

The (De)coloniality of Conceptual  
Inequivalence: Reinterpreting *Ometeotl*  
through Nahua *Tlacuiloliztli*

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Colonial discourses and mindsets assume that “if my truth and objectivity is not that of others, then those others should be converted to my own objectivity in religion, economy, politics, knowledge [...] or be put out of the way by other means” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 61). De-universalizing this local, Western and to a large extent, male-gendered “truth without parenthesis” has always been the critical task of decolonization.

However, a different kind of universalism, that of universalizing not local truth or objectivity but of local problems, seems to have managed to escape theorists’ scrutinizing eyes. For example, some white feminists claim the universality of the patriarchal oppression of women, although their works address a problem experienced in the West and almost always rely only on the Western intellectual tradition.<sup>1</sup> Maria Estela Jocón, an indigenous Mayan woman, expresses her unease with this aggressive universalism: “they question us very much, they insist that we should question our culture...what we do not accept is their imposition, that

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they tell us what we have to do, when we have the power to decide by ourselves” (qtd. in Marcos 35). Gordon Brotherston in his earlier work in a similar manner 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” (“Towards a Grammatology of America” 190), thereby assuming that all cultures experience the enmity between text and speech, writing and speaking, and that the logocentric preference of speech over text (a Western problem famously criticized in Derrida’s *Grammatology*) is universal or, universally problematic.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter contests precisely this universalization of local, Western problems (and by consequence, critiques and solutions) by revisiting a prominent and often universalized problem: dualism, which has intimate links with the issues of gender/sexuality and language/writing in Western cosmology. This dualism sets up a hierarchical relationship between men and women, which analogously works in logocentrism to establish a colonial hierarchy between speech and writing, alphabetic writing and non-alphabetic writing, and imperial and indigenous languages. Dualism, or more precisely *ometeotl* as the duality principle in Nahua culture, is so pervasive that one would hardly fail to notice it. Sylvia Marcos rightly summarizes the Nahua *ometeotl* as “a world constructed by fluid dual oppositions, beyond mutually exclusive categories” (35). This rather different way of conceiving the world, although also in terms of the pair and the dual, has been presented in the form of a colonial/modern heteronormative dualism when translated into modern languages.

The first part of this chapter discusses how *ometeotl* has been consistently mistranslated as a heteronormative form of dualism in its modern receptions. This imposition of Western cosmology (that is, truths *and* problems) onto the Nahua context, suppressing and neglecting the conceptual inequivalence between European and Nahua cosmologies is what I call the coloniality of translation. In the specific case of dualism, Nahua *ometeotl* has been made to resemble the model of a hierarchal binary opposition. The second part of the chapter focuses on a decolonial learning to learn from Nahua cosmo-philosophy conceived in its unique pictorial writing system, *tlacuiloliztli*.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the coloniality of translation is not only a violent imposition but also shows the severe intellectual limitations (in its own terms) of modern/colonial cosmology in comprehending the Nahua *ometeotl*.<sup>4</sup> In this light, the conceptual inequivalence enables a decolonial strategy of resistance that we could learn to learn from by unlearning certain conceptual habits that modern scholars hold dear.<sup>5</sup>

The chapter therefore stresses the double-edgedness of the conceptual inequivalence in the process of intercultural translation and transference: its coloniality and decoloniality.

### TRANSLATING “OMETEOTL”

Ometeotl, the supreme divinity in Nahua cosmology, has two gendered aspects: the feminine Omecihuatl and the masculine Ometecuhtli. They are also recognized as Tonacacihuatl and Tonacatecuhtli, Lady/Lord of Our Existence (to-: our; nacatl: that which grows from the earth and sustains life, that is, maize). Ometeotl the divine duality is so important that Miguel León-Portilla argues that all Nahua deities are different manifestations of Ometeotl (*La filosofía náhuatl*; “Ometéotl”), a thesis accepted by Henry Nicholson but contested by Richard Haly (Nicholson 409–410). Haly argues tellingly that Nahua culture, which he categorizes as an oral tradition, “is a more mediated presence than that of peoples who produce their own texts” (269). Ometeotl, or its correlating gendered aspects Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli (often translated as Lady or Lord of duality), at first glance might seem similar to the colonial/modern one: two genders, a heterosexual couple, lady and lord, woman and man. A second glance at how the divine triad has been translated in modern scholarship might further convince one that the Nahua *ometeotl* is no different from the colonial/modern dualism. Before beginning to talk about Ometeotl, we are confronted with at least three possible answers to the question: how many deities are there? Three, if one regards Ometeotl, Omecihuatl, and Ometecuhtli as individual, separate, and autonomous divine beings; two, if Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli are regarded as the additive components of Ometeotl; one, if all three are seen as different aspects of one deity.

