuperscript{57}

According to this account, not only Mictlantecuhtli, the deity of “underworld,” but also Tlaltecuhtli, live on one of the thirteen levels of the “sky.” Coatlicue, as we will see in the next chapter, is often regarded as an \textit{Earth Goddess} belonging to the terrestrial sphere. For example, under the grouping of “The Earth Gods,” Alfonso Caso argues that “three goddesses, who apparently are only three different aspects of the same deity, portrayed the

\textsuperscript{54} There is no scholarly explanation available for the different versions of the “lady of the place of the dead,” but in terms of etymology, \textit{mictlan} means the “place of the dead,” while \textit{micteca} means “people from the place of the dead” (as with geographical terms: Tepozteca are people or things from Tepoztlán). So I suggest that the difference between Mictecacihuatl and Mictlançihuatl seems to be only a linguistic variation. Here, in order to show her relation to Mictlantecuhtli, I opt for the version “Mictlancihuatl.”

\textsuperscript{55} For a detailed discussion on the question of the “thirteen levels” of the Nahuah universe, see Alfredo López Austin’s “La verticalidad del cosmos,” \textit{Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl} 52 (2016): 119–50.


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 22: “Croioyent les Mechiquiens et beaucoup de ses circunvoisins qu’il y avoyt treze cieux, […] au sixiesme Mictlantentli, qui est dieu des enfers […] et à] l’huictiesme Tlalocatentli, dieu de la terre.” “Mictlantentli” in the manuscript refers to Mictlantecuhtli or “Mictlanteutli,” as it is written in the editor’s note (ibid., 22n7); “Tlalocatentli” refers to Tlaltecuhtli or “Tlalocan teutli,” as it is written in the editor’s note (ibid., 22n9).
earth in its dual function of creator and destroyer: Coatlicue, Cihuacóatl, and Tlazoltéotl.”

“She” is also regarded as one of these “other nocturnal, terrestrial and underworld deities (like Mictecacíhuatl, Coatlicue, the cihuateteo, Itzpapálotl, and the other tzitzimime).” Meanwhile, the “terrestrial” Coatlicue is also the mother of Huitzilopochtli (representing the sun), Coyolxauhqui (the moon), and Centzonhuitznahuac (the four-hundred southern stars), all celestial deities, and actually the entire universe.

Ometeotl, the genderless/beyond-gender divinity who manifests both masculine and feminine aspects, has been reduced to a “him” (both linguistically and ideologically) in the same way that Gruzinski and others render the Nahua word *teotl* as masculine. On the one hand, the celestial sphere, masculinized through modern representation, excludes Coatlicue (mother of the universe), Coyolxauhqui (goddess of the moon), or any other “goddess.” On the other hand, the simultaneously feminized terrestrial sphere can accommodate Earth Lord Tlaltecuh tlī only under the condition that he (the deity and the word *tecuh-tlī*) is castrated and becomes a mere name without meaning the “goddess of the earth.”

In order to find possible clues to these puzzles, I would like to return to the *Códice florentino*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. In Book I, Chapter 3 of the *Códice*, we read a description of the deity Tezcatlipoca in Spanish, on the left side: “el Dios, llamado tezcatlipuca: era tenido por verdadero dios, y invisíble: el qual andaua, en todo lugar: en el cielo, en la tierra, y en el infierno”; and in Nahuatl, on the right side: “Tezcatlipoca:

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60 For a detailed discussion of the “gender” of Ometeotl, Ometeucuhtli, and Omecihuatl, and the masculinization of this deity in modern scholarship, see the next chapter.
ynin vel teutl ipan machoia, noujian ynemjian: mictla, tlalticpac, ylhujcac.” The Spanish text reads: “The god called tezcatlipuca was taken as the real god and invisible: the one (who) was marching in all places: in the sky, in the earth and in hell.” The Nahuatl text reads: “Tezcatlipoca: this old god in every part he walked: the place of the dead, the earth and the ‘sky’.”

