

**THE GRADUATE JOURNAL  
OF  
HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL**

**2021-22, volume 15**

# THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

2021–22, VOLUME XV

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, the author Arundhati Roy famously took a break from writing fiction in order to focus on journalistic essays. When asked about the possibility of a new book, she answered, “another book? Right *now*?” This talk of nuclear war displays such contempt for music, art, literature and everything else that defines civilization. So what kind of book should I write?”

Roy's bewildered rage is an apt place from which to introduce this year's journal. In the midst of a seemingly endless pandemic, a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, voter suppression, catastrophic losses to reproductive rights, and the now undeniable effects of the climate collapse, it is hard to see a path forward, and even harder to justify paving that path from within academic institutions. In fact, the academy's complicity in these contemporary crises is all too evident.

This year, we were confronted by Roy's question: given the circumstances, what kind of things should we—can we—write? How can the tools provided by religious studies help us to look outward rather than fix our gaze within? What can we contribute in such an unstable and contingent world?

The pieces that follow pursue these unanswerable questions. The graduate student writers meld scholarship and politics, theology and ethics, urgency and eternity. Their work contributes to what we see as the central and shared goal of creative and academic pieces alike: the pursuit of better ideas that sustain more livable lives.

In “We Are the Fruits We Bear with Each Other,” Virginia Schilder capaciously proposes a queer, Catholic, panentheist eco-theology that affirms queer relationships and parenthood without dismissing embodiment, a tactic that exposes the limits of existing Catholic relational theologies.

In “Hyman Bloom's Hat,” Alex Baskin explores art-making as a distinctly Jewish practice in the work of painter Hyman Bloom, an approach that questions the putative boundaries placed around Judaism in academic and creative analyses.

In “Smoking and Spoken,” Rebecca Mendoza Nunziato incisively deploys indigenous and decolonial methodologies to assess the significance of smoke glyphs in Aztec art, iconography, and codices to the Aztec cosmos.

In his review of Amy Hollywood, Sarah Hammerschlag, and Constance Furey's 2021 book *Devotion: Three Inquiries in Religion, Literature, and Political Imagination*, managing editor Riley Spieler highlights these authors' interest in devotional reading—and rereading—as an alternative to the logic of sovereignty. This issue concludes with the *Graduate Journal's* interview with Brenna Moore about her 2021 monograph *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism*.

We could not have published this exceptional research without the help and support of the Harvard Divinity School community, the professors on our anonymous Faculty Review Board, and the entire Student Editorial Board. Thanks also to Katie Caponera for her endless support of students' creative and academic work. We hope the articles in this volume provide a foundation on which new ideas and new scholarship can be built.

With gratitude,  
Laura Mucha, Editor-in-Chief  
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# We Are The Fruits We Bear with Each Other: Towards a Catholic Eco-Theology of Queerness, Fruitfulness, and Embodiment

*Virginia Schilder*  
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In my experience as a queer Catholic in the U.S., I have found that contemporary Catholic catechesis often relies on a glorification of “natural” (i.e. “unassisted”) procreation as the basis for the idealization of cisheterosexual sex, partnerships, and families. Queer-affirming responses to this catechesis often dismiss “the biological,” thereby chafing against an eco-theological emphasis on embodiment. With this framing, in this reflective theological paper I draw on themes from Christian eco-theology in an attempt to outline a Catholic theo-ethic of queerness and fruitfulness that retains a theological closeness to embodiment and physical life-giving while affirming, rather than implicitly denigrating, queer parenthood and families.

*“If theology told the truth, it would speak of bodies, of flesh.”<sup>1</sup>*

I offer a memory of my 11<sup>th</sup>-grade theology course at a blisteringly conservative Catholic high school. Our teacher gave us reprieve from the usual outright homophobia, and instead explicated its more dazzling, more insidious twin: lauds of the inimitable beauty of sex and its consummation in extraordinary, miraculous life-giving. She proffered unassisted biological procreation (that is, between two cisgender and heterosexual partners who conceive “naturally”) as the highest, most glorious participation in God’s creativity, the fullest embodiment of the Love that is God. In such procreative sex, she explained, the love between two persons, with and through God, becomes sacred life. Our teacher then brought this idyllic theology to its only logical conclusion: sex that either cannot or will not participate in “natural” reproduction inevitably “misses the mark,” as they would say of sin. (Sterile cisheterosexual marriage notwithstanding.)

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<sup>1</sup> Linn Tonstad *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 33.

A fellow classmate—a rare comrade who I’ll call Jesse—shot up her hand. “*We are more than bodies!*” She was incredulous at the teacher’s betrayal. “Sex and marriage are about more than bodies reproducing; parenthood is not a function of biology alone. Stop reducing people and relationships to organs.”

The class was ambivalent. But for other students like me, desperately longing for affirmation of our loves, families, and bodies, this was a life-or-death declaration. Though I don’t know if Jesse is queer<sup>2</sup> in the gender/sexuality sense, I remember that for a lot of her life she was raised by a single mother whose husband had died. (“You’re going to tell me my mom isn’t *ideal!*!” Jesse once cried to our theology teacher, who was arguing that well-developed children require one mother and one father. With astounding brashness, the teacher answered, “Wouldn’t you prefer that your father hadn’t died?”)

This glorification of procreativity we encountered at school, perniciously employed in service of preserving cisheterosexual norms, reflected themes articulated in Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae*, and especially in *Theology of the Body*, teachings on bodies, sex, and marriage set forth in a series of lectures by Pope John Paul II between 1979 and 1984.<sup>3,4</sup> These teachings hinge on essentialist ideals of “man” and “woman” and their resultant sexual, gender, and marital “complementarity.” I will not explore the contents of these teachings in depth here (nor do I wish to be reductive). But the sexual ethics framework espoused in *Humanae vitae* and *Theology of the Body* was the central guide in the catechesis on human sexuality that I encountered in Catholic school and parish

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I do not disentangle queer *identity* and queer *ways of being*, and I talk about sexuality and gender in relation to bodies and reproduction. Therefore, I use “queer” somewhat capaciously or even purposely ambiguously to refer to those with LGBTQ+ identities and relationships (and non-normative bodies) and that which is non-conforming and marginal. Maybe that’s using “queer” queerly.

<sup>3</sup> Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae: Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Paul VI, on the Regulation of Births*. The Holy See: 1958.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II. *The Redemption of the Body and Sacramentality of Marriage (Theology of the Body)*. The Holy See, 1979–1984.

education programs. This paradigm emphasizes the indivisibility of procreation from sex and marriage, and the beauty and sanctity of procreation as co-creation with God.

In her insistence that we are more than bodies, Jesse expressed a popular apologetic response to the central thrusts of teachings like those in *Humanae vitae* and *Theology of the Body*, espoused by the queer folks and allies I knew in Catholic spaces. When priests hoisted up the supposed complementarity of sexes as proof of the ideal of cisheterosexual sex (“*See, the vagina is exactly penis-shaped!*”<sup>5</sup>), we contested that we are more than what happens to be in between our legs, which we said was completely non-determinative of anything. When Catholic educators preached that the “objective reality” that unassisted physical life-giving is confined to a cishetero couple elevates it above other relationships (“*Can pussy-licking make a human, though?*”), we dismissed the biological as irrelevant to parenthood. We were even compelled to rip love from the body (“*It doesn’t matter what I do with my body; it matters that I love someone*”). The queer-affirming Christian voices and theologies we found online and in communities outside of school confirmed and emboldened such responses. But these were provisional shields, incomplete ones.

