MOCHE ARTISANS ON THE COAST of what is now northern Peru wrote perhaps the first Latin American history of sexuality sometime between 150 and 800 C.E. These craftsmen declared their interest in “sexual” subjects by producing a vast amount of pottery that depicted anal intercourse, fellatio, and masturbation. Only rarely did they construct explicit images in which the penis penetrated the vagina. One anthropologist argues convincingly that the artisans intended these vessels as historical commentaries. As they fixed meaning to sexual acts and developed particular ideologies regarding the past, they produced a historical critique, an analysis of time, rulers, ancestors, and gods. Yet, because we have such difficulty interpreting the messages portrayed, either we leave such imaginary universes entirely out of the history of sexuality, or we relegate them to uninterpretable oddities.1

Another puzzle emerges when we read an early colonial ethnography of a Nahua ceremony in which a priest donned the skin of a woman slain as an offering to a fertility goddess.2 In the ritual process, the Nahuas invoked a notion of creation: the First I must thank Margot Canaday for organizing the AHA panel that became this forum and for providing excellent commentary on the paper I presented there. I would also like to thank the other participants on that panel, including the contributors to this forum and Afshan Najmabadi, who got me analyzing interdisciplinarity and the archive in more depth. I began to think about the contents of an article such as this when I was at the National Humanities Center, where I was a Rockefeller Fellow, so I wish to thank all of the Center staff as well as my colleagues who made my year there so thought-provoking. My seminar at the University of California’s Humanities Research Institute also proved very fruitful in regard to this essay. I thank the organizers, Heidi Tinsman and Ulrike Strasse, as well as the participants, Anjali Arondekar, Cynthia Brantley, Michelle Hamilton, Eve Oishi, and David Serlin. Many other colleagues and students have provided commentary on earlier versions of the article. I particularly wish to thank Jocelyn Olcott, Anna Krylova, Dirk Bonker, Kathleen DuVal, Moshe Sluhovsky, and James N. Green for their comments.

1 See Mary Weismantel, “Moche Sex Pots: Reproduction and Temporality in Ancient South America,” American Anthropologist 106, no. 3 (2004): 495–505. For images of a few of the pots, see http://www.museolarco.org/igal_er.shtml. By claiming these as histories of sexuality, I argue that the pots contain explicit reflections on the past. In the pots we find mediations on the past of the Moche communities, refracted through the material conditions of the production of the pottery, the visions of Moche artisans, colonial intellectual frameworks, the collecting practices of archaeologists and curators, the analyses of art historians and anthropologists, and my own conceptualization of them as related to what I term “sexuality.”

2 In what has become standard practice, I refer to the Nahuatl-speaking indigenous groups of central Mexico as Nahuas. These peoples include the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, more commonly known as the Aztecs, and their neighbors throughout central Mexico. The ethnography and other related documents state that the ritual described here took place in Tenochtitlan just before the Spanish conquest. This
priest engaged in reproductive acts through his wearing of the skin. The ritual stimulated the planting of maize and the growth of the state. Could one consider such a ritual “sexual”? The methods currently used in the history of sexuality, at least as Latin American historians have applied them, do not allow us to interpret the Moche pottery or the Nahua ritual. We can only impute meaning to artifacts, refracted through a prism constructed by colonialism, but this prism, centered on the creative colonial act of vaginal intercourse, can never solve for us the puzzles that our sources create.

Moche pottery and the Nahua ritual both appear to date to precolonial times, but we must use the story of colonialism as the originating moment from which we can construct an understanding of these sexualities. Colonialism is a process in which one group attempts to impose its institutions and culture on another, resulting in some form of mixture that changes both. There exists a lively debate as to the nature and periodization of colonialism in Latin America, but the most important point is that in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the conquest of Latin America began an epic journey that, by mixing together incongruous cultural matrices, forever changed the nature of the intimate connections that we now call “sexuality.”

This occurred through what I term the colonialism of vaginal intercourse, in which both Catholic priests and Hispanized people from all walks of life provided a cultural framework in which the most intimate carnal relations between people were supposed to center around the penetration of the vagina by the penis. Priests implicitly made such an argument in the discourse of confession (in which, for example, the priest regularly asked the husband whether he had engaged in carnal acts with his wife or another woman in the “improper vessel”), while other Hispanized people promoted this colonizing act through quotidian joking, complaints to criminal courts and the Inquisition, medical practice, magical spells, and the like. The Moche pottery and the Nahua ritual suggest that centering sexuality on vaginal intercourse was a fundamentally colonial maneuver that did epistemic violence to the relationship between sexuality and history in non-Western societies.

Ritual is present in many different texts, but the most complete ethnographic record of it exists in the Nahua/ section of Book 2 of Bernardino de Sahagún’s Códice Florentino (facsimile edition issued by Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana and Archivo General de la Nación [Mexico City, 1979]). See my interpretation of this ritual in The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture (Durham, N.C., forthcoming).