The Spanish text shows Tezcatlipoca’s path as if he walks from heaven, through the earth, to hell, a sequence that is conceivable within and compatible with the Spanish/Catholic cosmology. The Spanish text thus presents the Nahuatl text in a reversed order. It is not necessary to exaggerate or stress the different sequence of these places, because, after all, Tezcatlipoca is able to walk wherever they want. However, León-Portilla asserts that “[t]he original Nahuatl texts […] are not the work of Sahagún, but of his elderly native informants from Tepepulco and Tlateloco (sic).” We can at least sense a tension between the Spanish and Nahuatl texts put side by side in the manuscript. Then we can infer that Sahagún, in his Spanish text, which certainly followed the Nahua one rather than the other way around, felt the necessity to make the “sky” (even if it is the Nahua sky, *ilhuicatl*) appear first, while his informants, the Nahua painters/writers (*tlacuilo*), naturally assumed the priority of *mictlan* and *tlalticpac*, because the earth plays a central role in the Nahua cosmology.

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61 Strictly speaking, the word *ylhujcac* does not mean “sky” in the sense we understand it, but the space above the earth. See Katarzyna Mikulska Dąbrowska, “El concepto de Ilhuicatl en la cosmovisión nahua,” *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 38, no. 2 (2008): 151–71.


63 *Ilhuicatl, ylhujcac,* or *ilvicac* are variations of the same word, translated as “sky.” Following the Nahuatl spelling convention we choose to follow, unless it is quotations from original texts, I will use the spelling of *ilhuicatl*.

Another issue emerges when we compare the two versions of the same text in translation. *Mictlan* is translated in the Spanish as *infierno*, a Christian concept, “hell,” and is also often translated as *inframundo* or “underworld.” While in the Christian cosmology *infierno* and *inframundo* are interchangeable, *mictlan*, or the place (*tlan*) of the dead (*micto*), is not exactly situated “beneath the earth.” *Ilhuicatl* (the Nahua “sky”) and *mictlan* (the Nahua “hell”) might not be in the same spatial relation as Christian heaven and earth. Otherwise, it would have been absurd for the celestial Ometeotl to “spread from the navel of the earth,” while the terrestrial Tlaltecuhtli, or even infra-terrestrial Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlantecihuatl, dwell on different levels of the “sky.”

In *La filosofía nahuatl*, first published in 1956, Miguel León-Portilla analyzes the Nahua expression *topan, mictlan*, which he believes is one of the fundamental “quests” of the wise man *tlaltimini*. León-Portilla translates *topan, mictlan* as “knowing what is beyond us (and) the place of the dead.” 65 He explains that *topan* means “what is beyond us” and *mictlan* “the place of the dead.” 66 We can find a similar expression in the *Códice florentino*, for example, *in topan in mictlan in ilvicac* which means “beyond us (in) the *mictlan*, (in) the *ilhuicatl.*” 67 Indeed, as Mikulska Dąbrowska argues, both *in mictlan* (the place of the dead) and *in ilvicac* (the “sky”) “appear to be situated *topan*, ‘beyond us’, which suggests a location ‘above’, where one would imagine it to be the opposite of ‘Mictlan.’” 68 That is to say, the “sky” (*ilhuicatl*) is not necessarily above (*topan*) and “hell” (*mictlan*) is not necessarily below. León-Portilla’s careful translation “*topan, mict-“

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66 Ibid.: “lo que nos sobrepasa”; “la región de los muertos.”
67 I’d like to remind the reader that *in* in Nahuatl means “the,” not “in.”
lan (lo sobre nosotros, lo que se refiere al más allá, a la región de los muertos),” suggesting not only the spatial but also the metaphysical “beyond” (topan), however, has become spatialized as up and down in the English version as “topan, mictlan, what is above us and below us, in the region of the dead” by its translator Jack Emory Davis. Suddenly the Nahua seem indecisive on whether the “region of the dead” is “above us” or “below us.” But what the Nahua philosophers were pondering is the question of topan, that is, “the metaphysical beyond.” León-Portilla translates topan mictlan as más allá or au-delà of mictlan for that matter. However, the English translation expresses the necessity to add a spatial preposition that cannot suggest any metaphysical speculation, “below us,” to fit the expectation that mictlan, the region of the dead, should be down there.

Pete Sigal argues that Nahua mythology “alludes to a set of powerful deities that asserted a feminine earth and a masculine sky.” However, they did not stop there; deities were able “to change genders and identities in order to access relevant levels of the cosmos [and the] actual substances that made up these gods could be exchanged when the god willed it.” How is this “changeability” maintained? In order to answer this question, we need to look closely at Nahua cosmo-philosophy, which will be the focus of the next chapter. Before we can learn to learn from Nahua cosmo-philosophy, and therefore its “queer” divinities, we need to unlearn certain epistemic habits so entrenched in colonial modernity.