The initialism for the characteristics of marriage that I was taught in Catholic school was (delightfully applicable to all manner of crass phrases) “FTFF:” Free, Total, Faithful, Fruitful. When drilled with this mnemonic, I approved, but with the ready addendum, “*iF Taking Fruitful Figuratively.*” Of course my Catholic educators didn’t mean *only* literally, but was I so short-sighted as to be unable to think of any ways in which a queer relationship could be *literally* fruitful, or to think that the fruits of mutual support, compassion, generosity, companionship, joy, learning, nurturing, and so on are only figurative abstractions?

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<sup>5</sup> Could anyone have told us the same could be said of the anus?

But soon into college, my Ark of the Disembodied Queer Heart ran aground once I found eco-theology, in its sometimes romantic but also intensely subversive affirmation—indeed, urgent attention to—embodiment, biology, flesh, tangibility, physicality, life, blossoming, death, decay. Though that’s not to say it is confined there: most eco-theology, especially my own Sallie McFague-inflected panentheism, is primarily interested in dissolving the immanent/transcendent and body/spirit dichotomies.<sup>6</sup>

Christian eco-theology refers to Christian theologies focused on the relationships between the Divine, creation, and humans, often with the goal of troubling the sharp divisions between them. Many eco-theologies (sometimes implicitly) espouse panentheism, the notion that God *is* the universe *and* exceeds it; that, to use McFague’s well-known language, creation is the body of God, but the totality of God also surpasses creation.<sup>7</sup> For this paper, most relevant about Christian eco-theologies are their attention to the Earth’s rich multiplicity and the necessity of diversity for healthy ecosystems, their emphases on embodiment, the dynamism and *divinity* of creation, and their centering of radical relationality (ecology).

The only time my high school theology teacher’s argument about the ultimacy of “natural” procreation made even remote sense to me was years later, when I would read of the primacy of embodiment in eco-theology. Its trumpets heralding the exaltation of corporeal life joined those of my Catholic schooling’s, together blaring at me all the more loudly. In my undergraduate studies I ardently embraced a deep commitment to the body, the immanent, the material—and then I would enter a Catholic space and pontificate for the queers and dismiss it all, saying that love, not flesh, is all that matters.

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<sup>6</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God, An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16; 35.

<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I speak broadly of the themes permeating the Christian eco-theologies I have encountered, which includes the works of Sallie McFague, Alice Walker, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard, and Wendell Berry. Notice that not all of these people would call themselves theologians.

Here's an (embarrassing) journal entry that I wrote early in college while visiting pitch pines in a coastal salt marsh:

*This confounding abundance of pinecones—for what? Why does creation so zealously strive to reproduce? Flowers, fruit, the drive to stay alive, to protect the young, competition among species. All for the sake of furthering genetic material? Why? And so violent? Female praying mantises sometimes eat their mates during sex, and we point to that as an exemplar of nature's cruelty. But I don't know, maybe that's not true, maybe she kills her mate with love, and respect, and gratitude, or maybe she's driven by love for her future children, or maybe she's just living as she was created to live.*

*Death, life, growth, death, life, life, life... the inevitable product of love... maybe this tree brims with pinecones, with chances at new life, as its way of desperately and constantly loving. Is this not how the universe came into being? Life as the consequence, the communication, of capital-L Love?*

Is life the shape of love? Is this the significance of physicality, of parentage? Surely, life relies on death: an animal's nourishment often demands another's end; our non-webbed fingers and toes form only through the deaths of the cells in the spaces in between. But these questions about the Earth's brazen tendency towards material life pestered me, pushed on my theology. We know that sex and parenthood among Earthly creatures happen in all manner of ways between all combinations of bodies—sometimes one, sometimes three, sometimes the whole community, sometimes two but one dies after. But in the above passage, you can see clearly my nagging anxiety that love must be audaciously corporeal, that divine Love emerges most fully in the Earth's cycles of life-making, in “biological” procreation, in tangible fruitfulness. (Though I asked just now, and my botanist girlfriend reminds me that pinecones are emphatically *not fruit* — at least not in the biological sense.)

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Jesse's avowal that we are more than a collection of organs—that parenthood is more than shared chromosomes—is indubitably correct and should be asserted. But I wonder if queer-affirming

rhetoric in Catholic spaces can love queer sex, parenthood, and relationships without throwing out our bodies. Similarly, I wonder if we can develop a Catholic eco-theology that centers enfleshment without privileging cisheterosexual procreation as an “ideal.” What might a practical, queer Catholic theology of fruitfulness gain from a serious encounter with the ecological? How can Catholics develop a theological closeness to embodiment and ecology that affirms, rather than implicitly denigrates, queer relationships, families, and parenthood?

As I try to outline the broad contours of such a theology, it is important to remember that a theology situated in creation does not mean it must be only literalist and only immanent. Rather, it supposes a sort of queerness of creation, that creation is both discernable *and* enigmatic, laden with multidimensional meaning. Here, bodies encapsulate both literalness and mystery, creatureliness and divinity, tangibility and transcendence, palpability and dynamism—a both/and flowing from Incarnation that is a crux of this theology, as I will soon explore.

Because a central tenet of “mainstream” cishetero-normative Catholic catechesis today depends on consecrating “natural” procreation, the queer narratives I have encountered in Catholic spaces often engage a dismissal or rejection of the corporeal when speaking about parenthood, sex, and relationships. But this is not to say that queer-affirming theologies in general eschew the body. In fact, quite the opposite: most feminist, disability, and queer theologies aim precisely to see bodies as holy, to consecrate bodily diversity, to dislocate bodily norms, and to validate bodies as crucial theological epistemes. So, I speak here only about the theologies-in-practice which eschew the flesh in their response to the specific physiology of the Catholic Catechism. How might the ecological help us respond to the preaching that cisheterosexual sex prevails in the incarnation it can render? How might it help us think more expansively about embodied participation in the ultimate Love which begets Life (*is this not how the universe came into being?*)?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we can find plenty of resistance to this particular view of sexuality within the canonical Catholic tradition itself. For example, before the last two centuries, the “official” ideal vocation was not to marriage and reproduction at all, but to celibacy and virginity.<sup>8</sup> But theological and ecclesial history alone do not de-legitimize present theology, nor do they change the present reality of teaching nor mitigate its very real implications for very real humans. And in any event, I am not especially concerned with challenging this theology in its own right. I am more interested in exploring a possible juncture with eco-theology, and the possibilities of developing a queer-affirming Catholic theology of reproduction that fully encounters eco-theology in its accentuation of the divinity and significance of embodiment.

As Linn Tonstad discusses, queer theology does not simply refer to LGBTQ+ issues in the Church, but also to the eradication of oppressive hierarchies of being.<sup>9</sup> This, too, is a project of eco-theology, which reveals how the structures and ideologies—especially white, imperial, cisheteropatriarchal capitalism—that destroy the land also destroy human bodies, particularly those of women and Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. In this way, eco-theology invites further integration of theology, sexuality, and economics, for which Tonstad, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marcella Althaus-Reid call.<sup>10</sup> Just as Tonstad writes “queerness affirms finitude,” ecotheology requires the recognition of human limitation as an arrestor of ceaseless development, consumption, and domination.<sup>11</sup> (We might even call this awareness of interdependence *love*, which I’ll return to later.) To know finitude is also, as Tonstad writes, to know “that nothing lasts”—which is to know change and fluidity, the dogma of the Earth. In my view, both queer theology and eco-theology prompt new understandings of embodied life that seek to bring about comprehensive socioeconomic

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<sup>8</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> See Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity, and God* (SCM Press: London, 2004); Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 49.

transformation “in which reciprocity and mutuality, equality and solidarity, function as the new norms for society.”<sup>12</sup> With this context, here I wish to focus on the constructive eco-theological principles (especially of the panentheist variety) on God, creation, and humanity that might help us think about queer relationality and fruitfulness.