While there exists an epistemological debate regarding the relevance of modern concepts of colonialism to early Latin American history, I argue, following Walter Mignolo, that modern concepts of colonialism began with the colonial experience in Latin America. See Mignolo, The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1995). This colonial system brought together distinct social systems, not just European, African, and American, but also different systems within the Americas that had had no previous contact with each other. The disjunctures present in the violent coming together of these social systems put forth a particular colonial effect that I call the creative colonial act of vaginal intercourse; see also Serge Gruzinski, La colonisation de l’imaginaire: Sociétés indièges et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol, XVie–XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1988).

On epistemic violence, see José Rabasa, Writing Violence on the Northern Frontier: The Historiography of Sixteenth-Century New Mexico and Florida and the Legacy of Conquest (Durham, N.C., 2000). One can certainly note, as I have elsewhere, that the priests in the confessional would have had great difficulty changing sexual concepts to such a degree, but daily interaction with Hispanized people would, over the long term, have had a substantial effect. See Pete Sigal, “The Cuiloni, the Patlache, and the Abominable Sin: Homosexualities in Early Colonial Nahua Society,” Hispanic American Historical Review 85, no. 4 (2005): 555–594. For other cases in which we hear about joking, criminal charges, con-
The historiography of Latin American sexuality can be used both to develop a methodological critique that has importance to the broader subfield of the history of sexuality around the globe and to recognize both the transcultural and the local in our aim to move toward an analytic centered on the global. While none of the essays in this forum rejects the study of the local (and Joanne Meyerowitz explicitly states that we must consider the local as we move to the transnational), we need to understand the colonizing potential of movements toward the transnational, and especially toward the global, even on levels at which we do not normally think such things. So, we must ask, have all societies throughout time viewed vaginal intercourse as “sexual”? I argue that the answer is no, and that its promotion, by the Catholic clergy and others in early Latin America, as the central point of all sexual activity was an important colonizing act. A focus on transnational flows is but one element of a larger understanding of the role of sexuality in historical analysis. Indeed, if we look at the premodern period, the transcultural may be a more appropriate term for the colonizing act of vaginal intercourse, and we need to focus more closely on the ways cultural artifacts moved through various types of pre-nation-state connections. Further, if we focus on the precolonial in Latin America, we question not only the ways in which the category “transnational” applies (much less the category “global,” which does not appear to have any meaning at all here), but also the category of “sexuality” itself.

The unique history of Latin America as the birthplace of the cultural narrative of modern coloniality and hybridity lends itself to a critique of the methods dominant in the history of sexuality. The narrative of so much of the history of sexuality is far too wedded to a redemptive and reconstructive frame to be able to analyze non-Western or premodern intimate bodily connections. The practitioners of this approach, implicitly or explicitly, on a theoretical level argue that sexuality is a modern construct, and on a practical level compare and contrast the objects of their analyses to present-day sexual communities and identities. In this method, then, sexuality

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5 This is not meant to criticize all attempts at constructing global histories of sexuality. Merry E. Wiesner Hanks’s *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (New York, 2000) uses the movement of Christianity across and beyond Europe as a point to focus on the interaction between religion and sex as exported from Europe. It seems to me that this is a fruitful way of analyzing sexuality beyond the confines of the nation-state.

6 I am thinking of the model most associated with George Chauncey in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994). There he argues that a gay community developed in the early twentieth century. Others have used this important observation to try to recon-
becomes a modern Western construct that enters the lives of colonized subjects only through colonial rule. Implicitly the colonized become blank slates (most practitioners of this narrative, when they discuss colonialism at all, argue that colonizers break down the previous intimate relationships of the colonized in order to create such blank slates) upon which Western subjects write sex. Thus colonialism enters the picture only as a narration of domination, not as a complex system of negotiation and mixture, and the colonized become relegated to the background. Recent scholars, of course, have begun the process of moving beyond such a facile understanding of indigenous sexualities, but more work remains.

One may criticize my anachronistic use of the concept of sexuality. As one AHR reviewer astutely observed, the term *sexo* does not appear to have entered the Spanish language until the early nineteenth century. Neither did the sixteenth-century Nahuas have any word that we would translate as “sex.” Still, both Spaniards and Nahuas had phrases that signified some set of activities that we would categorize as sexual, and a nominalistic critique of the fact that the specific category did not exist acknowledges neither the performative nature of premodern acts that we would now categorize as sexual nor the structural equivalencies and boundary issues at play in the translation of premodern and non-Western concepts to their modern Western counterparts. Among the Moche and the Nahuas, groups of people performed ritual activities linked with fertility that approximate what we deem the sexual, developed social meaning from those activities, and categorized the performances in a manner that distinguished them from other actions. While we should not subsume these performances under the category “sexuality,” in order to obtain a more complete understanding of both Moche and Nahua cultural formations and the relationship between the psyche and bodily performance, we need to analyze whether and in which ways such rituals connect with our category of sexuality.

