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### Pete Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*

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## Book Reviews

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*The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture.* By Pete Sigal. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. xvi + 361 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$94.95 cloth, \$25.95 paper.)

When writing about Nahua gender roles, the terms "femininity" and "masculinity" have never seemed quite right. The ambiguity of gendered images and discourses allows some scholars to see Nahuas as having had male-dominated institutions and ideologies, while others see more egalitarianism, if not equality. Pete Sigal's great contribution in his new book is to explore such ambiguities in the context of an analysis of Nahua sexual ideas, visual representations, and practices before and after conquest. The book offers a cultural history of sexuality as well as an intellectual history based upon an in-depth investigation of sources, both indigenous and Spanish, including pictorial manuscripts, the writings of Catholic priests, texts by colonial indigenous and *mestizo* writers, and idolatry and other criminal cases.

Using these lines of evidence, Sigal's arguments focus on four ideas. First, for Nahuas, sexuality was fundamentally related to fertility of all kinds, not just human, and while sexual desire or acts could be carried out excessively, they were not deemed sinful. Second, while the forms of ideological and social control promulgated by the Catholic Church influenced native religious beliefs and practices, the ability of the Church and its representatives to remake the complex of ideas around sexuality and excess—especially among the enormous Nahua commoner population—was limited by the vastness and cultural diversity of that population. This fact helps explain why "a hybrid sexual system...still survives today in many indigenous Mesoamerican societies" (p. 13). Third, deities that are often described by scholars as clearly male or female were in fact ambiguously gendered. Fourth, same-sex desire and acts were seen as neither sinful nor aberrant. The aforementioned arguments, in one way or another, relate to one basic concept, the idea of *tlazolli*, or "trash," which Sigal explores by building on the pioneering analysis of the concept in Louise Burkhart's book, *The Slippery Earth*. Sigal's discussion can be found in two key chapters, Chapter Two, "Trash" and Chapter Three, "Sin."

As Sigal argues, for Nahuas, both the earth and human body could produce dangerous substances that undermined the equilibrium, complementarity, and probity that formed the ideals that underlay their desire to avoid excess. The goddess Tlazolteotl, a goddess of sexuality, fertility, but also ritual cleanliness, served as a demonic symbol of evil for Spanish priests. However, the more priests promoted her as a symbol of sin, the more commoners especially saw her as linked to fertility, childbirth, and even sexual healing. The efforts of friars, particularly Motolinía (Fray Toribio de

Benavente), Bernardino de Sahagún, and Diego Durán—the subjects of the third chapter—to inculcate new ideas about sin and confession were undermined by the need to use indigenous deities and ideas as vehicles for understanding Nahua ideas about the life cycle and sexuality. Because, for Catholics, these beliefs and practices intersected with basic ideas about sin and salvation, knowledge gathering, sermons, and confession manuals on family and sexuality represented crucial elements of their efforts to create a new Christianized Nahua morality.

The chapters that follow take up other deities, with an especially insightful discussion in Chapter Four of Tezcatlipoca, a warrior deity whose imagery was sexually ambiguous rather than completely masculine. Sigal analyzes state and household fertility rituals, and an array of Nahua sexual practices and tales of seduction that show how Nahuas connected sexuality (whether same-sex or heterosexual) and politics. A discourse that expressed fears about how excessive sexual pleasure could lead rulers and nobles to lose power became connected to ideas about sin and chastity in the colonial era but, as Sigal shows, only partially.

A broader discussion of Nahua deities and their cosmology would have served to contextualize the particular deities and ceremonies on which the book focuses. There are also places, especially in the analysis of the three friars' writings in the third chapter, where suppositions that are supported give way to speculation about attitudes, even psychology, of these friars that is not well grounded in evidence. Nevertheless, this deeply researched and well-argued book, written by an author who brings a sensitive eye to how western ways of comprehending sexuality and native imaginaries influence our contemporary understandings of these subjects, is essential reading for scholars and advanced students interested in gender, sexuality, and family in a major Mesoamerican cultural and linguistic grouping.

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*Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America.* By John Tutino. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. x + 698 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$99.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.)

In this provocative and lengthy tome, John Tutino argues that world capitalism began in the relatively underpopulated lands to the north of Mexico City, a region that included the Bajío and stretched northward into Texas and New Mexico. Following Christopher Columbus' voyage in 1492, a new world began to emerge and, according to Tutino, "for three centuries no region was more important to the creation of that world than the Bajío" (p. 29). This