The task remains. How to develop a queer-affirming Catholic theology of reproduction and fruitfulness that actively draws upon eco-theology in a generative way? I argue that a most transformative queer theology (queer in all the senses) *must* draw from eco-theology. We are bodies, we are creation; our theology must come whence. Liberation is in the Earth—in its abundant plurality, interdependence, relationality, and divinity outwardly moving.

### **Multiplicity and the “Ideal”**

In many panentheist eco-theologies, creation is a manifestation of God, but creation is not the totality of God or the same as God. Creation is God’s communication, God taking form, God speaking love into being and inhabiting therein. As creatures, we do not *have* bodies, we *are* bodies—divine, fleshy, responsive bodies.<sup>13</sup> *What does a soul look like? a child once asked. Like this! exclaimed the youth minister, outstretching her arms.* The whole person is the soul. Why would Christ bother raising up his scarred and beaten body if that weren’t the case?

The body is thus glorified and affirmed as an instantiation of divinity (albeit a divinity partially hidden, never fully grasped). With this basis, the idea that physical life-giving, real body-making, is the quintessence of participation in the Creator God—that divine love generates tangibly, that two bodies become one flesh—sticks more readily. We are told that we don’t need to read Genesis to understand our complementarity, we need only to look to our own bodies (“*Just look how your body was made!*”), to

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<sup>12</sup> This is a quote from Rosemary Radford Ruether. Steven Bouma Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltman*, ed. Barbara A. Holdrege (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); McFague, *The Body of God*, 16.

see that nature beckons us to heterosexuality, that I make eggs and another makes sperm, and together we might be creators, we might make life. Of course, the possibility of fertility alone does not sanctify a partnership, nor can the differing capacities of bodies be used to inform how relationships are structured or other matters of ethics (biological determinism is long dead, even, I'd claim, to most Catholics). But in an eco-theology that has not been queered, it would appear that embodied Life remains the ideal; making life remains the truest way to make Love. Budding and brimming and breastfeeding. What's a communion without body and blood?

I do not mean to make the Church's mistake in ignoring science's observation that bodies themselves do not uphold the dual sex model, which of course is not essential to creation but rather a particular interpretation of it. Even so, the close entanglement of love and the emergence of new embodied life becomes hard to shake out. As eco-theology affirms a turn to incarnation and creativity, it seems the Church agrees, pointing to creation as proof of the cosmic ideal of bodily life-giving—extolling it as the *ideal*, even as eco-theology offers queer-affirming notions of diversity alongside.

In reality, the very concept of an “ideal” here prohibits true diversity-in-community because the “ideal” still functions as a hierarchy, with all the power implications that proceed from it. As Tonstad writes, “the reality of the solidified theological category or concept becomes the standard by which other, actually real realities (people and their messy lives) are judged unreal, or insufficient, or imperfect.”<sup>14</sup> There is violence in the superficial tolerance of the language of the “ideal” (“*Wouldn't you prefer that your father hadn't died?*”) and the structures and norms it sustains.

Indeed, some folks do not wish to have children (that is their “ideal”), or they consider their children in broader ways, rightly calling us to widen our notions of family and care. But what of people who seek to be parents but *can't* reproduce “naturally”? The Church has all sorts of theological

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<sup>14</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 33.

gymnastics for licensing the marriages and sex of cisheterosexual couples with fertility challenges or who are simply past childbearing years. But by “can’t,” I also mean those for whom living authentically queerly makes “natural” reproduction an uncertain prospect. For them, for us, the ideal is to live, love, have sex, and have children as we are, as we can, as we desire. To impose celibacy, as some in the Church even now wish to do, is a grave harm not unlike imposing cisheterosexuality itself.

This is why any social theo-ethic must be actively affirming, not passively tolerant. Nothing makes me shrivel more than the words “*I don’t care what you do in bed.*” How could that possibly make me feel loved? I understand that the sentiment is a signal of acceptance, not real apathy. Still, the common motto, even among hospitable Catholics who wish to indicate their openness, is often: *We treat our LGBTQ+ siblings with respect.* This is miles beyond where so many other Christians are, but it is not the same as, “you and your relationships are *actively* good and beautiful.” Something to be pursued, not simply to accede. I don’t want to just accept the shape of my loves, I want to run full speed towards my wondrously womanly partner and feel and believe that I ought to. Our rhetoric and ethic must reflect a theology of sexual and gender diversity that sees healthy queer sex, loves, and families as actively good, not as unfortunate consequences of original sin to be accepted with tepid tolerance, retaining the belief that it’s not *ideal*.

Eco-theology’s attention to multiplicity categorically prohibits any notion of an “ideal” way to love, live, be, or embody, besides the fundamental criteria of authenticity and relational interdependence in an ecosystem. The *requirement* of biodiversity for a healthy ecosystem teaches us that there are many ways in which to live harmoniously, sustainably, and ecologically. In order to function, the ecosystem relies on each member being what they are, in all their astonishing differences. This same validation of diverse ways of being—diverse ways of becoming embodied, even—is

expressed, for example, by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, speaking about those who were born eunuchs, those who were made eunuchs by another, and those who made themselves eunuchs.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the ecological insistence on the coequal value, necessity, and diversity of creation (even within species), within the bounds of loving care and mutuality, it is literally “unnatural” claim the “ideal” of any relationship, body, sex, or form of kinship and family—including and especially on the grounds of complementarity or reproductive potential. In addition to its emphasis on plurality, the eco-theological and panentheist notion of immanence and God-in-and-through-creation ardently asserts that though there is oneness of Spirit in the interdependence and inter-relatedness of creation; particularity is not lost. There is no standard of form, no singularity of ideal, no sole way to come closest to God. *God is multiplicity*. There is no one “highest” way to participate in God’s creative capacity with loving compassion and sincere communion. For creation itself is queer: capacious, multidimensional, and dynamic, capturing corporeality as well as growth and fluidity, relationship and becoming, and interior and communal flourishing.

### **Divine Bodies, Dynamism, and Parenthood**

Tonstad writes, “Christianity, while always claiming incarnation as its central event, often seems reluctant to recognize the consequences of incarnation.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is perplexing that a transcendent conception of God, as opposed to a more panentheistic immanence, is so favored in “canonical” Roman Catholicism (its doctrine, theology, and liturgy), given that incarnation and corporeal resurrection is the Gospel. Christ is fully flesh; eternal life is embodied.

But let us not then revert to the other extreme and say that flesh is the *only* point. The basis of eco-theological panentheism (as opposed to pantheism) is that God is the universe *and more*.

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<sup>15</sup> The Gospel of Matthew 19:12, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, eds. Michael Coogan, Marc Brettler, Carol Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

<sup>16</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 40.

