

# THE NAHUA NEWSLETTER

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## NAHUA NEWSLETTER NEWS

Welcome to the *Nahua Newsletter*, your biannual publication devoted to scholarship and research into the culture, language, and history of Nahua peoples and other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica. With issue number 44 we complete 22 years of publication in service to our readers. The purpose of the *NN* is to increase communication among researchers and others interested in Nahua affairs, and to provide a point of focus and source of information for readers. Last year we combined issues 42 and 43 because we were conducting ethnographic field research in a Nahua community in northern Veracruz, Mexico. Now we are back and will resume the normal biannual November and February publication cycle.

As most readers are aware, past issues of the *NN* are freely accessible online (minus the illustrations in the printed copy that serve to draw attention to new publications). It is our pleasure to announce that the *NN* now has a new domain name and redesigned Web presence —

The *Nahua Newsletter* has moved to <http://www.nahuanewsletter.org>.

The creative design work was done by Santiago Montalvo, a full-time student and member of the Web development team at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Many thanks, Santiago! The *NN* now includes a photo gallery of photographs taken in the traditional Nahua community of our field research, in the municipio of Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz. We hope that readers will enjoy this new feature.

We have had to make a very difficult decision regarding our readers who are incarcerated. Several years ago, someone brought a copy of the *NN* into the California state prison system and we received an immediate and enthusiastic response from inmates. Most are speakers of the Nahua language although some speak other Mesoamerican indigenous languages. Inmates would often write (sometimes in Nahuatl) asking for information or study materials on their language and culture. With each issue the number of prisoners has grown considerably, and we often receive letters several times a week from them. The letters were usually written in beautiful calligraphy, probably by prison scribes, and they were very complimentary of the *NN* and its role in furthering Nahua studies. Some of the correspondents are obviously gifted with languages and most wish to investigate their ethnic heritage. Last week, we received our first letter from a Nahua incarcerated in Arizona and so word is spreading further afield.

Trouble began several years ago when California prison officials ruled that a number of languages, including Nahuatl, would no longer be tolerated in the prisons. Among the reasons was fear that inmates would use these languages in coded communications among themselves and with people on the outside. We were contacted by the University of California Berkeley law school about the issue and learned that legal representatives were planning to fight the rulings in court as challenges to free speech. At that time we were unfamiliar with all of the issues involved, and we have no current information to report on the disposition of the case. In the meantime, we continued to send the *NN* to any prisoner who requested it.

Two events have changed the situation. First, we are increasingly getting the newsletter sent back unopened, with notices such as "Contraband Language," "Forbidden Language," or simply, "Return to Sender" scrawled on the envelope. At this point we are not at all certain that the majority of the issues mailed out are getting through to inmates. The second development is that several readers have written to say that they have been contacted by inmates and that they were understandably upset. We have always avoided sending out the special directory issue to prisoners, but they were nonetheless able to get the names and addresses of people who have submitted requests for cooperation, or who have changed their address or were new subscribers as this information typically appears in the Directory Update section of each issue.

These developments have caused a dilemma. The purpose of the *NN* is to encourage communication among readers and so we did not want to eliminate names and addresses. It would have been an impossible complication to send a separate edition to prisoners that had other readers' contact information blocked out. After much thought, we decided to cease altogether sending the newsletter to prisons. We regret this turn of events but feel that we have little choice. The prisoners were responsive and interested readers but we have no idea what crimes they may have committed and we felt that readers' worries about receiving requests from them is a legitimate concern. We have written a letter to inmates explaining our decision in hopes that they would at least understand the reasoning behind it.

A sidelight of these events is that a few months ago we received a letter from a researcher in Europe who was interested in conducting an anthropological study of Nahua prisoners. We determined that the request was legitimate and we forwarded the list of names and addresses of inmates to the researcher. We have not been updated on the progress of this project but in a letter received at the end of October, an inmate wrote to say that he had talked to the investigator who asked about his interest in the Nahua. The inmate reported that he had shared information about his being from a village in Mexico, that he spoke Nahuatl, and that he was interested in finding out more about his ancestors and cultural heritage. When the work is completed, we sincerely hope that our colleague will communicate the results of this study to *NN* readers.

This issue of the *NN* contains announcements, calls for cooperation, news items, a directory update, and a special commentary by philosopher James Maffie on the important concept of *nepantla* among both ancient and contemporary Nahua. He is particularly interested in receiving feedback from readers, so please send comments to the editor, to be published in a future issue, or respond directly to the author. As many of you will recall, Jim made an important contribution, published in *NN* 40:18-23 (November 2005), in his analysis of the concept of *teotl*.

The *NN* is here to serve its readers so please forward to the address below any news items, announcements of recent publications, accounts of research, commentary, questions, points of interest, or new insights. As always, the *NN* is sent out free of charge to subscribers, but we do accept donations to help offset printing and postage costs. Please make your check out to the *Nahua Newsletter* and send it to the address below. The *NN* has been supported by readers for 22 years and now reaches more than 400 subscribers in 15 countries. It is a record we can all take pride in.

Finally, do not forget to take a look at our new Web site, and send your comments.

Please direct all communications and donations to:

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[The illustrations have been removed from the online version of the *Nahua Newsletter*]

## NEWS ITEMS

1. Maria J. Rodríguez-Shadow would like to alert readers of the *Nahua Newsletter* to two new publications produced by Novedad editorial. To order copies or for more information, contact Miriam López at [mirlop@yahoo.com](mailto:mirlop@yahoo.com), or Maria J. Rodríguez-Shadow by e-mail at [davecita@hotmail.com](mailto:davecita@hotmail.com), or by writing to her at Dirección de Etnología y Antropología Social-INAH, Avenida Revolución No. 4 y 6, San Angel, México, D. F. 01000 MEXICO.

*Las Mujeres en Mesoamérica Prehispánica*. Coordinado por María J. Rodríguez-Shadow. Toluca: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, 2007. ISBN 968-835-976-9

"Este libro es el resultado de dos reuniones académicas y representa los esfuerzos de especialistas de diversas nacionalidades interesadas en analizar la situación social de las mujeres y las relaciones entre los géneros en diferentes culturas del México precolombino desde varias disciplinas antropológicas: la arqueología, la etnohistoria y la historia del arte, entre otras."

### Indice:

"Introducción" por Maria J. Rodríguez-Shadow

#### Sección Introductoria

"Jerarquía de género y organización de la producción en los estados prehispánicos" por Walburga Wiesheu

"Las relaciones de género en México prehispánico" por M. J. Rodríguez-Shadow

#### Área Maya

"Las deidades femeninas de la creación quiché" por Beatriz Barba A.

"Atributos y connotaciones de las figuras femeninas mayas desde algunas imágenes clásicas posclásicas" por Pía Moya Honores

"Las mujeres mayas prehispánicas" por Antonio Benavides

"Las relaciones de género en un grupo doméstico de las planicies yucatecas" por Marcos Noé Pool y Héctor A. Hernández Alvarez

#### Zona de Oaxaca

"Estado y Sociedad: estudio de género en el Valle de Oaxaca" por Ernesto González Licón

"El género en las urnas funerarias zapotecas" por Meaghan Peuramaki-Brown

#### Cultura Mexicana

"La condena de los "transgresores" de la identidad masculina: un ejemplo de misoginia mesoamericana" por Nicolás Balutet

"Una nueva interpretación de la escultura de Coatlicue" por Cecelia F. Klein

"Los teotipos en la construcción de la feminidad mexicana" por Miriam López Hernández

Un número temático dedicado a "Arqueología de género": *Expresión Antropológica*, nueva época, número 29, enero-abril de 2007 (Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura).

"Se trata de un número temático dedicado a los estudios de género en Mesoamérica en el que colaboran especialistas de México, Estados Unidos y Canadá en la construcción de una tradición de Arqueología de género en nuestro país."