Deciding among these options determines how these three words, Nahua theology, and especially the Nahua duality principle (which will be referred to as *ometeotl*) are understood and translated. Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli are often unambiguously translated as either goddess or god of duality, or as the feminine or masculine aspect of Ometeotl, the supreme one.<sup>6</sup> As I will show in the second part of the chapter, through a reading of *Coatlicue Mayor*, Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli do not exist independently from each other and *ometeotl* needs to be understood within the very linguistic structure of Nahuatl, especially its “writing/painting” system *tlacuiloiztli*. The Nahua duality principle works as such: that Ometecuhtli takes up the masculine aspect is largely in relation to the

fact that Omecihuatl takes up the feminine. “Both are in constant mutual interaction, flowing into each other” (Marcos 36). Ometeotl has no gender or is beyond gender.

Unfortunately, when “Ometeotl” is translated into modern languages such as Spanish, English, and French as “dios”, “god,” or “dieu,” “Ometeotl” is made a masculine deity pretending to be generic. Serge Gruzinski, investigating the “colonisation de l’imaginaire,” has produced masculinity for Ometeotl, a deity of duality, by rendering it “le Seigneur de la Dualité” (241). The “duality complex,” as summarized by Nicholson, has become “Complejo de Ometecuhtli (dios de la dualidad)” in Ortiz de Montellano and Schussheim’s work on Aztec medicine (63). The masculine aspect of Ometeotl, the male-gendered Ometecuhtli (tecuhtli means “lord” in Nahuatl) is forced to take up the task of representing the whole duality principle, erasing both the genderless Ometeotl and the female-gendered Omecihuatl. In addition, the feminine aspect of Ometeotl, Omecihuatl is often treated as the consort of Ometecuhtli. We read this dissymmetrical representation of the Ometeotl triad by Bernadino de Sahagún as follows: “[t]he name of the God of heavens was Ometeuctli, and the name of his consort, the woman of the heavens, was Omecihuatl” (cited in Haly 279, note 39). The feminine aspect of Ometeotl therefore becomes the “other than the norm.”<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, an encyclopedia entry would have only Ometecuhtli, the masculine aspect of Ometeotl, listed. The phallogentric and dissymmetrical sexual difference, a problem local to the colonial/modern West, produced in the languages and cosmologies that condition or conceive such differences, has been transplanted onto the Nahua context and quite literally separates and hierarchizes the two gendered aspects of Ometeotl.<sup>8</sup> This imposition of not only one’s linguistic habit but also cosmological truths *and* problems to the other, in the process of translation, especially from an imperial language to an indigenous one, is what I call, the coloniality of translation.

The coloniality of translation operates at different levels; two prominent ones being at the linguistic and the epistemic level. At the linguistic level, the problem is already quite difficult to solve. In English one might use “it,” as when we refer to maize corn or an animal. “It,” however, connotes in English a lack of full agency and that of “life” itself. As a divine being, Ometeotl is not an “it,” not because Ometeotl might not be maize corn or an animal (in fact, Ometeotl as tonacatecuhtli–tonacacihuatl who sustain life, is maize), but because within the cosmology of the English language and its linguistic habit, the agentless and lifeless “it” can hardly

do justice to the divine Ometeotl. With Spanish, into which many Nahua texts were translated, the issue is further complicated. Since compulsory gendering is the grammatical feature of Spanish and many other languages, “Ometeotl” has been coercively translated as “el dios de la dualidad,” the *male* god of duality.

These questions involving Ometeotl’s “gender trouble,” we should not forget, are posed to English or Spanish, not Nahuatl, a genderless language “written” in radically different ways than the alphabetic, speech-recording ones like Spanish or English. Meanwhile, Ometeotl or any other divine beings in the Nahua universe cross gender boundaries and animal–human–divine distinctions constantly (Sigal 3). However, translating Ometeotl as *dios de la dualidad* is *not* a choice without choice even though in modern Spanish using the masculine to designate the generic is a common practice. Here we move to the second level of the coloniality of translation, that of the epistemic. Ometeotl’s gender trouble is not confined by the particular characteristic of some languages such as Spanish and French. Tlaltecuhltli, the deity of the earth, whose name is literally “*Lord of the Earth*” (tlalli—earth; tecuhtli—lord), has been continuously translated as *diosa de la tierra*, goddess of the earth in most modern receptions.<sup>9</sup> Ometecuhltli, literally “*Lord of Duality*” might have shared the same fate of Tlaltecuhltli and become “*Lady of Duality*.” However, this hypothetical “mistranslation” that effeminates Ometecuhltli or Ometeotl for that matter would never happen.