Incarnation means that God became flesh and still remained God. God is flesh, and more. This is why Jesus, a body, could not stay dead: he is not body alone. *One cannot live on bread alone.*

I think of some of my old journal notes on McFague, also from college:

*In the Body of God model, body is congruous with spirit; God is not transcendent as in external or apart, but is “the source, power, goal, and spirit that loves and enlivens the entire process.” Let us “retain God’s immanence” and “magnify transcendence.”<sup>17</sup>*

McFague tells us: Retain immanence, magnify transcendence. Eco-theology brazenly and rightly places the divine in the flesh, but God is not limited there. We are bodies, divine in our creation by God, in our living participation with and dwelling with/in God, and in our destination for God—though no-body is God entire. Thus, the transcendent/immanent, Creator/creation binaries are morphed into blurry concentric circles. *“Creation is Divinity in drag,”<sup>18</sup> “we live in God through the world.”<sup>19</sup>* Eco-theology reveals the flesh as simultaneously fully flesh *and* more-than-flesh (not that bodies themselves were ever anything less than cosmic miracles). It not only places the divine among the “mundane” but shows divinity to be what makes flesh, flesh—and the flesh, to some degree, makes the divine. *“The soul is dust and breath.”<sup>20</sup>*

This paradoxical body is therefore queer. Maybe this is Christ’s non-conformability, the both/and, but also something more: fully human, fully God, distinctly Jesus. And a *body*. Transgressing easy categorization. We have body and more-than-body all at once, together in body, being fully body, being life as bread and wine and life as Bread and Wine. Tonstad and Althaus-Reid urge us to talk about bodies as they actually are in real life. Eucharist is ultimate spiritual nourishment, but it’s also a good snack—which only adds to its divinity. *The miraculous is everywhere; our daily bread.* A body would

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<sup>17</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*.

<sup>20</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *Cross Currents* 43, 2 (Summer, 1993).

not be a body without the divine within it, totally situated in messy, dirty reality and yet simultaneously pointing to something beyond the body itself. Bodies are theophanies. That is the miracle, the mystery.

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We have already established that we are bodies, even divine ones. “*Christianity promises no escape from the body.*”<sup>21</sup> But I ask again the central question: how to prevent a glorification of corporeality from becoming an implicit denigration of parentage that is not by biology? In Catholic discourses of reproduction, how might we retain the body without shunning the queer?

Of course, we can do what science is already doing, and see that our bodies are diverse: chromosomally, physiologically, phenotypically. Bodies are already queer; it is human frames of categorization that taxonomize them—at the service of power consolidation and at the expense of the richness and holy mystery of creaturely particularity.

Further, we might also consider how avoiding the body in attempts to affirm queer relationships and families presumes a divorcing of “external” acts from “internal” experiences of gender, attraction, love, relationship, kinship, and parenthood. This same presumption is present whenever “love the sinner, hate the sin” is parroted by homophobic Christians who believe themselves compassionate—as though queerness does not inherently, necessarily manifest in the body in a visceral way; as though queerness is not *lived*; as though, suppress it as one might, queerness does not pervade one’s being, actions, and experiences—inward and outward.<sup>22</sup> As Tonstad writes, “That’s how we experience gender—in our bodies and in relations with others.”<sup>23</sup> Just as dominative power is exercised on and through bodies, the anarchic power of queerness, which transforms and stretches boundaries, also acts through bodies. (I want to re-state here that I am using queerness both in the gender/sexuality

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<sup>21</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 17.

sense and in the sense of an orientation toward transgressiveness and marginality.) Similarly, in an ecosystem, interdependence (like the Eucharist!) is not only internally experienced as a spiritual reality but tangibly manifested in one's form, exemplified most acutely in the way that the food you eat comes from other bodies and joins in constituting your body. In this way, the body and its workings cannot be easily divorced from the "internal," or any interior sense of queerness or relationship.

You may accuse me of assuming queerness to be a fixed internal identity, but I speak about it here as a modality. Indeed, many queer, disability, and feminist theorists help us see that gender, sexuality, and queerness are not static states but live—and deeply material—*ways of being*.

This same dynamism is what constitutes life. One way to contest the supposed primacy of physicality is to show that the material is not all that comprises life, for you may recall from high school biology that something is alive if it *grows*. This simplicity bears a profound truth. Growth points beyond the replication of cells to the fundamental dynamism of living beings. Maggie Nelson beautifully illustrates this, positing bodies and caring lovers as Argonauts—ever transitory, ever renewing.<sup>24</sup> "*Christianity promises no escape from the body,*" Tonstad writes, but it does promise transformation.<sup>25</sup> Life means the corporeal, then, but it also means change.

Fluidity, therefore, defines the corporeal. Ecology shows us life is in flux, "being" as an active verb—relating, developing, loving, participating. Wendell Berry writes that creation is the "continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God."<sup>26</sup> If queerness is motion and mutability, creation is queer, too. This bodily dynamism is crucial to the question of queer fruitfulness, because if bodies are constantly altering, then the creation of beings, ourselves and others, is ongoing. In the same manner, reproduction is ongoing, and ongoing in a physical, bodily way.

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<sup>24</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation."

Reproduction is ongoing and bodily, and so are parental relationships. When I was in Catholic school, our teachers assailed us with all manner of anti-abortion arguments. To help us remember these arguments, we were taught another mnemonic, “SLED,” though I only remember D for *Dependence*. This final tenet asserts that the fact that someone is dependent on another person to live does not make their “termination” permissible, no matter the extent to which that dependence is “bodily.” The argument follows that some elderly folks, people with particular kinds of medical conditions, infants, young children, and unborn children all rely on other people’s *bodies* to survive—someone to feed, bathe, and hold them—and all have a right to be alive.

Problematic reproductive politics aside, I think my conservative teachers inadvertently offered us LGBTQ+ Catholics something useful here. This “dependence” argument relies on the premise that caring for a child *outside* of the womb—or caring for anyone, really—is a *bodily undertaking*. Reproduction and parenting, then, are always bodily, even when the child comes not from your womb or gametes or your partner’s or some combination thereof. Even if we believe that life begins at conception, a human is not “produced” at a single point; we are constantly shaped, forever becoming. And not only internally, as conceptual “becoming” might evoke, but physically, through our food, air, water, relationships, and experiences with the world around us. Developmental biology confirms that these interactions alter our brain chemistry, our blood composition, our epigenetic markers, our gut biomes, our habits of thinking, our likes and dislikes. Austen Hartke posits that trans folks who medically transition are participating corporeally in God’s creativity, lending a hand in the creation of themselves.<sup>27</sup> And even in the minutiae of everyday life, in our continuous interfaces with the world, we are tangibly built and rebuilt.

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<sup>27</sup> Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and The Lives of Transgender Christians* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2018).

I shall try to bring all of these threads together. We are bodies; all that we do is body. That isn't to take God and soul out of it, but to reveal the divine as fully as we can. Queerness is bodily and bodies are queer; their inscrutability and dynamism make them all the more so. Just as there is no Disembodied Queer Heart, there is no Disembodied Queer Parent or Disembodied Queer Lover. They are the resident phantoms of the illusory body/soul chasm, overcome by a queer Christ whose fully-divine, fully-human body was not left behind.

Having now integrated the body and the more-than-body as together fully body, I could affirm queer parenthood in asserting that parenthood is much more than the corporeal, and leave well enough alone. But my reading of both panentheist eco-theology and Catholic teaching urges me to also say that queer parenthood is itself thoroughly, deeply bodily—as is any form of relationship. Reproduction and parenthood are more than strictly biological, surely, but what if we also said that reproduction and parenthood *really mean bodies* in so many ways beyond chromosomes, pregnancy, and breastfeeding? *The soul is continuous with the body; it is our form, our touch.*<sup>28</sup> We love through our bodies, we parent through our bodies, we nurture, build, communicate, care, relate, produce, pleasure, and suffer through our bodies. Tonstad writes that theology is about bodies meeting bodies, but we are also bodies *making* bodies—making our bodies, making others' bodies, and together making the Body of God.<sup>29</sup> “*When bodies touch each other, they constitute each other's embodiment.*”<sup>30</sup> We are the soft, shifting fruits we bear with each other, in a process of becoming in which we move with the Divine.