In the twentieth century, many public intellectuals in Latin America considered sexuality an important topic of study. Two of the most prominent early- to mid-twentieth-century commentators, Brazilian author Gilberto Freyre and Mexican writer Octavio Paz, asserted the importance of colonial sexuality to their historical projects. Freyre understood sex as central to the Brazilian character, in which open miscegenation and an appreciation of cultural diversity reigned. Paz, in one of his most famous essays, asserted that the sexual betrayal of the Mexican nation by the indigenous woman Malinche placed the entirety of Mexican history in a subjugated position. His anxiety over miscegenation refracted very different views of sexuality promoted by other prominent Mexican public intellectuals. Paz, Freyre, and others used sex to play on nationalist sentiments, and their positions emulated elements that

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8 Spaniards used phrases such as *amor carnal* and *cosas carnales* to refer to sexual behaviors, and Nahuas used various terms including *tlalticpacayotl* (“the state of being on this earth, earthiness”) to signify the same.
already existed in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Latin American cultural imaginations. Many intellectuals, politicians, and others throughout Latin America have since understood sexuality, even when unnamed, as a category of great importance, whether signifying national betrayal or national character.9

Many of the images of Latin American sexuality created in the early twentieth century have remained. We still hear about the macho Latin man preying on vulnerable women, and the chaste Latin American woman who will never have sex before marriage. In gay circles, we hear about the strict division between the active, who can never be seen as gay, and the passive, who can only be acted upon. Historians of sexuality in the past twenty years have often challenged these stereotypes, and the differences between Freyre and Paz are an instructive warning for anyone attempting to summarize sexual practices from a continent-wide perspective. For Freyre, sex was a liberating activity for the Brazilian national psyche, while for Paz, sexuality signified the destruction of the Mexican national character. The longue durée of these images compares with the African, Asian, and Middle Eastern cases in this forum, although the specific nature of the stereotypes contrasts with them, thus suggesting that some comparative and transnational work on such issues has productive potential.

Like the Moche artisans and the Nahua ritual practitioners, Freyre and Paz used sexuality as a mode of analysis or a reading practice: the Moche used sex to analyze social interaction (for example, social inferiors fellated their superiors), the Nahua ethnographers used sex to discuss the relationship between humans and gods (for example, alluding to and sometimes describing sexual intercourse between particular priests and a fertility goddess), and Freyre and Paz used sex to analyze the state of the contemporary nation. All four thus utilized notions of history and sexuality to engage in a particular reading of society, and in all but the Moche case, colonialism was a central discourse in this reading practice. Still, in this respect the Moche and Nahua are radically different from their twentieth-century counterparts, largely because they did not center sex on vaginal intercourse. The earlier artisans, priests, ceremonial participants, and sixteenth-century ethnographers connected the acts described with specific rituals in which bodily performances led to the fertility of humans, gods, and others. The later public intellectuals connected quotidian activities with nationalism. These differences, though, should not obscure our view: all of these individuals presented bodily performances that we can link with sexuality as a vital analytical lens from which they could work to understand culture and society.

Professional historians of Latin America have been more reticent about developing the history of sexuality as a subfield. The Latin American history of sexuality began to emerge only in the 1970s and early 1980s in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, and later in other countries. The earliest studies, heavily influenced by incipient women’s and later gay rights movements, focused on the colonial period, analyzing the Inquisition, and the late twentieth century, looking at the beginnings of sexual

9 Gilberto Freyre, Casa-grande & senzala: Formação da família brasileira sob o regimen de economia patriarcal (Rio de Janeiro, 1938); Octavio Paz, “Los hijos de la Malinche,” in Paz, El laberinto de la soledad (Mexico City, 1959). For a different view of Mexican history, see particularly José Vasconcelos, La raza cósmica (Paris, 1920). Sexual repression was a prime theme for Paz; see his Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o, Las trampas de la fe (Mexico City, 1994) and Un más allá erótico: Sade (Mexico City, 1993). Today, Carlos Monsivais, perhaps the most prominent public intellectual in Mexico, considers sexuality a central theme of historical study.
political movements. Other scholars focused on women’s history, discussing motherhood and normative femininity. At the time, most of the studies were highly marginalized, not taken seriously by many more mainstream Latin American historians, who instead emphasized such topics as land tenure, labor systems, and political struggles. It was only in the late 1980s, as English-language scholarship on the history of sexuality began to appear, that historians both in and of Latin America began to take the subfield more seriously. Then we witnessed a flourishing area in which feminist historians expanded on their discussion of Latin American motherhood, while others, more influenced by anthropology, developed historical studies related to kinship practices, and a few began to work on social historical studies of sexual practices and identities.10