In light of the consistent translation of “tecuhtli” as *diosa* that feminizes Tlaltecuhltli, that Ometeotl has been translated as a masculine god of duality cannot be said to be only a result of the coercive feature of the Spanish language. It points to the coloniality of translation at the epistemic level. Although Nahua mythology “alludes to a set of powerful deities that asserted a feminine earth and a masculine sky,” it is the colonial/modern categorical logic underlying reception studies that has already predefined the so-called “celestial” sphere as exclusively masculine and the “terrestrial” sphere as exclusively feminine (Sigal 3). From the perspective of this strict gender division of heaven and earth, Ometeotl (and Omecihuatl/Ometecuhltli) dwelling in Omeyocan, or the Place of Duality, therefore belongs to the celestial sphere. Belonging to the heavenly sphere, Ometecuhltli can never share the same fate of feminization that Tlaltecuhltli experiences.

The difference of the Nahua *ometeotl*, mapped onto the relationship between heaven and earth, is that the gendered parts do not exist inde-

pendent of each other. Deities are able “to change genders and identities in order to access relevant levels of the cosmos” (Sigal 3). In fact, the celestial Omoteotl “*in tlalxicco ónoc*” spreads from the navel of the earth (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* 32). Coatlicue has been “lowered” to the terrestrial sphere and become fixed as one of the “earth goddesses” despite being mother of the Moon (Coyolxauhqui), the Stars (Centzonhuitznahuac), and the Sun (Huitzilopochtli). Her daughter Coyolxauhqui has not been able to salvage herself from the constraint of the terrestrial even if she is the deity of the moon. Omecihuatl, Lady of Duality, who improperly dwells in Omeyocan at the celestial level, which in the colonial/modern mindset, is only reserved for the masculine deities, has been represented to play so trivial a role that many studies and encyclopedias simply leave her out.

It should be clearer now how the modern translation of Nahuatl words and concepts into European languages has perpetuated the illusion of a universal applicability of local Western cosmology and neglected the conceptual inequivalence between the two worlds. This symbolic imposition however has been hardly successful. The intellectual limitation of Western cosmology to comprehend the complex system of transgender and even trans-species articulations is exemplified in the case of Tlaltecuhltli. Although primarily a deity associated with the feminine characteristics and represented in many occasions as a goddess, Tlaltecuhltli is also a masculine deity bearing a masculine title, *tecuhltli* not to mention zoomorphic and tlaloc-faced representations.<sup>10</sup> This multiple forms that Tlaltecuhltli takes are only possible through the writing/painting system *tlacuilociztli* that does not seek to record speech word by word.<sup>11</sup>

Walter Dignolo argues that decolonial theory is an “option” at odds with “missions” that seek to convert difference into homogeneity or into recognizable and thus controllable subjects. It is an *option* among other options “to be embraced by all those who find in the option a response to his or her concern” (*The Darker Side* xxviii). In my view, the decolonial methodology needs to understand the very modes of resistance that have *already* taken place. A decolonial approach is therefore more a learning to learn from indigenous modes of decolonization than prescribing theories and methods of resistance. It also means learning to unlearn the concepts, assumptions, and the very language that we deploy to think and theorize in the heterosexualist modernity/coloniality.<sup>12</sup>

## OMETEOTL MANIFEST(S)/ED

Ometeotl manifest(s) or is/are manifested in the Nahuatl pictorial “writing” system *tlacuiloliztli*.<sup>13</sup> This unique form of conveying knowledge challenges the familiar conceptual tools such as writing and painting with which we as modern scholars make sense of the world. Pertaining strongly to the visual, *tlacuiloliztli* is not limited to the notion of art, “as something visual to be appreciated and enjoyed but something separate from communication” (Boone 3). If we follow Elizabeth Boone, who argues that in the Nahuatl pictorial writing system *tlacuiloliztli* “the pictures *are* the texts,” it is possible to read not only the familiar book-like codices but also the statues and calendar stones as more than just artistic representations, but as “texts” or mediums that convey knowledge (20). The earliest study of *Coatlicue Mayor* and the calendar stone in the modern era by Antonio León y Gama, in fact, already places *Coatlicue Mayor* in the realm of writing by suggesting, “in the writings of those Indians [...] there are still some figures whose hieroglyphs encompass within themselves many allegorical significances to be interpreted entirely”(3).<sup>14</sup> Gordon Brotherston is one of the very few who takes the calendar stone *Piedra del sol* as *tlacuiloliztli* (“America and the Colonizer Question”).