69 “topan, mictlan (what is beyond us, which refers to the au-delà, in the region of the dead).”
70 Jack Emory Davis, quoted in León-Portilla, Aztec Thought and Culture, 15.
73 Ibid.
3.3 The Question of Writing

Tlaltecuhtli, Lord of the Earth, has been consistently translated as Lady of the Earth in scholarly works and curatorial texts. Despite the fact that Tlaltecuhtli, as we have already seen, can be regarded as a feminine figure, “earth mother,” or *vagina dentata*, a title that takes into account the deity’s gender complexity does not seem to exist. As we have already seen, there are not only feminine representations of Tlaltecuhtli, but also masculine, zoomorphic, and Tlaloc-faced ones. According to Matos Moctezuma, the categorizations that do not fit into the general naturalized “nature” of Tlaltecuhtli, one that intimately links the deity with the earth, such as the masculine group A and, to some extent, the masculinized Tlaloc-faced group D, should therefore be treated as special or exceptional ones. On the one hand, this “exception,” also assumed in other research and curatorial presentations, is performed through what I called “sex assignment by castration,” under the rubric of “Tlaltecuhtli: Diosa de la tierra.” On the other hand, despite the attempt to disavow any interpretation associable with heteronormativity, we have to accept the fact that one feminine function of the earth, namely, its birth-giving function, is undeniable. Being an earth deity, Tlaltecuhtli is Tonantzin, our benevolent mother, and Tlaltecuhtli is feminine.74

Surprised to learn that Tlaltecuhtli is not “Lady of the Earth,” I began the investigation of the strange case of Tlaltecuhtli. My unease at seeing the Nahua language silenced even in some very sophisticated research in the field made me wonder about the reason behind this. In previous sections, I offered an “archaeological” examination of how the modern/colonial heterosexualist gender system has imposed a “sex assignment” on Tlaltecuhtli whose “sex” (*tecuhtli* being masculine) and “gender” (the earth and the related imagery of *vagina dentata* being feminine) do not seem to be in accordance with each other. This coercive

74 I return to the usage of “is” (a technique known as *sous rature* or “under erasure”) in the next section.
modern “correction” happens at the expense of Nahuatl’s power to signify.

In this section, I want to problematize the ontological questions — “who is Tlaltecuhtli?” and “what is their ‘true sex’?” I will do so by turning first to Jacques Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics or logocentrism and Hélène Cixous’s further critique of phallogocentrism. I am, however, suspicious of the universal applicability of Derrida’s work, and Cixous’s work for that matter. Unlike Gordon Brotherston, who in his early work states that “no literary approach to the texts of the New World can avoid the problem of ‘grammatology’ raised by Derrida in his book of that title,” I mention these important critiques of Western metaphysics not because they are in any way universal, but precisely because they show that neither phallogocentric metaphysics nor critiques of it should be blindly applied to the Nahua context. As Elizabeth Boone suggests, the “need to record speech is not universally felt.” Let us therefore first understand how Nahua cosmology functions. Pete Sigal aptly summarizes it as

a complex amalgam of different concepts in which deities had the ability to transform themselves into virtually any-

thing [... with an underlying] set of beliefs about the interconnections among the earth, the heavens and the land of the dead.\textsuperscript{78}

This extremely flexible cosmology and certainly also its complementary gender system are reflected in and constructive of its very form of “writing,” \textit{tlacuilolli}, which means both “to write” and “to paint,” a concept to which we will return in more detail in the subsequent chapter. The fact that the Nahua have not developed a writing system to record speech word by word suggests that Nahua philosophical and cosmological concerns are very different from the European metaphysical tradition, which regards speech as the presence of truth best recorded by alphabetic language. In this context, we will focus on the importance and absence of the verb “to be” in Western and Nahua philosophies respectively. Finally, we will return to our concern regarding gender(ing) and discuss how Tlaltecuhtli and other Nahua deities in general resist modern gender categories. We should not forget that in pre-Conquest Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Tlaltecuhtli, the name of this important earth deity, was not “written” in the way that we have come to pronounce and know it, that is, in Latin characters. Rather, it was recorded in the writing/painting system \textit{tlacuilolli} of pre-Conquest Nahuatl.