### **A Queer Ecological Theology?**

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<sup>28</sup> “The body is not a discardable garment cloaking the real self or essence of a person (or a pine tree or a chimpanzee); rather, it is the shape or form of who we are. It is how each of us is recognized, responded to, loved, touched, and cared for — as well as oppressed, beaten, raped, mutilated, discarded, and killed.” McFague, *The Body of God*, 16

<sup>29</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 47.

What can a queer-affirming Catholic orientation towards reproduction and fruitfulness, one that has learned from eco-theology, look like?

First, it looks like an attention to and active affirmation of the multiplicity of bodies, sex and gender expressions, family compositions, and loving relationships. It looks like rootedness in communities, in ecosystems, in the realities of complex, embodied, non-normative lives. This entails, first, a radical appreciation of diversity, not as a matter of sympathetic tolerance, but as an ecological fundament—the substance of flourishing communities. For when we understand creation as richly diverse, plural, and dynamic—as *queer*—we can better understand the diversity and dynamism of human lives, bodies, and relationships. As such, this theo-ethic orients itself toward change and fluidity rather than static, universal claims about bodies, gender, and sexuality. It affirms the Cosmic Christ that encompasses all creation, the Incarnation always here, everlasting and ever-shifting, constantly born anew. It is the revelation that *we are bodies*, constantly undergoing creation—a creation of both ourselves and others in which we participate with God, in varied ways.

Second, this rootedness in creation entails not a dismissal of divinity, but an ability to identify the Divine more fully, all around at all moments, in more places and people and beings, the One running mysteriously yet inescapably through all of our vibrant and wondrous particularities. When we understand plurality and embodiment as the loci of the Divine, we more clearly see God in bodies, in relationships, in multiplicity, in the immanent, in life in all its forms. The bread and wine, a collective of pine trees, a trans child, a river, the way we make love, a city community, the praying mantises, a family with two moms, a disabled lover, a community of women religious, a kinship. *Thy kin-dom come.* With God's fundamental Relationality (the very essence of ecology) at the core of this theology, we are compelled to embrace our radical interdependence, and know it as always embodied. Because, as McFague reminds us, we are bodies: bodies that act, love, pray, care, express, suffer, resist, parent,

worship, wither, relate, and *be* through bodies. Thus, we can see all variety of loving relationality, communion, prayer, kinship, parentage, and care as wholly corporeal, wholly Life.

Third, this theology highlights the embodied interdependence not just of creation, but of creativity. As life begets life and love begets love, so love begets life too, and it begets it through and across bodies, constantly and multipliciously. This theology proclaims that when it comes to parenthood, in the way that I am linked to the trees (“*I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed*”<sup>31</sup>), so my children shall be linked to my very body, be they from my womb or hers or another’s. This neither undermines the importance of the bonding that happens during pregnancy nor glosses over the complex politics of adoption and the horrific histories of children stolen from the arms of their birth parents. Rather, it is to insist that love and care are embodied. Beings in loving and intimate kinships create one another in form. Gender, sexuality, marriage, friendship, partnership, family, parenthood, caretaking—these are endeavors of the body, fully human, mysteriously divine, always interdependent. Just as we encounter God through the material world, we love and are loved through our bodies. Such love reaps a visceral abundance. Our bones are branches lavished with pinecones and varied fruits, changing and moving, touching others, constituting being.

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*But the greatest of these is love.* And what role for love in this theology? Catholic sexual ethics often purport to be predicated on love. I’ve tried to emphasize in this paper that we love on and through our bodies. What else can the Earth tell us about love? *Maybe she kills her mate with love, respect, and gratitude.*

If we start with the primacy of relationship in ecosystems, we might be tempted to stop at relationality and leave love out of it, especially if we haven’t quite shed the old Catholic idea of love

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<sup>31</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 178.

as a total self-emptying. But what if we took love to mean acting on the tendency toward *Life*, toward real flourishing (which requires right relationship with God, self, and community) embedded in all created beings—in other words, acting in affirmation of our radical interrelatedness? We can see love in the connection, mutuality, and reciprocity that bears fruit for lover and beloved (and beloved community) alike. Love for oneself need not be absent from discussions of sexuality and fruitfulness, but it is not a self-serving consumption or narcissism. Rather, it is a desire for expression and the outward expansion and joyful honoring of the self, always situated in a web of relationships, that arises in liberative communion.

Ecology teaches that each being has a unique role to play in an ecosystem, and that by the very act of living as one lives (eating, digesting, digging, breathing, making, playing, mending, producing, decomposing) one contributes indispensably to the workings of the ecosystem. This is why biodiversity is the ultimate marker of ecological health. Such contribution does not require self-emptying, but self-actualizing. Birds communicate as they were made to and as they need to, and we enjoy the beauty of their songs. I don't know if the bee consciously chooses to pollinate the garden, but he does so by simply doing as he pleases: by flying and eating and bumbling about—*by just being a bee*. In other words, being and living authentically, in ways that are whole and true, is the greatest form of self-love, but is also the greatest way of loving the community, and God.<sup>32</sup> Alice Walker's magnificent, liberating command of *The Color Purple* rings in my being constantly: Love God by loving what you love.<sup>33</sup> Mary Oliver sings its harmony too in *Wild Geese*, her most popular poem of queer naturalism: "*You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.*"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Even viruses, which we generally only think of as destructive (especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic), play important ecological roles. For example, according to one article, viruses are significant in carbon cycling in oceans and can transmit ecologically-important genes. For humans, it is estimated that at least 1,000 different viruses are members of our gut microbial communities. Rohwer, F., Prangishvili, D. and Lindell, D. Roles of viruses in the environment. *Environmental Microbiology*, 11 (2009): 2771-2774. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1462-2920.2009.02101.x>

<sup>33</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*. 178.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese." [http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver\\_wildgeese.html](http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_wildgeese.html)

This theology holds, therefore, that we queer folks have an ecological obligation, not only to ourselves but also to others and the Creator, to love as we love, to be as we are, to relate as we relate, and to express our deepest loves, desires, and senses of self. Any ethos of domination, accumulation, exploitation, control, and individualism is entirely incompatible with this ethic of authenticity, reciprocity, and community-embeddedness as a way of relating to the world. Love is a direct and willing participation in our radical, divine interconnectivity. And as there are many roles in an ecosystem, there are many ways in which a person can love (parent, nurture, express, create, embody, relate) and promote the flourishing of the community. The simple wonder of joining in communion, in all its multiplicitous forms, is loving on all dimensions. In that sense, partaking in our intrinsic relationality—*love*—is indeed the law of nature.

It is important to remember that this real flourishing, this life of love, also requires death. For both ourselves and others in the community to have fullness of life, we all must honor our mortality, we must refuse to place ourselves over and against others, we must participate in the cycles of the Earth that eventually call us all to die and be re-born into transformation. Indeed, our tradition teaches that only through death will we come to true life, to true love. In choosing to love, in choosing to join in the sacred life that flows from the Loving God, we must also willingly join in death and change, as part of what it means to be in beloved, interdependent community.

The Trinitarian God means, vitally, that God *is* relationship. God is an ecosystem. Divinity is in creation—in animals, plants, rain—and in the interdependence that connects them. A friend from my parish re-constitutes *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* as *Lover, Beloved, and the Love Between Them*. Love of other, self, and God is thus recovered in an ecology called Holy Trinity that really understands many bodies in One.