As modern scholars, we need to rely on familiar concepts such as writing/text and painting/art to make sense of *tlacuiloliztli*. This unique form of conserving and conveying knowledge however is very different from an addition of “writing-text” and “painting-image.” One needs to bear in mind that talking about *tlacuiloliztli* as “pictorial writing” or “writing/painting” is a form of translation and involves a certain level of coloniality that hides the “conceptual inequivalence” between the two cosmologies. Meanwhile, this emphasis on “inequivalence” does not mean that *tlacuiloliztli* is inscrutable.

*Coatlicue Mayor* conceived in *tlacuiloliztli* is more than a mere “representation” (both textual and visual) of a deity whose gender is subsequently fixed. It “is both the syncretic expression of the binary thought that is the foundation of the Aztec metaphysics; and the multiple manifestations of masculinity and femininity” (Roberto Vera 12). Justino Fernández also comes to the conclusion that “the sculpture Coatlicue becomes much more than just the Earth Goddess or the Goddess of the Serpent Skirt. In effect, it symbolizes the earth, but also the sun, moon, spring, rain, light, life, death [...] and the supreme creator: the dual principle” (Fernández,

*A Guide to Mexican Art* 44). That is to say, Ometeotl manifest(s) and is/are manifested in *Coatlicue Mayor* following the duality principle.

“Coatlicue,” the one with skirt of snakes—a name that can be read out by looking at the sculpture by anyone familiar with Nahua mythology and *tlacuilocoliztli*—is composed of “coatl” (snake), “cuetli” (skirt), and “i” the possessive pronoun which has *no* gender (Lockhart 1). All these readings/interpretations seem to suggest that this is not (just) a representation of goddess with a female body.

In line with Nahua *ometeotl*, it is highly problematic to think of any independently existing “earth goddess” or “celestial god” without evoking any counterparts *already* within “him” or “her.” I refer specifically to the feminine rendering of Coatlicue in studies that fixes the genderless Nahua word as “Snakes-Her-Skirt” (Klein, “A New Interpretation” 129). The genderless possessive noun “i” has been fixed as feminine in this translation. The feminine identification of Coatlicue is by no means wrong, given that *cueitl* (or *cuetli*) is often used to designate femininity in *tlacuilocoliztli* and Nahua rituals. The problem lies on the fixation of gender in the very instance of equating “i-cue” to “her-skirt” and further equating the statue, a complex visual/textual/temporal system irreducible to either textual or visual, or their addition to a rather singular and *straightforward* concept written in alphabets: “Coatlicue—Snakes-Her-Skirt”.

Now, let us read the statue as a non-secular *tlacuilocoliztli*.<sup>15</sup> The upper part of the statue, like the other parts, can be perceived in varying ways from different angles and perspectives. The dual principle, or *ometeotl*, according to Justino Fernández in his monograph dedicated to the study of *Coatlicue Mayor* is located on the upper part of the statue (265). This is Omeyocan, the “place of duality.” From a holistic perspective, especially standing at a distance, one observes a face made of two beady eyes, a huge dentate mouth, and a serpentine tongue divided in two halves stretching out of the half-open mouth. However, if one moves closer, another image emerges: two identical snakes, as seen from the profile sides, face each other. The frontal face we saw at first glance is made of two facing faces. Each eye and each half of the mouth now belong to the two different serpent heads that can be only seen in profile. This interpretation that sees two instead of one head becomes more convincing if one goes around to the backside of the sculpture. From the backside, we can observe an identical “one frontal face” made of two facing ones. This “one face” at the back mirrors the other “one face” at the front.