3.3.1 \textit{The Instituting Question of (Western) Philosophy}

The ontological quest for “what is?” of the Western metaphysical tradition is not shared, or at least not shared in the same way, by the Nahua. Their language, Nahuatl, does not attach any importance to that quintessential verb of Western philosophy, \textit{to be}. The question “what \textit{is} Tlaltecuhtli?” or the statement “Tlaltecuhtli \textit{is}...” is already trapped in a particular kind of philosophical quest that prefigures its possible answers. Cixous rightly relates the question of “what is?” to the philosophical construction of masculinity and argues, “As soon as the question ‘What is it?’ is posed, from the moment a question is put, as

\textsuperscript{78} Sigal, \textit{The Flower and the Scorpion}, 3.
soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation.” In order to adequately explore this question, I follow Cixous’s suggestion to perform a linguistic analysis: “We must take culture at its word, as it takes us into its word, into its tongue [langue]. You’ll understand why I think that no political reflection can dispense with reflection on language [langage], with work on language [langue].”

The Nahuas have a different philosophical concern, which constructs the very materiality of their language as a non-alphabetic one. Whereas Western metaphysics deems it necessary to record speech as a kind of presence of truth, the Nahuas do not approach the world in this way. At least, it appears that their tlacuilolli does not seek to record speech word by word.

Derrida points out that “the instituting question of philosophy [is]: ‘what is…?’” This question can be understood as a preoccupation with “Being” and an ontological quest for an ultimate God, Truth, or Meaning immune to worldly “distortions,” whose underlying influence is that of the theo-political concept of creatio ex nihilo as discussed in Part O. Alphabetic writing is believed to be able to perfectly imitate speech, and speech entendu(e) (heard and understood) is believed to be “closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier.” Of course, the Eurocentrism of this belief becomes clear once we deprive the so-called “instituting question of philosophy” of its universalist assumption, and situate it as local to Western philosophy

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80 Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 45 [7]: “il faut prendre la culture au mot, comme elle nous prend dans son mot, dans sa langue [...]et une réflexion politique ne peut pas se dispenser d’une réflexion sur le langage, d’un travail sur la langue.”


82 Ibid., 20.
and the logocentric tradition. And yet, even Spivak’s postcolonialist explanation of the Heideggerian/Derridian technique of *sous rature*, a rebellion against logocentrism, falls into a universalistic trap:

Heidegger crosses out the word “Being,” and lets both deletion and word stand. It is inaccurate to use the word “Being” here, for the differentiation of a “concept” of Being has already slipped away from that precomprehended question of Being. Yet it is necessary to use the word, *since language cannot do more.*

A quick contestation of Spivak’s belief in the absolute necessity of the word “being” in “language [that] cannot do more” can be found in Nahuatl, in which this word simply does not exist. Previously, we stated that “Tlaltecuhlti is Tonantzin and therefore Tlaltecuhlti is feminine.” Here, the technique of *sous rature* or “under erasure,” used first by Martin Heidegger and then Jacques Derrida, is adopted. Spivak concisely explains this technique: “[W]rite a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible).” Since Nahuatl does not use the verb “to be” and allows every noun to function as a stand-alone nominal predicate, the Nahua expression *tlaltecuhtli tonantzin* should best be translated into English as “Tlaltecuhlti is Tonantzin,” if we are to respect the internal logic of the language.

Moving around or beyond the logocentric question “what is Tlaltecuhlti?” requires a critical overview of logocentrism and of the different philosophical preoccupations of Western metaphysics and Nahua cosmo-philosophy. A comparative discussion of the verb “to be” in Western languages and its absence in Nahuatl will then help us to explore further Nahuatl’s “writing

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84 Ibid., xiv.
without words.” Its pictorial representation and linguistic function provide the fluidity that allows the feminine rendering of Tlaltecuhtli, Lord of the Earth.

Derrida calls the philosophical quest in Western metaphysics for logos the “metaphysics of presence.” He contends that “there has to be a transcendental signified for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible.”

Through his grammatological scrutiny, Derrida suggests that this metaphysical tradition is characterized by “logocentrism,” a theory that privileges speech over writing following the logic of binary opposition. Logocentric philosophers deem written language an inferior mode of conveying truth, as opposed to speech, which is believed to be a non-mediated expression of thought and truth. Following the same hierarchical line of thought, different written languages are ranked in such a way that alphabetic languages are placed on top, believed to be the most developed ones. Alphabets are privileged because they are believed to be the best way to register speech. As a result of this hierarchization, writing systems such as Nahua tlacuilolli are discarded as “primitive writings,” still in an early period of development from pictographic to alphabetic system, if they are given the privilege of being considered writing at all.