Índice:

"Las mujeres nahuas a través del tiempo: leyes, política y activismo" por Susan Kellogg

"De lo subjetivo y lo objetivo en la Arqueología de género" por Elizabeth M. Brumfiel

"Guerreras: el papel de las mujeres en la guerra Prehispánica" por Sharisee D. McCafferty y Geoffrey G. McCafferty

"La Arqueología de género en México, avances y perspectivas" por María Rodríguez-Shadow

"Sexo y género en el Valle de Oaxaca" por Ernesto González Licón y Amanda Zamora Sánchez

2. La Biblioteca Latinoamericana de la Universidad de Tulane se complace en anunciar que ha abierto el concurso para las becas de investigación Richard E. Greenleaf. Estas becas son posibles gracias a la generosidad del Dr. Richard Greenleaf, profesor emérito de Tulane y distinguido historiador. El propósito de las becas es ofrecer a investigadores que residen permanentemente en cualquier país de Latinoamérica o del Caribe una beca residencial a corto plazo que les permita utilizar los recursos de la Biblioteca Latinoamericana en Tulane para adelantar un proyecto de investigación en los campos de las humanidades o las ciencias sociales.

For more information, please contact Rosanne Adderley at [adderley@tulane.edu](mailto:adderley@tulane.edu), or write to Doris Stone, Director, The Latin American Library, Tulane University, 7001 Freret Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70118 U.S.A.

3. Stephen C. Holler (Department of Theology, Thomas More College, Crestview, Kentucky 41017 U.S.A.) sends along news of two publications and a presentation:

"Exploring the Popular Religion of U. S. Hispanic/Latino Ethnic Groups." *Latino Studies Journal* 6(3):3-29 (September 1995).

"The Origin of Marian Devotion in Latin American Cultures in the United States." *Marian Studies* XLVI:108-27 (1995).

"La Virgen de Regla: Reversing the Slave Master's Ideology" paper presented at the University of Havana, 2002.

[The illustrations have been removed from the online version of the *Nahua Newsletter*]

4. The following communication has been received from Nicolás Balutet: "Estimado colega, le mando este correo para informarle de varias cosas. Primero, enseño ahora en la Universidad "Jean Moulin"- Lyon (Francia), Faculté des Langues, Manufacture des Tabacs 6, cours Albert Thomas, 69008 Lyon FRANCIA; nicolas.balutet@univ-lyon3.fr. Mi nueva dirección personal es la siguiente: 8 rue d'Algérie, 69001 Lyon FRANCE; nicolas.balutet@orange.fr. Aquí tiene una presentación de mi nuevo libro: *Le jeu sacré maya*. Paris: Le Manuscrit Collection "Essais et Documents," 2006, 115 pp." Table des Matières:

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5. The following request has been received from Hector Fuentes, Global Interpreting, 14417 Chase St. Suite 392, Panorama City, California 91402 U.S.A. / 866.397.9288 (toll free) / 818.510.4737 (office) / 818.510.4739 (fax) / 818.939.3244 (mobile):

"We are an interpreting company in Los Angeles. We have a request from the California Criminal Justice Center for two languages/dialects, Nahuatl and Tlapaneco. These requests are for an oral interpretation in a criminal and civil matter. Would you know anyone or refer me to any organization that can help me with this request? Any information or referrals would be greatly appreciated."

**COMMENTARY****"The Centrality of *Nepantla* in Conquest-Era Nahua Philosophy"****By James Maffie****Department of Philosophy  
Colorado State University**

Fray Diego Durán reports an anonymous Nahua as having characterized the religious beliefs and practices of his fellow Nahua in terms of *nepantla*, i.e., as "betwixt and between" Christianity and Nahua religion (*en medios*), and as "neither one nor the other" or "neither fish nor fowl" (*neutros*) (Durán 1994, quoted in Elzey 1976:324; see also Elzey 2001:365).[1] Given the all-encompassing nature of religion in indigenous Nahua life, we may safely say that Durán's informant's characterization applied to post-conquest Nahua life in its totality. The Nahua were experiencing *nepantla*.

Durán's informant's remark highlights one of the single most important concepts in indigenous Nahua philosophy. *Nepantla* characterizes a particular kind of process or activity: one consisting of middling mutuality and balanced reciprocity. I call such processes "*nepantla*-processes." *Nepantla*-processes are dialectical, transactional, and oscillating; centering as well as destabilizing; and abundant with mutuality and reciprocity. They situate people or things in *nepantlatli*, "in the middle" of — or "betwixt and between" — two endpoints. *Nepantla*-processes are also simultaneously destructive and creative, and hence, transformative.

*Nepantla* functions both descriptively and prescriptively in Nahua philosophy. It plays a central role in Nahua metaphysics' account of the nature of reality and of the human condition. It also plays a central role in Nahua wisdom, ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics, e.g., in their normative conceptions of the good life for human beings, good conduct, good cognizing, and good art. *Nepantla* accordingly figures prominently in Nahua prescriptions concerning how humans ought to conduct their lives in all respects: how to behave, think, feel, judge, speak, sing, dress, eat, create, weave, and work.

In what follows, I first examine the notion of *nepantla*. Sections II and III explore the descriptive role of *nepantla* in Nahua metaphysics generally and in its conception of the human condition. Section IV discusses the normative role of *nepantla* in Nahua wisdom, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics.

**I. *Nepantla* Examined**

Fray Alonso de Molina's *Vocabulario en Lengua Castellano y Mexicana y Mexicana y Castellana* contains numerous entries for *nepan*-compounded or *nepan*-derived words.[2] Let us see what we can learn about *nepantla* by examining some of these.

First, consider the verbs: *nenepantlazotlalo* ("to love each other"), *nenepantalzotlaltia* ("to create bonds of friendship between people"), *manepanoā* ("to get married, to join hands"), *motlatolnepanoā* ("to agree on what is said"), *nenepantlazotlalo* ("to love each other"), *nepanotl titotlapaloa* ("to greet one another"), *nepan tzatzilia* ("to shout to one another or for those who are working to hurry one another"), and *tictonepantlatalxilia* ("to blame each other for something"). And consider the nouns: *tenepantla moquetzani* ("one who puts himself between those who are quarreling in order to calm them"), *nepantla quiza titlantli* ("messenger between two people"), *tenepantla tetzalan ninemi* ("act of stirring up trouble among others"),

*nenepantlapaloliztli* ("reciprocal greeting"), *monepantlapopolhuia* ("those who pardon each other"), and *tlatolnepaniuiliztli* ("agreement or conformity of reasons and opinions").

Frances Karttunen suggests *nepan*- "conveys a sense of mutuality or reciprocity" (1983:169). The foregoing words confirm this. The activities and processes designated are quintessentially relational, transactional, and dialectical. They involve dialogue, reciprocity, or mutual interaction between two or more individuals. They are social processes that occur in a distinctly *social space* that exists betwixt and between or in the middle of the relevant actors. This social space is also unstable, ill-defined, and ambiguous. The processes also appear to be simultaneously destructive and constructive. For example, the process of becoming friends, lovers, or marital partners destroys the participants' prior identities while at the same time creating new ones. The nouns above likewise refer to something quintessentially social, transactional or dialectical, e.g., a "messenger between two people" and "agreement or conformity of reasons and opinions."

Second, consider *nepanoā*. Karttunen (1983:169) glosses *nepanoā* as a reflexive verb meaning, "for things to intersect, unite, join together," and as a transitive verb meaning, "to join, unite something, to examine something." Campbell (1985:212) glosses it as "to unite one thing with another, to lay one thing on another." Such processes involve the mutual or reciprocal intersecting, uniting, connecting or conjoining of two (or more) things. Molina contains a second entry, *nepanoā*, which Campbell glosses as "to have intercourse with a woman or to push into a group of people" (1985:212). The corresponding noun, *nenepanoliztli*, refers to the activity of "copulation or carnal intercourse" (1985:212). Sexual intercourse involves the mutual and reciprocal uniting, transacting, commingling or joining together of two individuals.[3] It is quintessentially social and occurs in a distinctly *social space*, i.e., one betwixt and between participating individuals. This space is also unstable, ill-defined, and ambiguous. Sexual commingling likewise appears to be simultaneously destructive and constructive. It destroys the prior identities of participants while simultaneously creating new ones. Their identities and lives become mutually conjoined, intermixed, and in the process, transformed. Sexual commingling also results in the birth of new human beings. In sum, *nepanoā* (in both senses) refers to processes or activities that are essentially social in that they consist of the mutual or reciprocal intersecting, intercouring, transacting, uniting, connecting, or conjoining of two (or more) things. They are also social in the sense of occurring in and among, betwixt and between, or in the middle of the relevant *relata*.