The simultaneous presence of two gendered aspects (Omecihuatl, Ometecuhtli) and one genderless Ometeotl is perfectly incarnated in the upper part of the statue. We have argued previously that the one (Ometeotl) is manifested in the two aspects separately and jointly. Each snake that forms the “head” is distinct yet identical; distinct because each one is a different snake, or gendered manifestation of Ometeotl in the myth; identical because they are both snakes in a mirroring simulating position facing each other. Most importantly, they are all (manifestations of) Ometeotl or *ometeotl*. We also note that on the level of Omeyocan (the upper part of *Coatlicue Mayor*), the gendered aspects of Ometeotl are not separately discernible (if discernible at all) because none of the two facing snakes can be considered to be the masculine or feminine aspect independently from each other, if gendered at all.

The sophisticated juxtaposition of the two snake heads seen from the profile with the two “one-faces” that are formed by the two snakes gives the duality principle a fourth dimension, coinciding with the creation myth of the four “sons” of Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli, the four cardinal directions, the *nahui ollin* (or four movements) and the four (preceding yet co-existing) cosmic eras. The two “one-faces” are in a mirroring relationship that can then be reduced to “one.” That is to say, the two faces that we can see from the front side and the backside of the statue are mirroring each other. Now we can start to appreciate the unfolding movement/*ollin* of Ometeotl. Ometeotl *inter* becomes the two aspects Omecihuatl and Ometecuhtli, which then unfold into three/four and many that fold back *simultaneously* with the unfolding process, into two/one, giving no chance for permanent polarizations.

All of this said, the differentiation of how one might perceive the sculpture is certainly hypothetical and temporal. The boundary between the perspective that sees the “one face(s)” and the perspective that sees the “two” facing profiles is uncertain. However, their mutual presence does not suggest that we are able to see *both* at once.<sup>16</sup> The frontal face, which is the assemblage of two distinct yet identical snake faces, exemplifies this complexity. This *one* that emerges out of *two* contradictory yet complementary forces is only possible in a cosmology that does not polarize the world into separate entities. There is still the fourth dimension, which is the mirroring face on the backside of the statue. One needs to move in time and space so that this fourth dimension emerges and simultaneously folds back to the dualistic pair.

If we follow Ann de León's suggestion that "the front of Coatlicue represented the past, and her back the future," this physical shift from looking at the "past" (front) to the "future" (back) and then to the "past" again endorses the cyclical temporality of the Nahuas (284). This movement that invokes the four dimensions invokes the Nahua cosmogony recorded in the calendar stone. In *Coatlicue Mayor*, we also see that each "arm" is formed by a snake, identical to the ones that form the "head" on the upper side. Being a symmetrical body, if the statue folds 90° inwards along the middle axis like closing an opening book, the two snakes that form the "head" would be overlapped and become "one." The two snake "arms" would then face each other, forming exactly the same heads as in the upper part. Iliana Godoy, adopting a holographic analysis, suggests that *Coatlicue Mayor* enigmatically coincides with contemporary theories on the simultaneously folding and unfolding universe, through the movement we have just imagined by folding along the central axis (85).

By turning 90°, one makes a quarter of one circle. Together with the central point, the unfolding statue forms a quincunx. The *Piedra del sol*, housed with *Coatlicue Mayor* in the same *Sala Mexica* of the National Museum of Anthropology, exemplifies the importance of the quincunx in Nahua cosmology. The sun stone encompasses four previous cosmic eras ("suns") and represents the fifth era as a conglomeration of these four suns. *Coatlicue Mayor* that folds and unfolds along the central axis is coherent with the sun stone through the idea of the quincunx, which conjures up the concept of duality. The lower part of the sun stone, with its two facing half-serpent, half-human faces, might also remind us of the facing snakes of *Coatlicue Mayor*'s "head."

The fifth "sun" that the *Piedra del sol* registers "is the synthesis and 'center' of the four 'earlier' ages. Each of the first four Suns forms one part or aspect of the contemporary Sun" (Elzey 125). This temporality is considerably different from "cyclical time." The coexistence of "previous" eras in the current "sun" suggests the "ongoing presence of the past within the present, not as its precursor or source but as an ineradicable, integral part of the present" (Bal 392). The center of the four eras on the sun stone where Tlaltecuhli, the deity of the earth, is present is also where *Coatlicue Mayor* stands.<sup>17</sup> This connection is only possible in a non-secular sense. What we need to remember is that these "statues," to which modern research's secular vocabulary refers, were not inert *objets d'art* for the Nahuas to contemplate and their synchronicity and multiplicity cannot be circumscribed (only) by a "profane" view. Secularism, Nelson

Maldonado-Torres contends, “as its literal meaning conveys, became [...] a call to leave the past behind and conform to the new standards of meaning and rationality” (362). It also “inverts and then properly modernizes the imperial dimension found in the radical dichotomy between the sacred and the profane” (Maldonado-Torres 369).