The evolutionary model in studies of writing systems posits a linear logic. All non-alphabetic writing systems are believed to inevitably develop from so-called “primitive” pictography to ideograms and finally reaching the front line of development, that of alphabetic writing. Even some highly knowledgeable scholars in non-alphabetic language systems fall into the trap of this evolutionary model constructed within the logocentric tradition. For example, in his influential *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* published in 1984, John DeFrancis suggests that the Chinese character-based writing system has failed in terms of mass literacy and subsequently calls for a linguistic reformation (indeed alphabetization) of the Chinese language. DeFrancis’s argument about the feasibility of alphabetization is

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based on his theory that “Chinese characters are a phonetic, not an ideographic, system of writing.”

On the other side of the Pacific, American indigenous languages such as Nahuatl, Maya, and Quechua, to name but the most widely spoken ones, are believed to be undeveloped not because they did not develop a writing system, but because colonial prejudice holds that they are not able to develop one. In his influential *A Study of Writing*, Ignace Gelb expresses a typical ethnocentrism without much reservation:

Would it not be surprising […] if the pre-Columbian Indians, who produced a culture frequently compared with the fully developed cultures of the ancient Near east, did not have a writing of the same stature as the systems found in the Orient? The answer I would give is that the Amerindian cultures cannot properly be compared with the cultures of the Near East. […] The highly developed calendar system is the most conspicuous feature of the Amerindian cultures and it stands out as a unique achievement among the dearth of other culture accomplishments. Such a high level of development in a specialized field is surprising, but not unique. […] Furthermore, even a superficial knowledge of the inscriptions of the Aztecs and Mayas is enough to convince oneself that they could never have developed into real writing without foreign influence. The features of the written forms, stagnant for about seven hundred years, the creation of the grotesque head-variant forms with their characteristic superabundance of unnecessary details — a cardinal sin in writing from the point of view of economy — are all indications of a decadent, almost baroque, development.

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“Pre-Columbian Indians” (as he calls the sum of the diverse groups of indigenous peoples, condemning them to the inevitability of the temporal linearity expressed in “pre-Columbian”) did not develop “writing” because, according to the circular logic of the author, they were culturally decadent. Their cultural decadence or impotence, according to Gelb, would have kept their writing stagnant and grotesque, “almost baroque.” No effort whatsoever is made to understand the philosophical, cultural, and historical reasons for the possible disinterest in developing a writing system comparable to the “oriental” ones. Nor has the author investigated the importance of, precisely, “the baroque” in the formation and resistance of the colonial Americas. Certainly, it does not occur to Gelb to compare Maya writing to other known writing systems. Another interesting paradox is that, while writing is condemned as unreliable and inferior within the Western metaphysical tradition, forms of writing other than alphabetic ones, or languages without certain “written” forms, are condemned as indicators of the inferiority of those cultures, peoples, and “races.”

Although Gelb and others claim that the Aztecs had no “real writing,” they did have a concept for it in Nahuatl, tlacuilolli. Tlacuilolli derives from the verb icuiloa, which roughly means “to write” and “to paint.” What is more, according to Marc Thouvenot, tlacuilolli in fact encompasses a wide range of other meanings that are beyond text or painting, for example: sculptures made of wood or stone, or even tattoos. In contrast to the condescending idea that Nahua writing is made of mnemonic “little drawings,” the Nahua scribes developed a complex system of conveying meaning and sound that is both logographic and logosyllabic, “written” with “scribal resources such as rebus and phonetic complementation, the conventions of transliteration and transcription, [and] the composition of signs in

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glyphic blocks.”89 For example, the Nahua sign resembling a human hand is a representation of *atl* (water). And the sign *atl* does not only convey the meaning “water” but is also sign of one of the 20 calendar days. On the other hand, although there is a mnemonic representation of *xochitl* (flower) as the figure of a flower, the sign has different functions. It can designate a flower or one of the 20 calendar days like *atl* does. What is more, the image of a flower might only serve as a phoneme, forming part of a glyph that might or might not convey the meaning of a flower or a calendar day. A glyph that reads *Xochimilco* (name of a place) is formed using the figures of “flower” (*xochitl*) and “cultivated field” (*milpa*). Brotherston rightly argues, “we should be aware of denying some inner systemic principle to even the most primitive-seeming graphie [sic].”90