Mutuality, reciprocity, middlingness, and betwixtness-and-betweenness characterize those activities referred to by *nenepanoā*, "to join or mix one thing with another," and by *tlaneapanuiuxoliztli*, the "act of shaking and mixing something together" (Campbell 1985:212). Shaking and mixing are revealing examples. They are middling in a variety of ways. Let us look at shaking. First, the physical process of shaking things together is itself middling. It literally takes place between two endpoints. It also involves a rhythmic motion that oscillates back and forth between the two endpoints. Second, shaking is middling in the sense that it involves the mutual interacting and reciprocal intermixing of more than one thing. It is social. Third, shaking places the original ingredients in a new physical position, one suspended betwixt and between the two peaks of its back-and-forth motion. It creates a dynamic, unstable and uncertain physical condition into which it places the ingredients. Fourth, shaking removes the original ingredients from their erstwhile ontological categories and places them into a new ontological category: one that is unstable, confused, and mixed up. The ingredients are now neither fish nor fowl, betwixt and between their original categories. Shaking involves the reciprocal and mutual co-creation of something entirely new: a *tertium quid*.

Shaking is therefore ontologically ambiguous since simultaneously destructive and creative. It destroys the original ingredients while also subjecting them to a transformative process of becoming something else. Shaking involves the mutual destruction of the original ingredients as well as their interactive transformation

into something new: something that is neither one nor the other (*neutros*). By shaking things up, by confusing the originals, by placing them in a process of transition, shaking creates something new: viz., "something shaken or mixed together" (*tlanepanuiixolli*). And with this we come upon a fundamental tenet of Nahua metaphysics: creation involves destruction.

Finally, when well-executed, shaking results in the thorough balancing, homogenizing, or equilibrating of the relevant ingredients. Yet the attained balance is fragile and ultimately shortlived. Something shaken together is ontologically unstable since it continually risks becoming separated again. And indeed, so it will — eventually. Here, again, we come upon another basic tenet of Nahua metaphysics: balance is hard won and ultimately fragile and shortlived. Things fall apart. Things get mixed up.

Consider next *tlaxinepanoā* ("to weave something"), *tlaxinepanoliztli* ("the act of weaving"), and *xinepanoā* ("to weave something, like mats, fences, or something similar") (Campbell 1985:212-13). Weaving, along with woven products (e.g., fabric and mats), is extremely suggestive in Nahua thought.[4] Weaving wonderfully exemplifies the above attributes of *nepan-* processes: mutuality, reciprocity, betwixtness-and-betweenness, and creative transformation. It is clearly a middling or centering activity in many senses. First, it literally takes place in the middle of the ends or sides of the loom. It consists of a rhythmic, back-and-forth motion that oscillates from one side of the loom to the other. Second, weaving involves the interlacing, reciprocal crossing over, the mutual enfolding, placing on top of, and overlapping of warp and weft threads. Third, it involves the mutual interaction of more than one thing. One interlaces two or more threads together so as to create a dynamic state of mutual or reciprocal tension. Warp pulls upon weft, weft upon warp. It creates a new, middle space of mutual tension — a space that exists only to the degree that such tension exists, only to the degree that warp and weft coexist in mutual balance with and against one another. The well-woven fabric holds its weave and shape, while the poorly woven one easily becomes warped, frayed, or unraveled. In this sense, weaving likewise involves the creation of an unstable ontological condition or state of affairs. Things become unraveled.

Weaving is ontologically ambiguous in the sense of being simultaneously destructive and creative. On the one hand, it creates something new: a structured fabric (*tlaxinepanolli*). It creates something that is neither warp nor weft yet at the same time both warp and weft held in reciprocal tension with one another. On the other hand, it destroys the prior identities of the individual fibers. Weaving is consequently a transformative process. It transforms individual fibers into woven fabrics. And so we return to the tenet of Nahua metaphysics: transformation is simultaneously a creative and destructive process. The creation of something new is predicated upon and emerges from the destruction of something prior. Artistic creating and transforming, which are simply instances of metaphysical creating and transforming, are instances of *nepantla*-processes.

In sum, weaving occurs in the middle, is itself a middling activity, and finally, it produces something that exists in the middle. The accomplished weaver (*tlaxinepanoani*) knows how "to middle" the threads, i.e., bring them into mutual balance with one another so as to create a dynamic state of reciprocal tension between them. She balances warp and weft so as to create a *cualli* ("good") fabric.[5] Weaving also involves, to borrow from Louise Burkhart's characterization of spinning and sweeping, "an intersection of order and disorder," as a single piece of fabric emerges from the collective disorder of spun fibers, loom sticks, treadle, heddle rods, shed stick, rolling stick, and batten (Burkhart 1997:45; see also Anawalt 2001). Weaving (along with embroidery and brocade) was also associated with sexual activity. And so we return to *nepanoā*.[6]

Cecelia Klein (1982) argues that weaving operates as a root or organizing metaphor of Nahua — and

indeed, all Mesoamerican — philosophy.[7] She characterizes the Mesoamerican conception of the cosmos as a "weavers' paradigm" (1982:1). Mesoamericans saw the cosmos as "bounded, defined, and contained by long, thin, essentially supple objects of a basically cord-like form," and as a woven fabric consisting of "pliant cords stretched out as on a giant loom" (1982:2,4). The Nahua conceived the cosmos as having thirteen layers: three underworld; one the earth's surface; and nine upperworld. They conceived these layers as folded lengths of a single cloth, not as an ontological hierarchy or "great chain of being," as is typically the case in Western metaphysics since Plato (Lovejoy 1933). The nine layers of the upperworld are well-ordered, like a well-woven fabric. The three underworld layers are ill-ordered, resembling a tangled mess of threads. The surface of the earth is also tangled, twisted, and crumbled. Moreover, time itself — or rather, time-space — travels in the patterns of the weaver's weft: repeatedly oscillating in back-and-forth motion. Dennis Tedlock has accordingly suggested that Mesoamerican calendrical periods are more aptly conceived as folds of a cloth mounted upon a loom rather than as wheel-like "cycles" (as is customary in Mesoamerican scholarship).[8] If Klein and Tedlock are correct, then it appears that the Nahua understood the cosmos as the product of a *nepantla*-process such as weaving, and moreover, as something possessing the structure that we would expect from such a *nepantla*-process.

In sum, the foregoing Nahuatl verbs designate activities or processes that are middling in several senses. First, they are middling in the intransitive sense of occurring in the middle or betwixt and between two (or more) *relata*. Second, they are middling in the intransitive sense of involving back-and-forth motion, mutuality, give and take, reciprocity, and dialectical transaction. Third, they are middling in the transitive sense of doing something to their *relata*, viz., middling them. And fourth, they are middling in the sense of creating something new — a *tertium quid* — that is ontologically speaking betwixt and between the original *relata*. These processes or activities occupy, use, and apply the middle as well as create a middling product. They are ambiguous processes in the sense of being simultaneously destructive and creative. They destroy old identities while also creating new ones. They are metaphysically transformative.

Let us briefly examine several *nepan*- compounded or derived nouns and adjectives. The referents of these appear to be either (1) creative processes (such as weaving), (2) things that are the product of processes that are characterized by *nepan*-, or (3) things that behave in a middling manner (e.g., messengers).

Consider *anepanolli* ("joining of waters that flow into some place") and *inpaniuhca yn ome atoyatl* ("the junction of two rivers"). The former refers to a process: the mutual flowing together or confluence of waters resulting in their intermixing, commingling, and transforming. The latter refers to the place where this occurs: their junction, which is a place of continuous mutuality, reciprocity, and transformation. The confluence of two rivers is unstable and in transition. It is ontologically ambiguous since it lies betwixt and between the two feeder rivers. It exists simultaneously as neither river and as both rivers. The confluence is also ontologically destructive and creative. It destroys the two feeder rivers while simultaneously creating a new one.

Although a post-conquest phrase, *peso ynepantla ycac* is extremely suggestive. Molina glosses it as *fiel de la balanza* or "needle or pointer of a balance." The needle behaves middlingly, oscillating back and forth as a consequence of the mutually interacting forces (weights) of the objects tugging on the balance's arm. It operates in a dynamic and unstable middle zone, betwixt and between two endpoints.