The pervasive divine presence is exemplified by the inner logic between the two seemingly unrelated “stones.” The abstract coherence between *Coatlicue Mayor* and the sun stone is maintained through the idea of the quincunx and “cyclical time.”<sup>18</sup> If this is accepted, *Coatlicue Mayor* cannot be an inert sculpture, an artistic representation or a “written/painted” record of a mythical figure, but needs to be viewed as a vibrating divine presence that dynamically dis/closes a (secret) linkage that synchronizes all other existences in the Nahua cosmos.

Tlaltecuhli, the deity of the earth, the same one that dwells at the center of the fifth “sun” represented by the sun stone, is found surprisingly on the underside of *Coatlicue Mayor*, a mysterious space that grants no direct access. If the statue were just an artistic representation, why would the Nahua artist(s) have bothered to “represent” him/her/it painstakingly at a place that in fact no one except for the sculptor(s) would ever see? *Coatlicue Mayor* stands in the quincunx center of the universe, the navel of the earth, where Ometeotl *in tlalxicco ónoc* (“spreads out on the navel of the earth”). It is also where Tlaltecuhli stands. Underneath *Coatlicue Mayor*, “in the breast [of Tlaltecuhli], the quincunx is situated in the center of the centers, at the cross of the celestial paths, those of the underworld and the four poles of the universe” (Matos Moctezuma 23–24).

The “statue” that enables the idea of an emergent third dimension from the juxtaposition of the complementary duals, and which simultaneously multiplies to the fourth and fifth possibilities *ad infinitum* and folding back into the unity with/as Ometeotl, stands in the center of the universe, which is also where Tlaltecuhli dwells. The simultaneity of the divine presence and the exuberant multiplicity of meanings and temporalities are best, and perhaps can be only, registered in *tlacuilociztli*.

We’d better stop here, where a whole dimension of *Coatlicue Mayor* is literally hidden from the uninitiated, mundane viewers. This inaccessible source and origin secure some secrets of the Nahua cosmo-philosophy. Tlacuiloliztli, far beyond simply “art and writing” or “pictorial writing” (although it conveys both translatable meanings), is a radically different form of knowledge that retains a space for the irreducible conceptual inequivalence that resists colonial imposition and universalization of its

cosmology (including its problematic, hierarchical dualism). The modern scholar's desire to scrutinize everything is denied, even just by the material inaccessibility that the Museo Nacional de Antropología decides to preserve. Instead of exposing the underside of *Coatlicue Mayor*, the museum has found a special way to (re)present Tlaltecuhтли without presenting him/her/it: a replica. Although it would have been technically possible to show the underside of the statue through a mirror box, as the museum does to other statues, such as that of *Ehecatl*, they chose not to. This replica is and is not Tlaltecuhтли. In a similar way in which we have relied on "pictorial writing" or "writing/painting" to understand *Tlacuilolizтли*, the replica of Tlaltecuhтли standing besides *Coatlicue Mayor* is a form of translation. It defies a naïve cultural relativism that denies translatability and therefore perpetuates a colonialist stereotype of the inscrutable other. But it also marks the limit of what is translatable and therefore what the colonial/modern knowledge is capable of comprehending.

Tlaltecuhтли who stands in the center/origin of the Nahua universe, beneath the *ometeotl Coatlicue Mayor* in the form of *tlacuilolizтли*, cannot be bothered with the validation from colonial/modern knowledge. It continuously speaks to a whole dimension that remains forever closed to us.

## NOTES

1. I am in no way suggesting that "patriarchy" is a property of the West. Many non-Western cultures are unquestionably patriarchal.
2. Walter Mignolo reports that Brotherston "dropped his claim for a 'grammatology' of the Americas and replaced it, instead, with a long discussion on the social role of the Mesoamerican scribes and the sign carriers" ("Writing and Recorded Knowledge" 310 note 5).
3. José Rabasa states, "[t]he mere fact of speaking of a Nahuatl philosophy entails a process of translating statements not conceived as philosophical into the languages of aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, ontology, and so on. This gesture posits the universality of the disciplines and categories that Western philosophy has developed over the centuries. As such, translation would erase the specificity of the worlds articulated in non-Western terms" ("Thinking Europe in Indian Categories, Or, 'Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You'" 50). I coin this word cosmo-philosophy to maintain this "conceptual inequivalence."
4. Brotherston suggests, "there has been a general reluctance to admit or recall Europe's own severe intellectual limitation (in its own terms) at the time of the first invasions" ("America and the Colonizer Question" 24). I

expand his argument to suggest that facing a different culture, one's intellectual capacity is always severely limited.