By the turn of the century, more studies appeared that took seriously the idea of developing social and cultural histories of sexuality. We in the colonial field suddenly discovered that Catholic clerics in colonial Mexico had lost control of their parishioners; witches throughout Latin America used sexuality; divorces took place in Brazil for reasons of sexual violence; Andeans, Nahuas, and Pueblos understood sexuality in a different manner than did Spaniards; plebeian and peasant men and women in colonial Mexico actively negotiated acceptable levels of sexual violence; and elites throughout late colonial Latin America used notions of sexuality to remove the “stain” of illegitimacy.11 In the modern field, we similarly discovered that many Argentine prostitutes came from immigrant groups (and that each group had its own specialties and clientele); doctors throughout the region further pathologized sexuality in the nineteenth century; criminologists used sex as a category to understand the potential of an individual to commit a crime; Argentine, Chilean, and Mexican

10 See Noemí Quezada, Amor y magia amorosa entre los aztecas (Mexico City, 1975); Solange Alberro et al., Seis ensayos sobre el discurso colonial relativo a la comunidad domestica: Matrimonio, familia y sexualidad a través de los cronistas del siglo XVI, el Nuevo Testamento y el santo oficio de la Inquisición (Mexico City, 1980); Alfredo López Austin, Cuerpo humano e ideología (Mexico City, 1980); El Seminario de Historia de las Mentalidades, Familia y sexualidad en Nueva España (Mexico City, 1982), El placer de pecar y el afán de normar (Mexico City, 1988), and Del dicho al hecho . . . Transgresiones y pautas culturales en la Nueva España (Mexico City, 1989); Sergio Ortega Noriega, ed., De la santidad a la perversión o de porqué no se cumplí la ley de Dios en la sociedad Novohispana (Mexico City, 1985); Ronaldo Vainfas, Historia e sexualidade no Brasil (Rio de Janeiro, 1986). See also June Hahner, Women in Latin American History: Their Lives and Views (Los Angeles, 1976); Asunción Lavrin, Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives (Westport, Conn., 1978); Lavrin, Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America; Luiz Mott, Escribidão, homossexualidade e demonologia (São Paulo, 1988).

political activists who used “mother” as a category to describe themselves negotiated sexuality more actively than we had once thought; men who had sex with other men revitalized urban space in Brazil in the early twentieth century; and rural women during the Allende period in Chile took advantage of some sexual openings while protesting vehemently against others.\textsuperscript{12}

To analyze these historiographical developments, we must understand the archival issues at stake in Latin American history, both colonial and modern. While historians of sexuality have not always sufficiently problematized the archive, they have for the most part thought seriously about archival issues.\textsuperscript{13} For those wishing to study the colonial period, until recently there existed only two obvious source bases for the study of sexuality: the literature produced by conquerors, early clerics, and the like, and the archives of the Inquisition. Early in the historiography, a handful of scholars produced works based on this first set of sources. Most of them recognized the inherent biases of such documents. One can never take literally the declarations of the Spanish chronicler that a particular indigenous society is full of sodomites. Yet, as more recent studies of these texts have shown, the chroniclers did not universally declare all indigenous societies sexually suspect, and, with care and within context, one can glean much information from the writings of the Europeans.\textsuperscript{14} More problematic, though, is the fact that the chroniclers rarely had enough context to make detailed observations about sexual subjects.

Even when those of us who are interested in ethnohistory supplement the accounts of chroniclers and priests with texts from pre-conquest indigenous societies, we find that the colonial archive always predominates. This type of work in some ways copies and in other ways moves beyond the efforts of sixteenth-century clerics as they sought to understand these elements of indigenous cultures. As we engage in a close analysis of the interaction between indigenous, African, and European individuals from multiple levels, we can focus on indigenous ritual and quotidian practices (thus working to approximate experience, though never capturing it), but these practices are always filtered through at least two (colonial and indigenous) and often more filtration systems.\textsuperscript{15} The best among our interpretive works create an archive from a variety of indigenous manuscripts, images, and ethnographic literature produced by Catholic clerics. But here the problem of interpretation, looking at that which cannot be described as sexuality in any simple way, comes to the forefront.


\textsuperscript{14} Trexler, \textit{Sex and Conquest}.