Two better known examples of *nepan*- words are *onepanco* and *onenpanolco*, both of which are commonly translated as "crossroads" (*encrucijada de caminos*). According to Wayne Elzey (1976:324-25), crossroads served as a paradigmatic case of *nepantla* in Nahua thought. The Nahua saw the crossroads as the center or middle of two intersecting paths. This intersecting creates a new space, one betwixt and

between the two paths — a marginal, anomalous, unstable, and ill-defined place; one that is ultimately "no-place" at all. Finally, the crossroads is ontologically ambiguous since it is neither this path nor that path yet simultaneously both this path and that path.[9]

Crossroads are commonly depicted along with grass brooms and therefore associated with the notion of sweeping. And sweeping, as Burkhart argues, is closely associated with the notion of purifying.[10] Crossroads were accordingly "important places to leave contaminants such as items associated with social misdeeds or disease" (Miller and Taube 1993:71). Repenting adulteresses and courtesans, for example, came to expiate their misdeeds in the crossroads (Olivier 2003:42; see also Burkhart 1989, especially chapter 3).[11] By collecting filth, the crossroads made possible purification. And hence crossroads were conceived as no-places of ambiguous power, betwixt and between filth and purity, simultaneously purifying and polluting. Like spinning, weaving, and sweeping, they represented the dynamic commingling or intersecting of chaos and order — ill-defined no-places of ontological instability, ambiguity, and transformation; potentially creative and destructive.

The terms *otlamaxac* and *otlamaxalli* are co-referential with *onepanco* and *onenpanolco*. Although themselves not *nepan-* derived terms, they offer additional insight into how the Nahuas regarded the crossroads.[12] As "the crotch of the road" (*otlamaxalli*), the crossroads carried sexual symbolism (Burkhart 1989:63). The crossroads, writes Burkhart (1989:63), was viewed as "a dangerous, liminal... place of bifurcation." And so we observe once more a general thematic connection between the referents of *nepan-* containing or derived words on the one hand, and sexual activity on the other. Like sexual activity (and weaving), the crossroads is simultaneously destructive and creative, and hence transformative.

Let us turn finally to *nepantla* itself. As we have seen, Durán glosses *nepantla* as "betwixt and between" (*en medios*) and as "neither one nor the other" (*neutros*). Molina translates *nepantla* as an adverb, meaning *en el medio, o en medio, o por medio* (i.e., "in the middle of something"). Elzey translates *nepantla* as the "center," "middle," or "in between," while Karttunen glosses it as "in the middle of something." She claims *nepantla* derives from *nepan-* and *-tlah*, and she writes, *nepan-* "appears only as an element of compounds and derivations and conveys a sense of mutuality or reciprocity" (Karttunen 1983:169). *-Tlah*, in turn, is a "locative compounding element conveying the sense of abundance"; thus *-tlah* compounds include, for example, *tetlah* or "rocky place" (<*te-tl*, "stone"), and *cuauhtlah* "forest" (<*cuahu(i)-tl*, "tree") (Karttunen 1983:259). In sum, *nepantla* conveys a sense of abundant mutuality or reciprocity, and moreover, a reciprocity and mutuality that derive from being in between or in the middle. Following Campbell's (1985:212) gloss of *nepan-* as "middle," we might say *nepantla* conveys a sense of abundant middlingness.[13]

The fact that Molina parses *nepantla* as an adverb suggests that we ought to gloss *nepantla* as "mutually," "reciprocally," "middlingly," or (their inelegance notwithstanding) as "betwixtly-and-betweenly" or "neither-fishly-nor-fowly." As an adverb, *nepantla* modifies primarily activities, processes, becomings, doings, or behavings. It tells us how, when, or where an agent(s) or thing(s) acts, behaves, or does something; or how, when, or where a process proceeds. It describes activities and processes as middling, betwixtly-and-betweenly, neither-fishly-nor-fowly, and abundantly mutual or reciprocal.[14] To describe a process as *nepantla* is to say that it involves or consists of middling, "neither-this-nor-that" mutuality or reciprocity. *Nepantla*-processes could thus be elaborated as "*nepantla*-middling" or "*nepantla*-balancing" activities.

If this understanding of *nepantla* is correct, then we need to resist the tendency to reify *nepantla* that comes with treating it as a noun designating (or adjective modifying) a static, settled, or stable state of being,

state of affairs, condition, relationship, arrangement, place, or thing. Indeed, I worry that such common translations as "the middle," "the center," "in the middle," or "in the center" lend support to this tendency.[15] I thus urge caution when using these constructions.

In sum, *nepantla*-processes are dialectical, intermediating, transactional, oscillating, betwixting-and-betweening activities, middling, and abundant with mutuality and reciprocity. They suspend people or things in *nepantlatli*, i.e., in the middle, betwixt and between two endpoints or "extremities" (Campbell 1985:212). They engage "fish" and "fowl" in a transformative process that destroys their original, independent and well-defined status as "fish" versus "fowl" while simultaneously creating a *tertium quid* that is "neither fish nor fowl." They suspend people and things in a dynamic, unstable and ill-defined *ontological zone* between two endpoints while also suspending them in an ill-defined *conceptual zone* between conventional categories: one in which people and things cut across as well as blur into the interstices between quotidian categories. Alternatively, *nepantla*-processes place people and things within a borderland, i.e., a dynamic zone of mutual transaction, confluence, unstable and diffuse identity, and transformation.[16]

*Nepantla*-processes are transformative processes because they are simultaneously destructive and creative. *Nepantla*-processes such as mixing, shaking and weaving involve their respective ingredients in processes of betwixting-and-betweening during which the original ingredients become neither themselves nor their other. *Nepantla*-processes place things within a dynamic environment that is ill-defined, transitional, unstable, and unsettled. Having both lost its prior identity and subsequently acquired a new, unstable and ill-defined identity as neither this nor that, that which participates in a *nepantla*-process "cuts across or falls between classes and categories," as Elzey puts it (1976:325). In light of this, one might venture to say that *nepantla*-processes subject their *relata* to a dynamic zone that ontologically supersedes an either-this-or-that dichotomy in the Hegelian sense of subsuming *this* and *that* while also transcending *this* versus *that*. The confluence of two rivers, A and B, for example, supersedes A and B in the sense that it is neither A nor B yet at the same time both A and B.[17]

## II. *Nepantla* as a Fundamental Descriptive Category of Nahua Metaphysics

The concept of *nepantla* plays a fundamental role in Nahua metaphysics by providing a descriptive account of the nature of reality and of the human condition. Nahua metaphysics holds the ultimate nature and structure of reality to be an ever-continuing *nepantla*-process. Reality itself consists of an ongoing process of intersecting, transacting, commingling, and interweaving polar opposites.

The starting point of Nahua metaphysics is the ontological thesis that there exists a single, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating, sacred power or force. The Nahua referred to this power by the term *teotl*. *Teotl* is ultimate reality. *Teotl* is non-personal, non-minded, non-agentive, and non-intentional. *Teotl* is not a deity, person, or subject who possesses power in the manner of a king or tyrant. Rather, *teotl* is power: an always active, actualized and actualizing, ever-flowing energy-in-motion. As the single, all-encompassing life-power of the cosmos, *teotl* creates the cosmos and everything that happens in the cosmos out of itself.[18]

Process, motion, change, metamorphosis, and transformation define *teotl*, and hence, the cosmos and all its contents. *Teotl* is ever-flowing and ever-changing, energy-in-motion, not an immutable, static, substantial entity or thing. Because essentially processive and dynamic, *teotl* is properly understood as *neither* being *nor* not-being but as *becoming*. *Teotl* *neither is nor is not; teotl becomes*. As a consequence, reality — and hence, the cosmos and its inhabitants — are ultimately unstable, evanescent, and transitory. They are also devoid of static states of being and order as well as any permanent structure.

And thus we get our first glimpse of *teotl* (and hence reality) as *nepantla*-process. As becoming and *nepantla*-process, *teotl* dialectically and middlingly oscillates betwixtly and betweenly being and non-being. It is abundant with mutual or reciprocal being and non-being, with the intersecting, interweaving, transacting, commingling and confluencing of being and non-being. It is at bottom ontologically ambiguous since neither being nor non-being yet simultaneously both being and non-being. In short, *teotl* is a *nepantla*-process that exhibits *nepantla*-balancing or -middling.

The ceaseless changing and becoming of *teotl*, its ceaseless generating and regenerating of the cosmos, is one of ceaseless self-transforming. The cosmos and all its contents are *teotl*'s processual self-presentation. *Teotl*'s becoming therefore represents a particular kind of becoming: transformative becoming. And its moving and processing are also self-transformative moving and processing. In sum, the power of *teotl* is transformative power.