3.3.2 Being

I shall take a detour through a similar case with its own nuances, namely the reception of Chinese writing in the West. Rey Chow summarizes the “Chinese hallucination” (a term coined by Derrida) as follows:

Chinese “writing” has been a source of fascination for European philosophers and philologists since the eighteenth century because its ideographic script seems (at least to those who do not actually use it as a language) a testimony of a different kind of language — a language without the mediation of sound and hence without history.91

“People without history” is an idea rooted in the Eurocentric theory “according to [whose] concept of history as defined in the Western world from ancient Greece to twentieth-century

France, every society that did not have alphabetic writing […] did not have History.”\(^{92}\) Hegel made a similar assertion about the unsuitability of Chinese for logical thinking without bothering himself to study the Chinese language at all. For example, he claims that only the German language is capable of having two contrary meanings in a single word, an attribute even Latin does not have.\(^{93}\) Qian Zhongshu, in his seminal work 管錐編 (Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters) exposes Hegel’s prejudice:

As we know, the German philosopher Hegel wrote disparagingly about the Chinese language, saying that it was unsuited for logical reasoning. He boasted at the same time, that German had the ability to capture ineffable truths, and adduced “Aufheben” as an example, observing that it combined two contrary meanings in a single word [ein und dasselbe Wort für zwei entgegengesetzte Bestimmungen], and asserted that even Latin does not have such semantically rich concentrations.\(^{94}\)

Quoting Hegel in German, Qian proposes a similar example to Aufheben and shows that the word 易 (yi), as in the classic 易經 (The Book of Changes), simultaneously means “simple,” “to change,” and “unchanging”:

Compared to “unchanging” and “simple,” yi 易 in the sense of “to change” is an antonymous meaning, whereas “unchanging” and “simple” are distinct but synonymous mean-

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92 Mignolo, The Idea of Latin America, xii. For a more radical take on this, see: José Rabasa, Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).
94 Ibid., 203, originally published as 管錐編, vol. 1 (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian Press, 2007), 5: “黑格爾嘗鄙薄吾國語文，以為不宜思辨；又自誇德語能冥契道妙，舉‘奧伏赫變’（Aufheben）為例，以相反兩意融會於一字（ein und dasselbe Wort für zwei entgegengesetzte Bestimmungen），拉丁文中亦無意蘊深富爾許者。”
nings of *yi*. The statement that “the one name of *yi* contains three meanings” thus refers jointly to antonymous and synonymous meanings, as well as the fact that all are used simultaneously.  

It comes as no surprise that those who desperately disparage other cultures do not even consider it necessary to consult some basic knowledge about these cultures. However, ignorance does not always result in direct denigration, as in the case of Gelb or Hegel, who condemn languages that they do not know. It also sometimes leads to exotic fantasies. Derrida points out, for example, that “the concept of Chinese writing […] functioned as a sort of European hallucination [which] translated less an ignorance than a misunderstanding [and] was not disturbed by the knowledge of Chinese script.” Reading on the surface of an unknown language, especially when it is alleged to be “pictorial,” is common practice.

A famous case is Ezra Pound’s “translation” of Chinese poems under the influence of Ernest Fenollosa, who believed that Chinese “ideograms” were “shorthand pictures of the operations of nature.” Contrary to Derrida’s claim that Pound’s “invention of Chinese poetry” should be regarded as “the first break in the most entrenched Western [logocentric] tradition,” Zhang Longxi’s analysis of the Pound–Fenollosa case suggests that

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96 Qian excuses Hegel for being ignorant of Chinese with a mild, diplomatic criticism: “Now, Hegel cannot be blamed for not knowing Chinese. To flaunt one's ignorance carelessly, making it the basis of a grand pronouncement, is also something that scholars and specialists do all the time, and this too can hardly be held against him” (Qian, *Limited Views*, 203).


they should [not] be regarded as free from the sort of Chinese prejudice Derrida has detected in Leibniz, because for them […] “what liberates Chinese script from the voice is also that which, arbitrarily and by the artifice of invention, wrenches it from history and gives it to [poetry].”

The debates over the “ideographicality” of the Chinese language are numerous. Although they are not the major concern of the current study, a quick survey will help our discussion of the Nahua case. After all, it is not uncommon for me to be asked questions, such as “isn’t your language made up of little drawings?” echoing Fellonosa’s theory of the Chinese language. The misunderstanding of Nahua tlacuilolli and Maya hieroglyphs as silent “pictures” also aligns with this theory. DeFrancis even asserts that “there never has been, and never can be, such a thing as an ideographic system of writing.”