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*I sometimes wonder if Real Presence theology, when taken to its fullest extent, itself obviates the Church, surpasses it, demolishes it, in the service and vision of a church that is ontologically everywhere and free of the sacred/profane boundaries. In this ironic way perhaps the goal of the Church has always been its own obsolescence, to preach its own scandalous inadequacy, to queer itself, to tell us we cannot stop at Bread and Wine (though they are full in Themselves, that is the paradox). At Mass we hold up the Eucharist as the Body frantically gesturing all around, commanding us to take it further, saying look, look, There I Am too, calling the congregation to throw open the doors and run outside, run, run, run around the walls blasting our horns and flinging ourselves at the first person, tree, bird, or creek we come across, even hugging ourselves if we can muster the strength. That's a Communion liturgy.*

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A question remains: could Catholics embrace this ethic as continuous with our tradition? Does this queer-affirming eco-theology rely on a panentheism incompatible with Catholicism? This opens a theological discussion beyond the scope of this reflection, but I urge Catholics not to discount panentheism as easy “heresy.” For is Catholicism not already panentheistic? Is it not the implication—the consummation—of Real Presence theology, of *imago dei*, that God is here, in created things, in and through *all* bodies? Is that not what the Incarnation, the full humanity and full divinity of Christ—indeed our original doctrine—is all about? As Tonstad points out, Christ does not merely transgress or queer the divine/immanent boundary, but does away with it altogether.<sup>35</sup> Panentheism affirms this precisely: God is not distinct from God’s binary “other,” creation, but is both identified with/in creation and surpasses it.

If Catholics took Incarnation seriously and located the divine in all aspects—all the varied, plentiful, complex, shape-shifting aspects—of creation, then we might be able to more confidently and joyfully find God in queer bodies, queer sex, queer kinships, queer families. We may be able to

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<sup>35</sup> Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 17.

more clearly see that we are linked in our being enlivened by Life itself; we are invited at each moment in innumerable glorious ways to participate in, through, and with the Divine.

We thus can honor revelation, opening ourselves to finding God not only imaged in but truly *present* wherever there is life—life meaning the flesh and its everlasting becoming. We can foster true kinship in and with a queer church, knowing that we all exist and relate and love always through bodies—growing, ecological, divine bodies. We can love ourselves, the Earth, and each other as beings humming at each moment with God’s tender relationality, through and in which we are eternally making our bodies, making each other’s bodies, together making the Body of Christ.

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# Hyman Bloom's Hat: Jewish Art as Jewish Practice

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This paper is a close reading of three paintings by the late Jewish-American artist Hyman Bloom (1913–2009). I argue for interpreting Bloom's paintings as Jewish art, including when his works challenge Jewish religious doctrine. Further, I contend that making Jewish art should be recognized as a Jewish practice. This notion problematizes the widely accepted idea that Bloom *left* Jewish life. More broadly, my argument sheds light on lived Jewish religion, using the activities of Jews—such as artmaking—to expand the domain of Jewish life beyond ritual observance.

Studies of twentieth-century painter Hyman Bloom frequently mention these two biographical points: that he was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family and that he left the fold. In an oft-quoted 1977 interview, Bloom explained that in early adolescence, he “threw away his hat,” presumably referring to his yarmulke.<sup>36</sup> In another interview, Bloom says of himself, “[I] threw my cap on the ashcan.”<sup>37</sup> The repetition of “threw” lends itself to the inference that Bloom did not simply withdraw from Jewish observance but that he rejected tradition with some vehemence. In a chronology of the painter's life included at the end of the monograph *Modern Mystic: The Art of Hyman Bloom*, Robert Alimi briskly remarks that in 1926, “Following his bar mitzvah, Bloom ceases to practice Judaism.”<sup>38</sup> This paper challenges the simplicity of such assertions; religious identity, for most, is more complicated than an on-off switch.

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<sup>36</sup> This paper was greatly improved by the thorough copy-editing of Roselyn Bell (who is many wonderful things, one of which is my mother) and William Scruggs of the HDS Graduate Journal. I wrote this in a course with Professor Ann Braude, who was a terrific teacher and thought partner, and to whom I am eternally grateful for introducing me to the work of Hyman Bloom.

Henry Adams and Marcia Brennan, *Modern Mystic: The Art of Hyman Bloom* (New York: DAP/Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2019), 14.

<sup>37</sup> Katherine French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace* (Framingham, MA: Danforth Museum of Art, 2006), reprinted at <https://hymanbloominfo.org/spiritual-embrace/>, page numbers not available.

<sup>38</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 172.

Jewish life and identity in particular do not fit into a neat in-or-out binary. Jewish life has never demanded the acceptance of a set of belief propositions. Jewish life revolves around practice, yet which practices should register as important—religious observances or other parts of life such as artmaking—is a matter of debate. Bloom certainly spurned notable aspects of Jewish life, but I argue that Bloom’s oeuvre can be read as Jewish art. Further, I propose that Jewish art should be acknowledged as a part of Jewish life and thus as a Jewish practice. An appropriately expansive understanding of Jewish practice makes space to see that Bloom did not throw away his hat completely.

I was born seventy-six years after Bloom. Like him, I was raised Orthodox. Like him, I took off my yarmulke. Some of us have yearnings in our hearts for ways of being in the world that require us to move beyond the communities and customs of our upbringings. At times, I have described Judaism as something in my past, something I have completely moved away from. But such a description represents a mistake. I surprise myself with the ways I engage Judaism. I find myself using biblical motifs in my poetic writing. This is as authentic an engagement with my ancestral tradition as observing the laws of kosher or the sabbath would be. The meaning of the adjective “Jewish” is by no means straightforward, but equating it with ritual observance concedes definitional power to religious authority, which is unnecessary. When Jews utilize Jewish themes in creative endeavors, we open space to live full Jewish lives beyond putative orthodoxy. When I encountered Bloom’s paintings, I was stirred by their beauty—and Jewishness. Taking a page out of Bloom’s book, I turn directly to the art rather than providing a detailed biography.

Bloom refused to provide biographical information for a 1942 exhibit. Explaining why to a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, he wrote, “The lack of information about the painter might lead more deeply into the paintings.”<sup>39</sup> Examples of Bloom’s (both principled and

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<sup>39</sup> Erica Hirshler and Naomi Slipp, *Hyman Bloom: Matters of Life and Death* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2019), 11.

career-limiting) approach to self-disclosure included his tendency to avoid journalists and his absence at the openings for exhibitions of his work.<sup>40</sup> In the spirit of centering artwork, I analyze three of Bloom's paintings before pivoting to wider concerns regarding Jewish art, life, and identity.

Painting Jews: *Younger Jew with Torah*

Hyman Bloom completed *Younger Jew with Torah* in 1944. It is an oil painting on canvas, measuring roughly three feet tall and two feet wide.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the many decades that Bloom created works spanning numerous symbolic themes—including fish, spirits, forests, gourds, chandeliers, brides, archeological digs, séances, corpses, aging bodies, and the astral plane—he completed upwards of fifty paintings of rabbis and/or Jews holding Torah scrolls.<sup>42</sup> In *Younger Jew with Torah*, the protagonist clutches a large, highly decorated Ashkenazic-style Torah in one arm and grasps a prayerbook with his free hand. Both hands are yellow-gold. One almost glows. The Torah, too, is luminous—light being a major spiritual motif in Bloom's work. The Torah here shines like a rainbow. It is huge, almost another person alongside the human figure; it takes up a large portion of the canvas and radiates more vividly than anything else within the frame. An ornate wood carving, probably the back of a large chair, appears behind the titular subjects. The protagonist's face, like the Torah, includes reds, blues, greens, oranges, and yellows. He has an impressive, darkly colored beard, and he wears a *tallit* (prayer shawl). His dark eyes are wide open and stare right out of the

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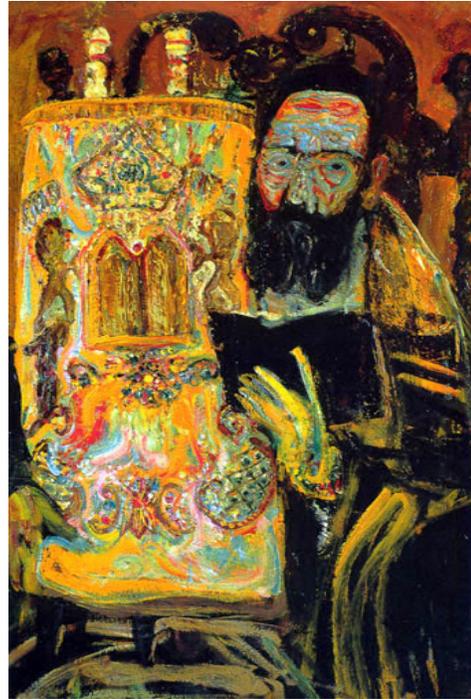
<sup>40</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Hyman Bloom, *Younger Jew with Torah*, 1942–1944, oil on canvas, 39 x 23 1/2", Five Colleges and Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium.