\textsuperscript{15} The concept of indigeneity becomes extremely complex here, for there existed multiple indigeneities, often in competition with each other, within each society, to say nothing of colonial Latin America as a whole. Thus, while Joan Scott, in “The Evidence of Experience,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 17 (1991): 773–797, showed the impossibility of capturing “experience” for any group in modern Western culture, this becomes more complex for premodern non-Western societies (and, of course, the concepts of modernity, premodernity, West, and non-West all remain fundamentally unstable).
The second colonial archive, that of the Inquisition, provides related problems of interpretation. First, people came into contact with the Inquisition only if they were brought before it for some reason, as defendant, accuser, or witness. All of these individuals had their own highly charged interests to defend. Second, the reach of the Inquisition was limited both by institutional issues and by the personal interests of the inquisitors. Thus much escaped its grasp. Finally, it was often in the interests of those brought before the Inquisition to lie. Still, as many studies have shown, understanding the Inquisition as an institution that mediated between the state and various subaltern populations can tell us much about a particular type of sexual interaction that related closely both to the power of the state and to attempts at resisting that power.16

Studies of modern Latin American sexualities have most often focused on an institutional approach similar to that used in the Inquisition studies of colonial Latin America. Looking at criminal and medical archives (and sometimes relating these archives to literature and media) has been the modus operandi. These sources are just as problematic as the Inquisition studies: criminal and medical archives emphasize the spectacular and the scandalous. Even when contextualized by novels and newspapers, the studies can overemphasize sexuality as a “problem” to be resolved and ignore both the mundane meanings of sexuality to daily life and the cultural meanings of sexuality to ritual practice. Again, while some studies have suggested that these archives are windows into sexual realities, more have emphasized the opacity of the imagined window, looking at the interaction between the institution and the individual.

Other studies in modern Latin American history have derived from recent works in anthropology and sociology, looking at the ways that individuals have formed communities based on kinship and sexual ties. Thus, historians have found rural communities in which kinship has implied particular sexual rules that, when broken, caused an existential crisis for the community. Others have shown that the development of urban societies throughout Latin America, but particularly in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, has led to the creation of new sexual and kinship relations. Looking at the sexual roles of mothers, wives, widows, young single women, and even youth, these scholars have shown that many women have attempted to control their sexual relationships in both private and public discourse. Further, studies of gay communities have shown the desire to form incipient sexual communities, the power of public declarations of sexual identity, and the corresponding political movements. Finally, and most recently, scholars have studied systems of normative masculine sexuality, deriving their analyses from cases, such as criminal trials, that signify exceptions to the norm. These studies have shown the possibility of developing a multifaceted archive in which criminal, medical, and oral histories could be combined to understand identity formation.17

Scholars of modern Latin America, as compared to their colonialist counterparts,

16 See particularly Lewis, Hall of Mirrors; Irene Silverblatt, Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World (Durham, N.C., 2004); and Martínez, Genealogical Fictions.

17 See Jorge Salessi, Médicos maleantes y maricas: Higiene, criminología y homosexualidad en la construcción de la nación argentina (Buenos Aires, 1871–1914) (Rosario, 1995); Jaime Humberto Borja Gómez, Inquisición, muerte y sexualidad en el Nuevo Reino de Granada (Bogotá, 1996); Miguel Angel Urrego Ardila, Sexualidad, matrimonio y familia en Bogotá, 1880–1930 (Bogotá, 1997); Green, Beyond Carnival;
can come much closer to an emphasis on the quotidian realities of the lives of their subjects. Through oral histories, ethnographies, participant observation, and similar techniques, we can often provide a “thick description” of the sexual cultures and societies under study. Perhaps we can argue that more social and cultural histories of this type are necessary to understand the use of prostitution, the prevalence of sexual violence, and the creation of a gay community. Yet, as critiques of oral history and ethnography have shown, such a facile understanding of realities can obscure more than it resolves.  

With respect to the Nahua and Moche archives, the narrative of the bulk of Latin American history of sexuality is far too wedded to the redemptive and reconstructive frame described above. Latin America provides an example that will allow us to critique the limits of this framework, and instead suggest that a particular reading practice that focuses on colonialism, culture, and power will provide a more adequate lens for studying sexualities in various historical periods around the globe. As historians of sexuality, we most often work to find identity and community based on our imaginary vision: we see the current configuration of sexuality as a transhistorical, transcultural category that will remain stable at the end of our telling of the story. It is the responsibility of historians of sexuality to destabilize our current notions of sexuality; our inevitable failure to comprehend indigenous meanings (themselves always unstable) will allow us to critique our own notions of the sexual. Indeed, we may need to discard the very category “sexuality” in order to develop an effective understanding of the history of sexuality.

If we limit the study of sexuality to understanding identity, community, and behavior, we have no means to analyze how the Moche developed meaning from the pottery created by their artisans. We cannot find community in the pots, they signify nothing about identity, and we do not have the ability to discern what they suggest about behavior. If that is true, then we have linked sexuality only to a particular redemptive narrative in which the West creates this discourse, whereas all others had something else that only vaguely resembles Western sexuality. Thus, in the narrative central to much of the history of sexuality as currently performed by Latin American historians, we constantly compare the West to the rest.

The payoff of our critique comes only when we direct our analysis primarily toward the links between colonialism, power, and bodily performances that we equate with sexual behaviors. This allows us to begin to comprehend both the colonialisn appropriation of the body for sexual purposes (centering sexuality around the singular act of vaginal intercourse) and the various indigenous signs that we can connect

Osvaldo Bazán, _Historia de la homosexualidad en la Argentina: De la conquista de América al siglo XXI_ (Buenos Aires, 2004).