Whether or not these so-called pictorial or pictographic writings convey sound is an irrelevant question. In fact, they might well not convey sound. Of course, anyone who knows Chinese knows that the script does record sound, but is not reducible to sound. As Shang Wei puts it: “[O]ne-to-one correspondence between script and sound and overall congruence between writing and speech, […] did not exist in early modern and premodern China.” Shang’s observation does not include the act of read-

101 DeFrancis, The Chinese Language, 133. Several pages later, after surveying the rather ethnocentric theories of Gelb and Mallery regarding “Amerindian” writings as “merely mnemonic,” he argues that to “lump together the writing of the American Indians and the early Chinese and Egyptians because of some similarity in graphic forms is to fall victim to the kind of befuddled thinking that is indicated by calling all of them pictographic or ideographic” (ibid., 137–38).
102 Wei Shang, “Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issue of Vernaculars in Early Modern China,” in Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919, ed. Benjamin A. Elman (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 254–301, at 256. Shang continues: “the very fact that a given word or morpheme is often associated with more than one pronunciation and that the same text can be subject to different vocalizations inevitably complicates,
ing. We can find in Hegel some ungrounded assertions that “the reading of hieroglyphs is for itself a deaf reading and a mute writing.”

Zhang Longxi responds to this prejudice with some common sense:

[R]ead any […] language is a linguistic act of comprehending the meaning of a succession of signs, either with silent understanding or with utterance of the sounds [and] it is not an archaeological act of digging up some obscure etymological roots from underneath a thick layer of distancing abstraction.

Let us now return to the Nahua case to survey how tlaçuilolli, the most salient form of writing of the Nahuas, as well as other surrounding groups, is read (out). Elizabeth Boone, an expert in Nahua writing, explicates that these pictorial histories did not remain mute. Aztec historians did not just consult them quietly in libraries or offices, nor did they read the histories to themselves […]. [Instead], the pictorial histories are closer to being scripts, and their relation to their readers is closer to being that of a play’s script to its actors.

By the same token, Pete Sigal situates the discussion of the writing/painting activity within the religio-ritual setting, where Nahua priests “read’ these documents out loud in a variety of cer-

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emonies by expanding on the images presented on the page.”¹⁰⁶ These “images” were tlacuilolli, which were not meant “to be read as transparent assertions of a reality that they had witnessed [or] as complete narratives.”¹⁰⁷ Tlacuilolli was not a widely practiced activity but was reserved to the professional scribes called tlacuilo: “[A] good tlacuilo contrasts with the bad, not in what we might call his ability to represent accurately a given reality but rather in his artistic merit. Thus a bad tlacuilo is said to be ‘dull’ and one who ‘paints without reflection.’”¹⁰⁸ What Gelb considers the “cardinal sin” of their “almost baroque” writing is clearly an asset.

In Nahuatl, no equivalent to the verb “to be” exists. “I am a person” would be nitlacatl with the first person singular prefix ni- attached to the noun tlacatl (“person”). In case of the third person singular, such as “s/he is Tlaltecuhiti,” one only needs to say tlaltecuhiti. James Lockhart explains this particularity that “each noun in an utterance is at least potentially a complete equative statement in itself,” with the example of the “word for ‘house’ in its dictionary form, calli, [which] has a third person subject and by itself means ‘it is a house,’ or since in many cases no distinction exists between singular and plural, ‘they are houses.’”¹⁰⁹ Put in another way, the relationship between the subject and predicate in Nahuatl does not presuppose fixity. In the words of Gaston Bachelard: “It is not being that illustrates relation, far from that; it is relation that illuminates being.”¹¹⁰ This grammatical relationality is reflected in the pervasive connectedness between earth and heaven, man and woman, good and bad in every aspect of Nahua cosmology, especially in its concept of the divine.¹¹¹ As a mutually dependent relationship,
it gives the possibility for “humans and animals under certain circumstances […] to] become gods”\textsuperscript{112} and vice versa. We only need to see how many rulers named themselves Quetzalcoatl, imagining themselves to be the “incarnations” of this supreme deity. Again, this is different from an idea of the transcendental God (capitalized, singular, but perhaps not the pluri-singular elohim) who created the world ex nihilo, and the human individual as a projection of God’s image. Keller coins the formula “Genesis 1 + omnipotence + ontology = creatio ex nihilo,” which can be played back as creatio ex nihilo conditioned by Christian doctrine leading to “ontology”: “What is?”\textsuperscript{113}