<sup>42</sup> French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace*.

canvas into the viewer's own gaze, in contrast with many of Bloom's rabbi paintings, which often feature men with eyes closed, possibly in religious trance.

Extraordinarily, the supposedly secular Jewish artist acknowledged his personal identification with rabbinic imagery. After all, the "Younger Jew" looks like Bloom himself. Art historian Marcia Brennan and art critic Holland Cotter concur that this painting, and several of Bloom's rabbis and Jews, resemble the artist.<sup>43</sup> When Bloom was asked whether the rabbis were self-portraits, he responded with the rhetorical question, "When did I ever paint anything else?"<sup>44</sup>



Before Bloom's 1920 immigration to the United States from Russia (present-day Latvia) at age seven, a teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he got to America. The young Bloom said, "a rabbi."<sup>45</sup> Bloom never did become ordained, although as an adult he reflected explicitly on the parallels between the roles of the artist and the rabbi. Bloom referred to both vocations as "beggars" who offer something vital to society but must rely on fickle patronage.<sup>46</sup> Though the "Younger Jew" is not a rabbi per se, it makes sense to identify this piece as part of the series of rabbi paintings for at least two reasons. First, the structure of the image is quite closely aligned with Bloom's rabbis (i.e., a male, bearded figure with a Torah scroll). Secondly, the inclusion of "younger" in the title—not just "young"—implies that the character is in comparative relationship with other figures, presumably the older subjects of his other rabbi paintings.

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<sup>43</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 138.

<sup>44</sup> French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace*.

<sup>45</sup> Angélica Allende Brisk, *Hyman Bloom: The Beauty of All Things* (Documentary Educational Resources (DER), 2010), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/hyman-bloom-the-beauty-of-all-things>.

<sup>46</sup> French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace*.

The theme of concealment, especially of divine truth, recurs consistently in Bloom's rabbi paintings. Crucially, the Torah scroll in *Younger Jew with Torah* is covered. This holds true for all the rabbi paintings; I could not find a single one where the open Torah scroll itself is depicted. This evokes the Jewish theme of the hiddenness of the holy found throughout the Hebrew Bible in verses such as Exodus 33:20—" [The Lord] said, 'You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.'"<sup>47</sup> Though Bloom's Torah scroll is concealed, it glows through its thick velvet cover. The painting suggests that the Torah's potency cannot be contained. It bursts forth with light. And this radiance is not limited to the Torah. The "Younger Jew" himself shines with color as well. The protagonist does not just hold the Torah. He has been transformed by it.

Bloom mused, "The Torah is no good unless it is introverted. If the Torah remains outside, it's a loss."<sup>48</sup> I take this to mean that the wisdom of the Torah must not remain superficial; spiritual adepts must take its teaching ("Torah," meaning "teaching") inside themselves. The "Younger Jew" seems to have done this. Given Bloom's statements comparing artists and rabbis, perhaps this painting implies that as an artist he too has been transformed by spiritual wisdom, which supports an understanding of artmaking as a kind of religious practice.

Thus, this painting contains Jewish themes, not simply because it features a Jew and a Torah, but because it conveys characteristically Jewish theological notions about the availability of the divine. Not limited to the content of his paintings, concealment and interiority were also life values of Bloom. Numerous visitors to his studio tell stories of finding his in-progress canvases turned to the wall to ensure that they were not seen until deemed ready.<sup>49</sup> Again, a parallel between the artist and the rabbi emerges: both preserve holiness through concealment.

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<sup>47</sup> Exodus 33:20 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>48</sup> Brisk, *Hyman Bloom: The Beauty of All Things*.

<sup>49</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 20; Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 8.

Concealment, however, implies the possibility of revelation, and Bloom was also devoted to sharing inner spiritual truth. Bloom is often considered an abstract expressionist. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, giants of the movement, even went so far as to say that he was the first abstract expressionist.<sup>50</sup> But Bloom resisted the label, feeling that abstract expressionism was only “emotional catharsis, with no intellectual basis.”<sup>51</sup> Criticizing “modern painting”—most likely abstract expressionism—Bloom described it as “going against the Torah by refusing to tell an inner truth.”<sup>52</sup> In contrast, the refulgence of the “Younger Jew” reveals an inner truth. It is fascinating to observe that Bloom, who distanced himself from numerous Jewish observances throughout his life, used the language of “going against the Torah” to describe artwork that he deemed as lacking in spiritual value.

Thus, Bloom’s paintings of Jews and rabbis demonstrate a fixation on portraying living Jewish symbols and conceptual themes. His personal identification with rabbi figures, his infusing of Jewish images with radiance, and his exploration of concealment and revelation through Torah suggest a complex, even admiring, relationship with Jewish religious life. These paintings would appear hard to reconcile with an outright rejection of Judaism.

#### Painting Bodies: *Self-Portrait*

The next painting that I consider is Bloom’s 1948 *Self-Portrait*. This transfixing work is one of Bloom’s corpse paintings, which is perhaps the most famed collection of his long career. *Self-Portrait* was done with oil on canvas and measures about four and half by three



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<sup>50</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace*.

<sup>52</sup> French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace*.

feet.<sup>53</sup> The piece centers on a human body—flayed—bone and tissue unveiled. As in many of the corpse paintings, the body’s insides are vibrant hues and innumerable unexpected colors. In terms of technique, this work is exquisite. The artist’s first wife and lifelong friend Nina Bohlen described Bloom’s method as sometimes applying “one color on one side of the brush, another on the other side, [and] twisting to create marvelous effects.”<sup>54</sup> Perhaps that accounts for the controlled chaos of *Self-Portrait*. Neither abstract nor representational, the piece can be thought of as an example of figural expressionism. Art historian Naomi Slipp maintains that the body on the canvas is seen from behind, though at first glance the piece is sufficiently blurry so as to be directionally ambiguous.<sup>55</sup> This is a fine example of what Slipp calls Bloom’s “delaying of bodies,” a spiritual metaphor for seeking essence.<sup>56</sup>

Brennan calls attention to the visual resonance between *Self-Portrait* and Bloom’s 1945 *Archeological Treasure*, which suggests that the jewel-like portrayal of the organic material in *Self-Portrait* indicates notions of spiritual excavation.<sup>57</sup> Like Brennan, curator Erica Hirshler reflects on the connection between bodies and excavation that an archeological dig implies; she argues that the visual link could insinuate “seeking inner truths by digging deep.”<sup>58</sup> Spiritual excavation then includes essence-seeking as well as delving into history. Metaphorically, the connection between this work and *Archeological Treasure* recalls the notion of digging into the past, perhaps in this case (given that it is a self-portrait) the artist’s own past—and finding treasure.