Nahua metaphysics is guided by several fundamental intuitions. First, that which is real is that which becomes, changes, and moves — contra the lion's share of Western metaphysics, starting with Plato, which claims that that which is real is that which is immutable, stable, static, everlasting, and unmoving. Reality is thus characterized by *becoming* — not by *being* or "is-ness" as such. To exist (to be) is to become, to move, and to change. Second, that which is real is that which makes things happen. Reality consists of the power to move, transform, influence, act upon, or effect change in things. To exist is to be (causally) effective. Nahua metaphysics is committed to the mutual equation of existence, power, energy, motion, becoming, causing, and transforming (both of self and others). Third, that which is real is that which is mixed and contradictory — contra much of Western metaphysics, which claims that that which is real is that which is pure, unmixed, uncontradictory, and unadulterated. In sum, Nahua metaphysics appears to embrace what Western philosophers call a "process philosophy." Processes, rather than perduring objects or substances, are ontologically fundamental: "temporality, activity and change — of alteration, striving, passage, and novelty-emergence — are the cardinal factors for... understanding of the real" (Rescher 1995:417).[19]

Furthermore, *teotl* is properly understood as *neither* ordered (e.g., determined or governed top-down by laws or principles) *nor* disordered (anarchic, chaotic) but rather as *unordered*. As with being and not-being, order and disorder are two, mutually arising and mutually interrelated, complementary polarities. *Teotl* captures a tertium quid: unorderliness, i.e., a dynamic condition of being simultaneously neither ordered nor disordered yet at the same time both ordered and disordered. Since the cosmos is identical with *teotl*, it follows that the cosmos is essentially dynamic and devoid of any permanent or lasting order. All things pass, including the Age of the Fifth Sun.

Although essentially processive and devoid of permanent structure or order, *teotl*'s ceaseless becoming and self-presenting are nevertheless contingently characterized by an overarching rhythm, pattern, and regularity. This rhythm and pattern is simultaneously expressed in two interrelated ways or aspects: as duality, and as the two calendars (the *tonalpohualli* or 260-day count, and the *xiuhmolpilli* or 360+5-day count). As Kay Read writes, "Things do not simply change. They embody time..." (Read 1998:88). And things are also placed, of course. Indeed, place and time form a seamless unity: what I call "time-place." [20]

*Teotl*'s self-presentation, in other words, is characterized by *ollin*, i.e., "orderly and structured 'Motion' or 'Movement'" (Elzey 1976:319). *Ollin* is crucial to understanding *teotl* and hence reality since it helps us see why *teotl*'s self-presenting changes are *transformational* rather than random. As Elzey points out, *ollin* is not just any kind of motion. It is motion that is "distinguished into an orderly succession of well-defined

elements"; *ollin* "classes and categorizes" (Elzey 1976:325).[21] *Ollin*, the regular and patterned moving of *teotl*, is mapped by the two calendars.

The idea of duality merits closer examination. *Teotl* presents itself in multiple aspects, preeminent among which is duality. This duality takes the form of the cyclical alternation, non-Zoroastrian dialectical tug-of-war (or *agon*), and mutual interaction of contrary yet mutually interdependent, mutually arising, and mutually complementary paired opposites or polarities. These dualities include (among others) being and not-being, order and disorder, life and death, light and darkness, fire and water, masculine and feminine, dry and wet, and hot and cold. Life and death, for example, are mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary aspects of one and the same process. López Austin uses the word "*inamic*," which he glosses as "their complement" when characterizing the interrelationship between paired opposites (1997:116). Each is the *inamic* or complement of its paired opposite: *being*, the *inamic* of *non-being*; *life*, the *inamic* of *death*, etc.[22] The ceaseless, cyclical alternation and dominance of these dualities produces the diversity and momentary arrangement of the cosmos. Finally, although each moment in a cycle consists of the dominance of one or other paired opposite, in the long run a cycle manifests an overarching, diachronic and dynamic balance. Short-term imbalances are thus woven together to form long-term balance.

But what kind of cyclical alternating and balancing is this, and what sort of process produces it?[23] Simply put, it is the kind of balancing produced by a *nepantla*-process. It is *nepantla*-balancing or -middling. It is the kind of balancing or middling produced by the rhythmic oscillating and reciprocal transacting, intersecting, interweaving, and commingling of two things. It is the kind of balancing manifested by a human activity central to Nahua philosophy: walking down a path or *ohlatoca* ("following a path").

Walking is a process, not an event. It is diachronic, not static. Walking requires being able to achieve an overarching, diachronic balance between a repeating series of momentary imbalances. Starting from a standing position, one extends one's left leg forward, shifts one's weight left-forwardly, and in so doing puts oneself off balance. But before falling leftwards too far and crashing to the ground, one quickly extends one's right leg and shifts one's weight rightwards. This, of course, creates a right-leaning imbalance that counterbalances the first, left-leaning imbalance. However, before falling rightwards too far and tumbling to the ground, one quickly extends one's left leg, thereby shifting one's weight leftwards. The process of walking involves repeating these imbalancing and counter-balancing actions over and over again. One does not try to strike a static middle or mean point but rather passes through such a point in the constant "to and fro" of walking. Indeed, one cannot walk without embracing alternating momentary imbalances. One walks straightforwardly by walking crookedly. One walks in balance by walking imbalancedly. One walks in balance by walking middlingly — not by walking in the middle. Furthermore, walking is ambiguous since it consists of moving betwixt and between. It is *neither* left *nor* right yet *both* left and right. Balance is attained dialectically, diachronically and dynamically. Individual acts of short-term imbalance are woven together to form a diachronic process of long-term balancing. Viewed kinesiotically, walking is thus a *nepantla*-process exemplifying *nepantla*-balancing. In sum, what I propose we glean from this example is the following, more general claim: a process of *nepantla*-balancing consists of — and is achieved by — a rhythmic series of mutually interdependent and reciprocally influencing individual acts of imbalance.[24]

*Ollin* — the regular, dialectical oscillation of complementary dualities — is one aspect or self-presentation of the *nepantla*-process of *teotl*, and hence of *teotl*'s *nepantla*-balancing. Dialectical polarities are moments in a process involving endless, reciprocal middling. *Teotl*'s *nepantla*-balancing therefore underlies as well as explains the dialectical and cyclical moving — i.e., transforming, changing, and becoming — of the cosmos.

Consider several other examples of *teotl-as-nepantla*-process. Consider life and death. Life and death are mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary aspects of one and the same process. Life contains the seed of death; death, the fertile, energizing seed of life. They are two sides of the same reality. As Read (1998) and Philip Arnold (1999) stress, in order to live things must eat other things, and eating them causes them to die.[25] Death is thus both positive and negative, as is life. Death makes possible life, and therefore has a positive aspect. Life, on the other hand, feeds off the death of other living things, and so has a negative aspect. *Teotl-as-nepantla*-process underlies the dialectic of life and death, and as such, falls betwixt and between, and cuts across life and death. It is abundant with both life and death. It is ontologically ambiguous: neither alive nor dead and yet at the same time both alive and dead.

More abstractly, consider order and disorder. As we've seen, the cosmos is characterized by the dialectical tug of war and reciprocal transaction of order and disorder. Order and disorder are contrary yet mutually interdependent, mutually arising, and mutually complementary paired opposites. Their dialectical interplay is a self-presentation of *teotl's nepantla*-balancing between the two endpoints, order and disorder. However, *teotl* itself is neither orderly (e.g., nomic or governed top-down by laws or principles) nor disorderly (anomic, anarchic, chaotic), but rather *unorderly*. And as *unorderly*, *teotl* falls betwixt and between order and disorder. *Teotl* is also ontologically ambiguous: neither orderly nor disorderly yet simultaneously both orderly and disorderly. *Teotl-as-nepantla*-process is abundant with reciprocal order and disorder (i.e., with intersecting, commingling, or interweaving order and disorder).[26]

From *teotl's* tireless *nepantla*-middling between polar dualities (such as life/death, male/female, being/non-being, hot/cold, and order/disorder) emerges *teotl's* creative and transformative power or energy. The created cosmos itself emerges from polar dualities bound together in mutual, *nepantla*-tension. As Alfredo López Austin observes, paired opposites interlocked in X-shaped, crisscrossing *nepantla*-processes are "crucial element[s] in creation miracles" (1997:108). Indeed, López Austin argues that Tamoanchan itself is a "process of the marvelous crossing" of polar dualities. As such it is also "the place of creation" (1997:112). From *teotl's* ceaseless *nepantla*-middling between polar dualities also emerges its artistic power or energy. The Nahuatl accordingly referred to the cosmos as *teotl's* "flower and song" and *teotl's* "house of paintings" (León-Portilla 1992, 2001).