18 See Daniel James, _Doña Maria’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity_ (Durham, N.C., 2000).

19 Our urge to compare has much to do with our professional training in a particular narrative of Enlightenment progress. This narrative creates a historiography in which eighteenth-century sexuality moves from a previous focus on sin and redemption to a modern emphasis, by the nineteenth century, on internal identities. Historians work to reconstruct those identities, or, for societies that we cannot label “modern,” discuss the various levels of sin, always comparing modern identity constructions to the other sexual formations. This becomes the central narrative thread of many social and cultural histories of sexuality, a thread that cannot be woven effectively into a Latin American tapestry.
with sexuality through a sexualized reading practice and a queer analysis. Using a sexualized reading practice means engaging in a close textual reading to understand the role of the sexual in the particular society and culture under study. I use the term “queer analysis” here to refer to the destabilization, so central to queer theory, of identifying practices. We think, then, about the ways in which particular elements of power form and maintain stable sexual identities, and our work becomes an effort at taking apart, destabilizing, those formations. Thus a queer analysis of the Moche and the Nahua works to understand the ways in which their notions that approximate sexuality destabilize the very category of the sexual. If we develop such an analysis, we can begin to understand the place of the Moche pots and the Nahua rituals, always refracted at least partly through colonialism.

We need to look more closely at the limits of our categories of analysis, in this case sexuality. The Nahua ritual performance engaged the entire city-state of Tenochtitlan, as well as dignitaries visiting from other city-states both inside and outside the empire. The performance began with groups of women dancing while local priests watched them. After several days, when the dances were complete, the priests seized one of the women, a captive playing the role of a major fertility goddess. To reassure her, the other women told her that she was being taken to have sex with the emperor. Once the priests had possession of the woman, however, they decapitated her and skinned her, and one of them then put on her skin. For the remainder of the ceremony, this priest was called by the name of the fertility goddess. S/he proceeded to lead the people in ceremonies to sweep Tenochtitlan and plant maize, while another priest, wearing the slain woman’s thigh skin, led a group of warriors in a mock battle that took place in a neighboring land. In the final part of the performance, a group of people led by the fertility goddess/priest fought and defeated a group of priests wearing paper phalluses. The goddess/priest then demanded that they give up their phalluses and weapons to the emperor, who gave them brooms in exchange. Finally, the goddess/priest placed the skin on a wooden cross set up for that purpose.

The ceremony was intended to ensure the fertility of the earth and the welfare of the warrior. The Nahua gaze envisioned this ritual performance as a repetition writ large of the daily activities of the people, especially the commoners, and in particular women. Thus Nahua ritual practitioners reproduced sweeping and sexual activity in ritualistic form, performed for the community in order to maintain and expand the state. The ceremony used the figures of the sweeping woman, the warring man, and several mother goddesses to invoke fertility. Only through the ritualistic

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20 On queer destabilization, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif., 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C., 2000); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, 1999); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C., 2004). I do not argue that a queer reading practice is the only way to understand these connections. Without claiming a queer reading practice, some of the scholars of colonial Latin America cited above have used concepts of colonialism and power to focus on the ways in which peoples and communities have conceived intimate relations in particular circumstances.

21 It was vital for the leaders of Tenochtitlan that the commoners and the visiting dignitaries saw the performance. This gaze signified the importance of the ceremony to the maintenance both of the community (through reproduction and the planting of maize) and of the empire (through war).
slaying of a mother goddess, the wearing of her skin by a male priest, the burial of her thigh in enemy territory, the mock battles of sweeping women, and the replacement of phalluses with brooms could the leaders ensure fertility and futurity.

By using the tools developed in other disciplines, particularly anthropology and performance studies, we can suggest that each element of this ritual has meaning important to sexual history. For those who performed it, those who authorized it, and those who watched it, the ceremony itself gave meaning to sexual life. Instead of subsuming the actions of the priest wearing the slain goddess’s skin under the category of sexuality, in a queer analysis we allow this individual’s actions to destabilize our notion of the sexual. Thus we can analyze his wearing of the woman’s skin as an aesthetic of self-fashioning that destabilizes gender, allows him to enter a sexual performance, and eventually ensures fertility. In our reading, we work to approximate the imaginary frameworks signified by the ceremony itself, and we develop an archive to aid us in our analysis of the audience reaction to such a performance.