The very contradiction between Tlaltecuhltli and Goddess of the Earth does not exist in Nahuatl, not because the noun tecuhtli might be “goddess” or “lady” but because from its very root, the gender of Tlaltecuthli is uncertain. As one of the most important deities in Nahua cosmology, given their direct association with the earth, Tlaltecuhltli is not confined to any one “sex.” The Nahuas have produced a coherent system in which complementarity, relationality, and communality, rather than opposition, ontology, and individuality, are emphasized and enacted through tlacuilolli writing/painting and its highly mutable pantheon. For these reasons, the Nahuas seem to be perfectly comfortable calling the Earth Lord: Tonantzin Tlaltecuhltli, “Our Mother: The Earth Lord,” in the Song of Teteoinnan.\textsuperscript{114} That “the earth lord is our mother” might at least cause speculation or unease for a modern English speaker (just as Smith’s quotation with mesmerizing gender-blending at the beginning of this chapter has generated all the speculations for us throughout). “Tonantzin Tlaltecuhltli,” however, could be translated also as “Our Mother is the Earth Lord” or “the earth lord is our (benevolent) mother.” Without the fixation of the verb “to be,”

\textsuperscript{112} Sigal, The Flower and the Scorpion, 3.
\textsuperscript{113} Catherine Keller, Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming (London: Routledge, 2003), 64.
\textsuperscript{114} Sigal, The Flower and the Scorpion, 152–53.
Tlaltecuhtli becomes Tonantzin, which is perfectly legitimate in Nahuatl.

Nahua cosmology asserts that a feminine earth is not contradictory to the masculine name of the earth deity, Tlaltecuhtli. In grammatical terms, “the Nahuatl way of saying that a thing ‘is’ another thing is the verbless conjunction or reciprocal reference of two nouns of the same person and number.” However, the creativity of Nahuatl appears to go further than that. The coexistence of masculinity, femininity, zoomorphism, and Tlaloc-rendering in the representations of one deity, Tlaltecuhtli, can be read as a possibility of conveying what I have termed elsewhere the logic of “either…and.” Tlaltecuhtli is (either) feminine (and) masculine. And because neither Tonantzin nor Tlaltecuhtli was locked in alphabets and the compatible grammar of subject-predicate linked with “to be,” the monolithic fixation is even less palpable. They are all entangled, through the earth, through the “mother figure,” through Ometeotl. This strong sense of connectedness or entanglement of Nahua philosophy, without surprise, determines and is reproduced in its syntax:

[I]n the absence of case or a fixed word order, it is often hard to determine the function of third person nouns in Nahuatl, particularly when there are several in a sentence. Object and subject are particularly hard to tell apart. […] In cases like these we must hope that the context will settle the question for us.

A language philosophy that relies on context would only answer the question “what is Tlaltecuhtli?” with a quasi-postmodern “relativism” — it depends. Peter van der Loo believes that what he calls the Mesoamerican “pictorial notating system” has the privilege of being read “not only by the actual painter but

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115 Lockhart, *Nahuatl as Written*, 11.
116 Xiang, “Transdualism.”
117 Lockhart, *Nahuatl as Written*, 11–12, emphasis mine.
118 Not only the Nahua but also other indigenous peoples such as Zapotecos have developed similar writing/painting systems.
also by many other Mesoamerican peoples who may have spoken very different languages.”

Within the conventional limits (that is to say, *not* everything goes), it allows “regional and also personal interpretations of the important elements of the religion [… and] the necessary flexibility for regional and personal adaptation.” Furthermore, “the implication of the name, the images, and the partnerships of Tlaltecuhtli all suggest an identity that […] cannot be only female. Rather, Tlaltecuhtli signified a figure, a deity whose gender cannot be named.”

“Who is Tlaltecuhtli?” is eventually a misleading question to ask, especially when they are isolated from the ritualistic, mythological, philosophical, and linguistic contexts of the Nahuas. Like Tezcatlipoca, the one who kills Tlaltecuhtli in the beginning of the Fifth Era, they also *noujian ynemjian: mictla, tlalticpac, ylhujcac,* “walk in any place: in *mictlan,* the place of the dead, on the earth and in *ilhuicac,* the ‘sky’.”

Tlaltecuhtli is immensely free.

120 Ibid., 85.
121 Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, 304n68.