In the final analysis, however, *teotl* is essentially an undifferentiated, unstructured, and unordered seamless totality. As a *nepantla*-process, *teotl* falls betwixt and between the dualities of being/non-being, order/disorder, life/death, male/female, etc. And because it cuts across conventional categories, *teotl* is ill-defined in terms of such categories. It is neither this nor that, yet both; neither something nor nothing, yet both. Moreover, given that time-place (as defined, mapped and counted by the two calendars) is yet another self-presentation of *teotl*, it would appear that *teotl* is ultimately untimed and unplaced. It is neither here nor there, yet both; neither now nor then, yet both. Like the crossroads and the *nemontemi*, *teotl* stands outside of time-place.[27] It is no-place and, in a similar vein, no-time.

The non-autochthonous analytical concept that most closely resembles *nepantla* would seem to be liminality. Indeed, many scholars invoke the notion of liminality when explicating *nepantla*. [28] Victor Turner defines the liminal as "a no-man's-land betwixt and between the structural past and the structural future" (1986:41), and as "that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (1979:236). The liminal is "transitional," "neutral," and "ambiguous." "Logically antithetical" processes such as death and growth are represented by ambiguous symbols such as serpents since serpents "are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another" (1979:236). Consequently, the liminal cannot be defined statically: "We are not dealing with structural contradictions... but with the essentially unstructured (which is at once destructed and prestructured" (1979:236). The liminal is "interstructural." Turner writes, "This

coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (1979:237). Liminality is also "a gestational process, a fetation [as in fetal or embryonic development] of modes appropriate to postliminal existence" (Turner 1986:42; definition mine, paraphrased from the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Finally, Turner suggests the liminal be understood in terms of "the subjunctive mood of culture, the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire," whereas the ordinary is understood in terms of "the indicative mood, where we expect the invariant operation of cause and effect, of rationality and commonsense" (1986:42).

Their similarities notwithstanding, I suggest that the Nahua notion of *nepantla* flips Turner's notion of liminality on its head. Turner's liminality is temporary and exceptional. It occurs only temporarily in interstitial transitions from one established state of being or permanent structure to another. Structure, order, being, and is-ness are the norm, while liminality is the exception. In short, Turner's liminality presupposes a Platonic-style metaphysics of being. *Nepantla*, by contrast, is neither temporary nor exceptional but rather the permanent condition of the cosmos, human existence, and indeed reality itself (*teotl*). *Nepantla* is ordinary — not extraordinary. Unorder is the norm — not order. Becoming and transition are the norm — not being and stasis. Androgyny is the norm — not male or female. Moreover, being and non-being, order and disorder, life and death, etc., are never entirely pure because always mixed with and conditioned by their contraries. They are always in transition, always swinging back towards and becoming their contraries. Furthermore, *nepantla* is not merely a social, conventional, performative, or ritually-induced condition. And finally, *nepantla* is not usefully understood in Turner's terms as "the subjunctive mood," "fantasy," "maybe," or "as if." *Nepantla* is a metaphysical condition: one that defines the nature of *teotl* and hence the nature of reality, the cosmos and human existence. *Nepantla* is indeed gestational and fetiferous, but *not* of some post-liminal existence, for there is no post-liminal existence according to Nahua metaphysics. There is only continuing *nepantla*.

### III. *Nepantla* as Descriptive of the Human Condition

The human existential condition is no exception to the foregoing metaphysical picture. Succinctly put, human beings are *in nepantla* as well as *of nepantla* (to adapt a common religious saying).

Human life takes place on *tlalticpac*, the earth's surface. *Tlalticpac* literally means "on the point or summit of the earth," and suggests a narrow, jagged, point-like place surrounded by constant dangers.[29] The time-place circumstances of human existence are unstable and perilous. The Nahuatl proverb, *Tlaalahui, tlapetzcahui in tlalticpac*, "It is slippery, it is slick on the earth," was said of a person who had lived a proper life but then lost his or her balance and fell into impropriety, as if slipping in slick mud.[30] Humans lose their balance all too easily on *tlalticpac* and so suffer misfortune frequently. With this in mind, the *huehuetlatolli* ("words of the elders, words of the ancients") recorded by Sahagún in Book VI of the *Florentine Codex* include the following speech from a mother to her daughter:

"On earth we walk, we live, on the ridge of a mountain peak.... To one side is an abyss, to the other is another abyss. If you go here, or if you go there, you will fall, only through the middle can one go, or live." [31]

Human existence takes place *in nepantla*, i.e., in the middling, oscillating tension betwixt and between order and disorder, being and non-being, life and death, hot and cold, etc. Because of this, it is unstable, fragile, treacherous, and fraught with peril. The human existential condition thus takes place at the crossroads (as it were): it is defined by constant and inescapable liminality (making the requisite Nahua

adjustments to this notion). It is one of ineliminable change, instability, motion, transaction, transition, becoming, and transformation. Human existence is consequently fleeting, evanescent, and shortlived.

Human existence is also *of nepantla* in the sense that the activity of living itself consists of *nepantla*-balancing the forces of order and disorder, life and death, etc. Simply put, living (life) is itself a *nepantla*-process involving constant change, transition, becoming, and transformation.

This characterization of human existence follows directly from the Nahua metaphysics, or more specifically, its monism, i.e., the thesis that there exists only one thing: *teotl*. Human beings are made up of *teotl*, ultimately identical (one) with *teotl*, and hence *in* and *of teotl*. Since Nahua metaphysics conceives *teotl* as a *nepantla*-process, it follows that human beings and human existence are *in* and *of nepantla* as well.

#### IV. *Nepantla* as Normative Model and Prescriptive Category for Human Behavior

The Nahua looked to their metaphysics for guidance concerning how human beings ought to behave wisely, ethically, epistemologically and aesthetically in a cosmos characterized by *nepantla*.<sup>[32]</sup> Given its central role in Nahua metaphysics, they thus turned to *teotl*, or more precisely, *teotl-as-nepantla*-process. They regarded *teotl-as-nepantla*-process as the ideal normative model *for* human behavior since they regarded *teotl-as-nepantla*-process as the ideal model *of nepantla*-behavior. Nahua *tlamatini* ("knowers of things," "sages") thus enjoined people to live their lives in a *teotl*-like, *nepantla*-middling manner, and based their prescriptive claims regarding how human beings *ought* to conduct their lives upon *teotl*'s example. *Nepantla* accordingly figures prominently in Nahua prescriptions concerning how humans ought to behave, think, feel, judge, speak, sing, eat, weave, etc. Nahua *tlamatini* apparently reasoned that since reality and the human existential condition are inescapably middling, human beings must therefore act and live middlingly.<sup>[33]</sup> In a cosmos characterized by *nepantla*, one must live a life characterized by *nepantla*.

As we have seen, the Nahua likened the human condition to walking down a narrow, jagged path along a mountain peak. After characterizing the human condition thusly, the mother quoted above advises her daughter, "*zan tlanepantla in uiloa, in nemoa*" ("only through the middle can one go, or live"). The mother invokes *tlanepantla* ("in [or through] the middle"). In this vein, a Nahua adage recorded by Sahagún states, "*Tlacoqualli in monequi*" ("the middle good is necessary").<sup>[34]</sup> Molina (1971:128) provides two related entries, *tlanepantla yeliztli* and *tlanepantla nemiliztli*, which he glosses as "*mediano estado, o manera de vivir.*" Campbell (1985:212) glosses them as "ordinary way or state of living." In light of the above discussion, I suggest the two are better glossed as "living or being middlingly" or "middling way of being or living." Those striving to walk in balance upon the slippery earth must pursue a middle footing, a middle way of living — not an ordinary way of living (unless ordinary means middling).