But we must remember the frame of colonialism: this ritual comes to us through our colonial interpreters, and we cannot free ourselves from such a lens. In a Spanish gloss of a pictorial manuscript describing this ceremony, the writer calls the men who have their mock phalluses replaced by brooms putos, faggots.22 By centering our analysis on the colonial frame, we can search the archives to find places that mention the puto, and we can analyze the meaning behind the term, thus finding that the category asserts definitions based on particular acts and perceptions. The Spaniards viewed the puto as a figure endemic to many urban areas, one who deserved only disgust and condemnation because he took on an improper gender role: as the “passive” in anal intercourse, he played the part of the woman.23

We find that colonialism allowed the Spaniards to assert particular sexual signs and categories that the indigenous peoples before the conquest would not have understood. The Nahua at the time did not have a category that we can equate with the puto. Furthermore, the Nahua ritual practitioners viewed the priests with paper phalluses as powerful social figures who used their phalluses to inseminate the goddess. The emperor removed the phalluses not to turn the phallic priests into putos, but in order to control the sexual excess involved in the ritual, thus returning all of the ritual practitioners to the daily realities of society.24 Allowing colonialism to center part but not all of our analysis helps us discover a great deal about a colonial struggle for power, as the meaning of these priests changed in the colonial discourse: they moved from liminally gendered entities to improperly gendered subjects. But

22 Codex Borbonicus 28. For this image, see http://www.famsi.org/research/graz/borbonicus/img_page28.html.
23 On the role of the puto, see Rafael Carrasco, Inquisición y represión sexual en Valencia: Historia de los sodomitas, 1565–1785 (Barcelona, 1985); Mary Elizabeth Perry, Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville (Princeton, N.J., 1990); Trexler, Sex and Conquest; Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson, eds., Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (Durham, N.C., 1999).
24 The Nahua had a category for men who cross-dressed and played a passive role in anal intercourse, but this role did not equate well with the improperly gendered and sexualized subject of the puto. See Sigal, “The Cuiloni, the Patlache, and the Abominable Sin.” On the control of sexual excess in Nahua society, see Louise M. Burkhardt, The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico (Tucson, 1989); Camilla Townsend, Malintzin’s Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico (Albuquerque, 2006).
we must be careful here not to impute the meanings placed upon the identities of these priests by Catholic clerics and individual Hispanic notaries to the minds of Nahua individuals. For the Catholic priests could not and did not change indigenous sexual performance to this extent, and ceremonies representing these types of fertility rites continued throughout the colonial period and still exist today.

By understanding the frame of colonialism and by reading for the marginalia of ritual discourse as presented around the edges of the frame, we can work to understand ways in which Nahua notions of ritual destabilize our notions of the sexual. We witness Nahua ritual practitioners, refracted through the prism created by our colonial ethnographers (Nahuas and Spaniards), using their own concepts to develop an understanding of their relationships with the gods, other nobles, the commoners, and the earth. This refracted gaze becomes our payoff as we alter the history of sexuality.

But then we have the Moche, a society destroyed long before the conquest, and one that seems a clear example in which indigenous sexuality is front and center, where no prism of colonialism exists. The Moche artisans used sexual scenes to explain something about society. Similarly, only a little later, Maya artisans produced pottery with sexual messages. But we cannot analyze these messages if we base our method on historical searches for sexual identities and communities. Nor can we uncover the sexual behaviors of peoples who have long since disappeared. It is not simply that we are missing an evidentiary base; rather, and more profoundly, the methods most commonly used in the history of sexuality do not have a theoretical basis for understanding these approximations of the sexual.

Various elements present in the pottery can instruct us as we work to understand the structures of the sexual. I find the Moche artisans’ failure to depict vaginal intercourse in the bulk of their pots to be the most striking element. Mary Weismantel shows that the pottery is about fertility. This makes sense on the basis of what we know about a society with very high infant mortality. While we do not know why the Moche depicted anal as opposed to vaginal intercourse, we can relate the pottery to fertility rites, suggesting a close relationship between fertility and anal intercourse. As with Nahua society, or even the Spanish, we have no way of knowing whether anal intercourse was the predominant sexual practice, and no reason to suggest that vaginal intercourse was more predominant among the Moche. But that is not the point.

25 On the power of notaries to create a notarial truth that is not in the minds of the individuals represented on the piece of paper, see Kathryn Burns, “Notaries, Truth, and Consequences,” American Historical Review 110, no. 2 (April 2005): 350–379.


27 Thus, even if we had a set of notarial documents, it becomes clear that the pottery depicts notions of sexuality so counterintuitive to us (anal intercourse perhaps = procreation?) that we could not find anything resembling what we consider sexuality.

28 “The scenes of anal and manual sex are suffused with the symbolism of generation (infants, breast milk, ancestors, tombs). Reproductive processes are a central focus of this art, celebrated, elaborated, and dispersed as widely as possible, to encompass the interaction of multiple orifices and actors in an endless flow of vital fluids between bodies and across time.” Weismantel, “Moche Sex Pots,” 8–9.
The pottery does not suggest to us that the Moche believed that by engaging in anal intercourse they could produce offspring. Rather, Weismantel concludes that the pots “disperse control over reproduction by creating a physiological system in which no one individual or pair acts alone: not the married couple, not the mother breast-feeding her baby, not even the all-powerful and massively fertile ancestor. Each form of bodily engagement is only one link in a chain of physical processes that nourishes not only babies but also a vigorous network of linkages between social actors.”