5. I borrow the notion of "learning to unlearn" from Tlostanova and Mignolo.
6. In this chapter, I use the capitalized version "Ometeotl" to designate the divinity and the italicized version "*ometeotl*" to refer to the Nahua duality principle which is closely related to and also represented by, but not confined to the divine "triad" Ometeotl.
7. Braitotti contends, following Derrida, that "it can be argued that Western thought has a logic of binary oppositions that treats difference as that which is other-than the accepted norm" (78).
8. For detailed discussions on the complicity between modern colonialism and heteronormativity, see for example Lugones and Oyewùmí.
9. I have discussed in depth this "strange case of Tlaltecuhli" in my PhD thesis "Contested Gendering: Decolonial Readings of Snakewoman Deities and Their Reception" (2013 Perpignan, Tübingen); at the "Decolonial Capital, Dewesternizing Methodologies" panel at the 2014 ACLA Annual Meeting. The result of this research will appear as Chapter 4 in my forthcoming monograph.
10. For a comprehensive discussion on the different representations of Tlaltecuhli as male, female, animal, and Tlaloc (rain god), see Matos Moctezuma.
11. Elizabeth Boone contends in the context of Nahua writing/painting system that the "need to record speech [as in Western metaphysics] is not universally felt" (20).
12. María Lugones coins the term "heterosexualism" to "understand the relation of the birth of the colonial/modern gender system to the birth of global colonial capitalism" and therefore complicates Anibal Quijano's notion of "the coloniality of power" (186–187).
13. Richard Haly claims that *Ometeotl* is an invention of ethnographers like León-Portilla who aims to make Nahua culture resemble Christendom. He analyzes how the so-called "oral tradition" of the indigenous Nahuas is only known to us through a mediated presence of the books in ethnography and the history of religions (269). He further claims that there is no representation of Ometeotl (278).
14. If otherwise acknowledged, all translations from other sources to English are mine.
15. I have not included any image in this chapter deliberately. This intends to invite readers to reflect on the limits of the textual and its (linear) temporality, very different from the visual and *Tlacuiloliztli*, the beyond-textual-and-visual medium that conveys knowledge and cosmo-philosophy.

16. Eric Gombrich's classical study *Art and Illusion* opens with a case of a drawing, which is both a rabbit and a duck. However, no matter how fast one switches from the two alternatives, we can only see either the rabbit or the duck at one time. This leads Gombrich to conclude, "we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time" (5). Earlier on the same page that discusses the rabbit-duck game of perception, the art historian accuses Egyptian art of having "adopted childish methods because Egyptian artists knew no better" (5). It is not difficult to imagine Gombrich calling the Aztecs "primitives" as he does with other American "Indians" (85-86). Interesting and perhaps unforeseen by professor Gombrich, his analysis of the rabbit-duck finds its best example in Nahua dualism. *Ometeotl* manifesting/ed in *Coatlicue Mayor* moves beyond the confinement of the logic of "either...or" and its purported alternative: "both...and".
17. Traditionally, as the name of the calendar stone shows, the deity that appears in the center has been identified as Tonatiuh (deity of), the sun. Klein however convincingly contests this identification, after an exposure of the divine functions and the related artistic representations of Tonatiuh which are incompatible with the one allegedly present in the center of the sun stone. Like the other four "suns" represented around it, the fifth cosmic era or "sun" would also, "at the navel of the female earth goddess [*sic.*] Tlaltecuhli" (*The Identity of the Central Deity 2*). She argues that it is then more appropriate to identify the deity present at the center as Tlaltecuhli with her/his "connotations of earth, death, darkness, and cyclic completion" (3).
18. One can also imagine that *Coatlicue Mayor* is symbolically standing *on* the Aztec Calendar Stone whose central deity, Tlaltecuhli is also the center of *Coatlicue Mayor* hidden underneath, facing/*in* the earth.

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