Nahua wisdom accordingly aimed at teaching humans how, like skilled mountain climbers, to maintain their balance upon the narrow, jagged summit of the earth.<sup>[35]</sup> It aimed at teaching humans how, like accomplished weavers, to weave together the various forces and tensions in the cosmos and in their lives into a well-balanced fabric. In order to live wisely, live well, live artfully, and live an authentically human life on *tlalticpac* — where these are conceptually equivalent — one's living must exemplify *nepantla*-middling or *nepantla*-balancing. One's living must itself be a well-crafted *nepantla*-process. And from what better to learn how to do this than from *teotl* itself? In sum, wisely living consists of embracing and mastering *nepantla* — not trying to avoid, minimize, or escape *nepantla*.

In this manner, I suggest *nepantla*-balance functioned more specifically as the normative model and evaluative criterion for (what we call) ethically, epistemologically and aesthetically good (*cualli*) or

appropriate behavior. Good behavior not only springs from *nepantla*-balancing but also promotes *nepantla*-balancing in human lives and in the cosmos at large.[36]

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return to Fray Durán's informant's remark that the post-conquest Nahua were in *nepantla*. This is commonly interpreted as characterizing the *exceptional* circumstances of post-conquest Nahua life. The Nahua were betwixt and between the old and new orders. This interpretation, however, both misunderstands *nepantla* by assimilating it to the non-autochthonous notion of liminality and mistakenly presupposes that *nepantla* did *not* characterize ordinary Nahua life *before* the conquest. I thus propose that when queried about the condition of the Nahua by Durán, the informant spoke generally about the human condition as such. It was not his intention to contrast pre- and post-conquest life. After all, *nepantla* was not unique to post-conquest Nahua life. It defined all of existence and reality.[37]

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XXVII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, 2007. I would like to thank my co-panelists, Willard Gingerich, Joanna Sanchez, Catherine DiCesare, Alberto Lemus-Hernández, and Alejandro Santana for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to Pamela Effrein Sandstrom for her painstakingly excellent editing suggestions.
2. In what follows I rely primarily upon R. Joe Campbell's (1985) invaluable compilation and translations of Molina's entries
3. For additional discussion of *nepanoā*, see López Austin (1997). Karen Powers (2005:27) tells us that Mesoamericans did not conceive sexuality as a form of violence or conquest.
4. For a description of backstrap weaving in Mesoamerica, see Klein (1982), Anawalt (2001), and Schaefer (2002).
5. See Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1950-82, Book X:36,86) for descriptions of the good and bad weaver and the good and bad seller of reed mats (respectively).
6. Burkhart (1997:48) writes, "the rhythmic, back-and-forth motion of weaving, its intertwining of separate threads into a single web is, like spinning, an obvious source of sexual innuendo." Weaving fell under the province of the Xochiquetzal, who was also associated with sexuality.
7. For discussion of root or organizing metaphors, see Pepper (1970), Turner (1974), Knab (1986), López Austin (1997), and Maffie (in preparation).
8. Reported in Burkhart (1997:50). Kay Reed (1998) also explores this idea.
9. Pages 2, 3, 4 and 37 of the *Tonalámatl de Los Pochtecas (Codex Fejérváry-Mayer)* contain depictions of crossroads; see León-Portilla (2005). For further discussion of crossroads, see Miller and Taube (1993) and Olivier (2003). Sahagún's informants described the crossroads as a dangerous and "disquieting place, of apparitions and omens," haunted by Tezcatlipoca, the arch sorcerer and mocker, and where strange events occurred and unearthly beings appeared at midnight (*ioalnepantla*) (quoted in Elzey 1976:324).

10. See Burkhart (1989, 1997) and Miller and Taube (1993). Space does not permit discussing the concept of sweeping in more detail.

11. The crossroads provided access to the underworld, and the *Codex Laud*, for example, contains an image depicting this (see Miller and Taube 1993:71).

12. Molina (2001[1571]:55v) glosses *maxaltic* as "something divided like a road or the crotch of a tree."

13. According to Karttunen (1983:169), *nepan-* derives from *ne-* + *-pan*. *Ne-* functions as a nonspecific reflexive object prefix, and *-pan* as a postposition, meaning "on the surface of, for or at a particular time" (1983:186). López Austin (1997:108) suggests *nepan-* derives from *panoa*, which he glosses as "to throw one thing on top of another" and to place "one long object over another of equal length so that they cross, resulting in the geometric shape of a cross." López Austin also observes that "the shape of the cross was very important in [indigenous] ritual symbolism" (1997:108). Terms containing *nepan-* were commonly used to designate articles commonly employed in religious ceremonies such as strands of flowers. The Nahuatl later referred to the Christian cross, for example, as *cuauhuítl nepaniuhoc*, "the planks that are crossed" (López Austin 1997:108; see also figures 10a-e on p. 109).

14. Elzey writes, "A place, state, figure, or situation is *nepantla* when it is *unstable* and *in transition* from one status or position to another" (1976:234, emphasis mine). Molina contains the closely related word, *nepanōtl* which he glosses as "*unos a otros, o unos con otros, o los a los otros*" (1970[1521]:69r), which Campbell (1985:212) glosses as "one another, reciprocally," and Karttunen (1983:169) as "mutuality, reciprocity." Karttunen tells us that *nepanōtl* is used primarily "in adverbial constructions with the sense 'mutually, reciprocally'" (1983:169). It would thus appear that *nepantla*-processes are aptly modified by the adverb *nepanōtl* and thus characterized by mutuality or reciprocity.

15. Although my understanding of *nepantla* is deeply indebted to Elzey, I find that many of his remarks do tend to reify *nepantla*. For example, he writes, "The 'center' as *nepantla* is a marginal and ill-defined place or time..." (1976:325), and *nepantla* is "descriptive... of an unresolved, boundary situation — anomic and/or potentially creative" (2001:366). This tendency to reify is found in recent scholarship in border studies. Lisbeth Haas, for example, writes, "indigenous people experienced a state of *nepantla*..." (1995:28). Haas also dubiously characterizes *nepantla* as "cultural woundedness" (1995:43).

My understanding of *nepantla* is also indebted to Willard Gingerich and Barbara Myerhoff. Neither Gingerich (1988) nor Myerhoff (1974, 1976a, 1976b) explicitly discusses *nepantla* as such. Rather, they discuss indigenous Nahuatl and Huichol notions of balancing and equilibrium (respectively). I nevertheless interpret both as in effect discussing *nepantla*. Their work strongly suggests that the concepts of *nepantla* and *nepantla*-balancing are rooted in indigenous Mesoamerican shamanism.

Molina contains the corresponding noun, *nepantlatli* or "*el medio entre dos extremidades*" ("the middle part between two extremes"), and corresponding adjectives *tenepantla* or "*en medio de algunos, o entre otros*" ("among others") and *tlanepantla* or "*en el medio*" (in the middle") (Molina 2001[1571]; Campbell 1985:212). Presumably those people or objects subjected to *nepantla*-activities or processes are aptly described as *tenepantla* or *tlanepantla* (respectively).

16. See León-Portilla (1974), Klor de Alva (1982), and Hass (1995). For a provocative contemporary discussion of the notions of *mestizaje* and the borderlands, see Anzaldúa (1987).

17. It thus makes no sense to ask of the confluence of the two rivers A and B whether it is river A or river B. Understanding *nepantla-relata* and processes — and as we shall see below, *teotl* — would thus seem to require a non-binary (i.e., non-either/or) style of thinking and knowing. For further discussion of Nahua epistemology, see León-Portilla (2001), Gingerich (1987), and Maffie (2002a, 2003, 2005).

18. Space does not allow my discussing Nahua metaphysics in greater depth. My understanding of Nahua metaphysics draws upon the following work: Hvidtfeldt (1958); Hunt (1977); Klor de Alva (1979); Townsend (1979); Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986); Sandstrom (1991); León-Portilla (1992); Boone (1994); Monaghan (1995, 2000); Read (1998); and Maffie (2002a, 2002b, 2005).

19. Process philosophy reverses the classical principle *operari sequitur esse* ("functioning follows being"), with the principle *esse sequitur operari* ("being follows from operation") (Rescher 1995:417). For further discussion, see Maffie (in preparation).

20. Read (1998) makes a similar claim. For further discussion of the Nahua conception of place and time, see López Austin (1988, 1997), Aveni (2001), León-Portilla (2001), and Boone (2007).