To the Moche, vaginal intercourse was not the only, and perhaps not even the most important, reproductive act: through their portrayal of anal, oral, and manual sex, the Moche artisans produced and reproduced the social, the entire network linking humans, nature, and gods. We can comprehend this only through an extensive analysis of ritual in which we decouple sexuality from the centrality of vaginal intercourse.

But we cannot view these pots in isolation from the colonial depiction of coastal Andean peoples as sodomites. Further, the archaeologists who initially discovered them confusingly classified them as an example of either condemnation or exploration of homosexuality. Finally, a series of scholars have used the pots to exemplify the limitless sexual potential of humans. All of these cases suggest the prism of colonialism: deviations from the normality of vaginal sex always require that we explain them, something that we continue to do today as we further analyze the pottery. We never escape colonialism, and thus we never can reproduce precolonial sexual ideology.

The two important elements here are the exposition of colonialism and the exploration of colonial marginalia for hints of sexual ritual that exceed the colonial frame. We must understand the central discursive space of vaginal intercourse as a colonial act. As some Europeans asserted that vaginal intercourse was the only way to engage in reproduction, they produced a major ideological infusion, an attempt to alter the sexual concepts of indigenous peoples. In Nahua ritual and Moche ceramics, we find evidence of vital reproductive acts that did not include vaginal intercourse. As Weismantel notes, the Moche artisans viewed a wide variety of sexual acts as productive and reproductive. Similarly, the Nahua ritual practitioners found that the actions of a priest wearing the skin of a woman who signified the fertility goddess promoted reproduction throughout society. And in both cases, despite the broad notion of reproductive participation, the rituals enhanced elite control, promoting the reproductive power of Moche ancestors and Nahua priests. Only through an analysis of colonialism in which we uncover the maneuver that made vaginal intercourse the center point of the sexual picture and a concurrent examination of indigenous ritual practice can we develop a history of sexuality for these societies.

29 Ibid., 9.
30 On these points, see Mary Weismantel, “The Silence of Kinsey” (paper presented at the Ethnopornography Conference at Duke University, March 30, 2007). See also Horswell, Decolonizing the Sodomite.
31 Here, of course, I do not suggest that indigenous peoples did not practice vaginal intercourse. Rather, I argue that, for at least some and perhaps all indigenous societies in the Americas, vaginal intercourse was not the only, not even the most important, sexual behavior that symbolically led to reproduction.
So, where do we go from here? First, we need to take the premodern past more seriously. It is no accident that the majority of the contributors to this forum are modernists: the history of sexuality has developed a modernist emphasis, betraying its classical and medieval roots. Second, we must connect the transcultural with the local in order to avoid simply comparing the West to the rest. Hence, we need to see the connections made between the *puto*, derived in early modern Iberia from his predecessors throughout Europe, and the phallic image presented to us by the Nahuas. How was this connection made, and how did ritual representation change in the Nahua world as a result of transcultural interaction? How did the local signified by the Moche pottery become re-signified in a transcultural frame based on twentieth-century discourses of indigeneity and authenticity? Finally, we need to question how useful it is to say that sexuality is a useful category of analysis. In a recent presentation on the influence of Joan Scott’s famous essay “Gender,” Mrinalini Sinha argued that we must question the utility of gender as currently conceived for understanding colonized societies such as India.\(^3\) Similarly, we must question the usefulness of sexuality as a category of analysis. I am consciously using “sexuality” here as an anachronistic category. The category, after all, was not invented until the nineteenth century, and even the category “sex” has a modernist genealogy. To relate the premodern to the modern, however, it is necessary to use the category as an anachronism. Can we do away with it entirely? Can the aim of the history of sexuality be to destroy the history of sexuality?

When a goddess replaces phalluses with brooms in order that humans, the earth, and the state can be made fertile and clean, when anal intercourse equates with reproduction, we are hardly in the realm of sexuality. But if we fail to consider these puzzles anything but artifacts, then a global/transnational/transcultural history of sexuality remains unattainable. If instead we look at the originating moment of colonialism, we can study the traces of the precolonial that remain. When we work to understand what links the Moche artisans and Nahua ritual practitioners to the history of sexuality, we gain a greater comprehension of the structures of sexuality as they exist across cultures, throughout time, and around the globe. Thus, we must use care in exercising our search in this forum for a transnational history of sexuality. I am calling for a queer reading practice in the history of sexuality: we should embrace the disruptions of local epistemologies, seeking to explore at the same time the global tendencies of structures of desire.


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