21. See also Read (1998) and Monaghan (1998:137-46). While I am indebted to Elzey's study of *ollin*, I also find it potentially misleading. I prefer to say that *ollin* consists of patterned or regular motion rather than "structured and orderly" motion. Why? First, I worry that terms such as "order" and "structure" incorrectly imply that *teotl* is to be understood as having a static, permanent structure (such as Platonic-style "Forms," abstract essences, or laws of nature). Second, I worry that characterizing *ollin* in terms of "order" and "structure" falsely implies that *teotl*'s motion is to be understood as consisting of static states of being, structures, or conditions. As I understand it, *ollin* is neither lawful nor causally deterministic (in the Western scientific sense of causal laws of nature). We also need to be careful not to interpret Elzey's talk of "well-defined elements" as referring to static, unambiguous states of pure being. As we will see below, all existing things are dimorphous, ambiguous, and not entirely one thing or the other, and Elzey's "well-defined elements" obscures this fact. The characterization of *ollin* by Elzey also fits poorly with my claims that *teotl* is essentially processive and that since *teotl*'s cyclical processing oscillates between order and disorder, structure and chaos, *teotl* is essentially "betwixt and between" order and disorder and structure and chaos. I suggest we understand *ollin* instead as patterned or regular moving between paired opposites or dual polarities.

22. Molina (2001[1571]:39v) glosses *inamic* as "*su igual, o cosa que viene bien y quadra con otra.*" Strikingly absent from these dualities from the perspective of Western religion and philosophy is the moral construct: good versus evil. *Agon* serves as second organizing metaphor of Nahua (and Mesoamerican) philosophy. For further discussion of dualism in Nahua and Mesoamerican thought, see Dennis Tedlock (1985, 1986), Gossen (1986), López Austin (1988, 1996, 1997), Davies (1990), Barbara Tedlock (1992), Monaghan (1998), and Maffie (2002b, 2005).

23. In answering this question, we need to remember that balance (equilibrium) and imbalance (disequilibrium) are *not* among the polar dualities embraced by Nahua dualism. They are not defined as mutually arising or interdependent; they are not engaged in dialectical and cyclical alternation in the way that hot and cold, and order and disorder are, for example.

24. The example of walking is not perfect for several reasons. First, left and right are *not* complementary dual polarities by Nahua lights. Second, the Nahuatl word for walking, *nehnemi*, is not derived or constructed from the root, *nepan*. This notwithstanding, I nevertheless find the example illustrative.

25. The artists of Tenochtitlan portrayed the *nepantla*-balance of life and death by fashioning stone sculptures with split-faced countenances, one half fleshed and alive, the other half, fleshless, skeletal, and dead (e.g., see Solís Olguín 2004:91, plates 89 and 90). These figures are ontologically *ambiguous*. Skulls simultaneously symbolize death and life. Flesh simultaneously symbolizes life and death, since death arises from the flesh of the living. I suggest we understand these faces as *neither* alive *nor* dead yet at the same time *both* alive *and* dead. On the one hand, they are *neither* alive *nor* dead where life and death are conceived as mutually exclusive, contradictory properties. They are *neither* completely alive (fleshed) *nor* completely dead (skeletal). On the other hand, they are *both* alive *and* dead since they manifest both life and death conceived as interdependent, mutually arising complementary polarities. They thus supersede the binary life/death.

The artist-scribes of the *Codex Borgia* likewise portrayed the concept of *nepantla*. Plates 56 and 73 (Díaz and Rogers 1993:5,22) show the dual deities, *Quetzalcoatl* (the god of life) and *Mictlantecuhтли* (the god of death), sharing one and the same spine. Like the masks above, the images express the unified duality of life and death, and more generally, the creative-destructive polarity of the cosmos. For further discussion, see Pasztory (1983:88).

26. For additional discussion of the relationship between order and disorder, see López Austin (1988, 1996, 1997), Burkhart (1989), Read (1998), Curcio-Nagy (2000), and Maffie (2005).

27. As mentioned above, the Nahua embraced two time counts: the *tonalpohualli* or count of the 260-day cycle, and the *xiuhmolpilli* or 360+5-day solar calendar. The two cycles and time counts ran simultaneously. The ends of their cycles coincided every 52 years (forming a bundle of years or century), at which time a new 52-year cycle would (hopefully) begin anew. The Nahua divided the *xiuhmolpilli* into eighteen months, each month consisting of twenty days. This count totaled 360 days. But what about the remaining five days? Even though they included these five days in their mathematical calculations (and the count of the *tonalpohualli* continued), the Nahua refused to count the five days for ritual purposes. "Nothing was their number," reports Sahagún (1950-82, Book II:172). The Nahua referred to the five days as *nemontemi*, which Sahagún tells us means "barren days" (1950-82, Book II:35). They regarded the five days as loaded with extreme danger. Because they occurred between the end of an old cycle and beginning of a new one, the Nahua considered the five days to be a period of no-time or "time out of time," as Monaghan (1988:140) puts it. Motolinía characterizes the five days as "*sin año*" (quoted in Monaghan 1998:140). Elzey (1976) characterizes the *nemontemi* in terms of *nepantla*. I suspect this is mistaken. Although they do occur between solar cycles, the *nemontemi* do not represent an example of *nepantla*-middling since the solar cycles are not interwoven by a *nepantla*-process.

28. Recent work discussing *nepantla* in terms of liminality includes Burkhart (1989), Elzey (1976), and Díaz Balsera (2005). The classic discussion of liminality is, of course, Turner (1979), but also see Turner (1986).

29. Translation by Michel Launey, quoted in Burkhart (1989:58).

30. See Sahagún (1950-82, Book VI:228), translated by Burkhart (1989:58).

31. Sahagún (1950-82, Book VI:101), translated by Gingerich (1988:522). In another *huehuetlatolli*, a father advises his son: "...on earth we travel, we live along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss, over there there is an abyss. Wherever thou art to deviate, wherever thou art to go astray, there will thou fall, there wilt thou plunge into the deep. That is to say, it is necessary that thou always act with discretion in that which is done, which is said, which is seen, which is heard, which is thought, etc." (Sahagún 1950-82, Book

VI:125).

32. I believe Nahua philosophy makes no distinction between the sagely, ethical, epistemological and aesthetic dimensions of human behavior, institutions, and relationships. These are *our* distinctions, not those of the Nahua. In what follows, I thus treat these as a seamless conceptual unity. In this respect, Nahua philosophy differs from most Western philosophies beginning with Plato and Aristotle but resembles East Asian philosophies such as classical Daoism and Confucianism. For further discussion, see Hall and Ames (1998) and Maffie (2000, 2003, 2005).

33. In this way, the Nahua sought to behave "cosmogonically" as Norman Girardot (1985) puts it when discussing the Daoist aim to model human behavior upon the *Dao*. For a related discussion, see Lovin and Reynolds (1985). Several scholars have defended the relevance of Nahua metaphysics to Nahua ethics, including Elzey (1976, 2001), Read (1986, 1998), López Austin (1988, 1996, 1997), and Burkhart (1989). The quest to ground one's normative philosophy upon one's metaphysics is not confined to religions. In Western philosophy it dates as far back as ancient Greece.

34. Sahagún (1950-82, Book VI:231), translation by Burkhart (1989:134). Citing Karttunen (1983:59,260), Burkhart observes that *tlacoqualli* derives from two words, *tlaco*, meaning "middle, center, half," and *cualli*, meaning "something good" (Burkhart 1989:210n.6).

35. For a related discussion of Nahua wisdom, see Gingerich (1988), Burkhart (1989), and Maffie (2005).

36. I expand upon this claim in Maffie (2000, 2003, 2005).

37. Many thanks to Willard Gingerich for bringing this point to my attention. By interpreting this remark in terms of *nepantla* conceived according to the foregoing analysis rather than in terms of non-autochthonous Turner-style liminality, this essay hopes to contribute to the *decolonization* of our understanding of Nahua thought. For related discussion of decolonizing African philosophy and religion, see Wiredu (1998). Finally, while it seems undeniable that post-conquest Nahua were suffering from "cultural woundedness," it appears to be a mistake to equate this condition with *nepantla* per se (contra Haas 1995:43).

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### **ILLUSTRATIONS IN THIS ISSUE**

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[The illustrations have been removed from the online version of the *Nahua Newsletter*]