*Self-Portrait* is a meditation on embodiment, wonder, and one’s own mortality. It is meant to be beautiful. Bloom made this clear when he explained, “The body is very beautiful, and its insides

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<sup>53</sup> Hyman Bloom, *Self-Portrait*, 1948, oil on canvas, 53 x 38”, 1948. Private collection of Deborah and Ed Shein.

<sup>54</sup> French, *Hyman Bloom: A Spiritual Embrace*.

<sup>55</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 150.

<sup>58</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 16.

are just as beautiful as the outside.”<sup>59</sup> Even those who have not visited morgues and observed autopsies, as Bloom did, know that this terrific kaleidoscope is not literally what a dead body looks like; it is symbolic of an inner vibrancy present even post-mortem. Despite Bloom’s emphasis on beauty, these corpse paintings are certainly visceral reminders of death.<sup>60</sup> In *Self-Portrait*, Bloom does not spare himself from this eternal reality. Thus, the series is not only about prompting others to recall the inevitability of their demise; it is also the artist’s acknowledgment of his own life’s finitude. Art historian Henry Adams notes that a close inspection of *Self-Portrait* indicates a spine with a slight curvature. Importantly, Bloom had scoliosis.<sup>61</sup> The artist is in the thick of it with us, heading to the same destination, yet finding the wonder.

Hirshler notes that, for Bloom, spirituality cannot be separated from the body.<sup>62</sup> This identification of spirit with body is a notable feature of rabbinic Judaism. In *Carnal Israel*, Daniel Boyarin demonstrates that the writers of the Talmud offer a theology of embodiment that places a marked emphasis on “the body as the very site of human significance” (as opposed to Platonic and early Christian understandings of the body as mere vessel for the spirit, which is framed as the true self).<sup>63</sup> For Boyarin, rabbinic Judaism is rightly thought of as “carnal,” because it is concerned with bodily action over mental faith. As someone raised Orthodox, Bloom was likely exposed to talmudic literature and would have been familiar with this orientation. The talmudic theology of embodiment shows up in *Self-Portrait*. The body is given center stage in this artistic-spiritual discourse. The use of the term “self” in the title along with the painting’s content—a human body in fleshy magnificence—completes the link between the self and embodiment. Hirshler notes that while

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<sup>59</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 147.

<sup>60</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Erica Hirshler, in “Hyman Bloom: Spirituality and Art,” February 14, 2020, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4P-K\\_rvCL6E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4P-K_rvCL6E).

<sup>63</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6.

Bloom is just one of many mid-century American artists who depict images of death, his reminders of mortality are distinct in their “love of the human form.”<sup>64</sup> According to Boyarin, framing the body as meaningful and valuable, and not as only repulsive, is one recurrent theme of the Talmud.

There are more reasons still to consider the corpse paintings through a Jewish lens, in particular by noting their connection to the rabbi paintings. A page from the artist’s sketchbook shows skeleton drawings alongside drafts of rabbis, indicating some thematic link. The hues in the face of the “Younger Jew” match many of the colors of *Self-Portrait*, and Bloom tacitly acknowledged the rabbi paintings as self-portraits. Notably, rabbis and corpses both shine fantastically in his imagination. Bloom painted from memory rather than with models.<sup>65</sup> It may be that Bloom’s paintings of rabbis are based on elderly figures from his childhood, who had passed by the time of the work’s creation. Thus, Bloom’s rabbis may indeed be corpses. Also, the theme of concealment/revelation found in Bloom’s Torah scrolls that shine through their covers appears in corpse paintings such as *Self-Portrait*, where the body is cut open, laying bare what had been hidden. The theme is inverted, and the insides of bodies are revealed whereas Torah scrolls remain concealed. But questions of what is hidden and what is visible are again treated as urgently important.

Thus, at least one way to interpret *Self-Portrait* is to see it as Jewish art. The identification of self with body reflects the Talmudic culture that Bloom was raised in, and the stylistic and thematic parallels between the rabbis and corpses further corroborates a Jewish reading of the corpse paintings. Granted, Bloom was evasive in discussing the meaning of his artwork, perhaps especially the controversial corpses.<sup>66</sup> When he did talk about this series, interviewers gleaned that the paintings were associated with his mystical experiences, which were informed greatly by Theosophy,

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<sup>64</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 14–15.

<sup>66</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 34.

spiritualism, and LSD.<sup>67</sup> Bloom tended to downplay his Jewish heritage when he described the aims of his paintings, and he denied that his complex depictions of death—produced throughout the 1940s—had anything to do with the Nazi Holocaust.<sup>68</sup> He, of course, had good reason to deemphasize the Jewishness of his art, as he was subjected to anti-Semitic jabs by some critics who described his work as “thickly racial” and “almost psychotically Jewish.”<sup>69</sup> Yet I would argue that there is something deeply Jewish about Bloom’s works, not only the rabbis but the corpses too.

### Painting Beyond: The Medium

The third and final painting would appear to challenge my thesis. The subject matter and theological orientation of *The Medium* looks to be quite far afield from Judaism—I certainly have never heard of a Jewish ritual of communion with the dead or any kind of spirit mediumship. *The Medium* is another oil painting rendered on canvas and measures about three and a half feet wide by three feet tall.<sup>70</sup> As in the previous paintings analyzed, this piece features bright, warm



colors. The central figure and titular character, the “Medium,” wears gold clothes and her skin is gold as well. (“She/her” represents my best guess at the figure’s pronouns.) It is unclear to me what the large object in the top left of the painting is, but hovering above the “Medium” are apparitions, one yellow-orange and one blue-green. A small hand with a dark sleeve emerges from the right of

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<sup>67</sup> Hyman Bloom, *Spirituality and Art*.

<sup>68</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 38.

<sup>70</sup> Hyman Bloom, *The Medium*, 1951, oil on canvas, 40 x 34”, 1951, Smithsonian Institution.

the canvas, clasping the hand of the central figure, who appears to be sitting in a red chair. Her eyes are closed. Her head is tilted. And her facial expression is calm, maybe neutral.

*The Medium* seems to tell the story of a séance, and thus, it likely belongs to Bloom's series of séance paintings.<sup>71</sup> Bloom did, in fact, attend séances around this time.<sup>72</sup> The protagonist of the piece radiates gold as she finds herself in a trance state, channeling spirits who hover above. Others on the human plane (at least one, although there may be more) hold hands in perhaps a circle. Notably, the "Medium" looks a great deal like depictions of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, a figure representing compassion from the Buddhist pantheon. During his adolescent artistic training, Bloom spent a great deal of time in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, where two classical sculptures of Avalokiteshvara were then newly displayed. One was an eighth-century Sri Lankan bronze, and the other, a twelfth-century Chinese gilded wooden piece.<sup>73</sup> Bloom's "Medium" wears a headdress and necklace that quite closely match those Avalokiteshvaras. In Bloom's adulthood, he was deeply engaged with Theosophy, a universalizing theology that fuses elements of Asian religions with the mystical traditions of some Abrahamic faiths. The Theosophist writer Helen Blavatsky, whose texts Bloom read closely, wrote extensively about Avalokiteshvara.<sup>74</sup> In this painting, Bloom perhaps imagines the Buddhist semi-deity as a spiritualist medium, channeling beings from other realms.

There are several resonances between *The Medium* and both Bloom's corpse series and his rabbi paintings. In *The Medium*, an arm emerges from out of the frame, which occurs in many corpse paintings, such as *The Hull*, *The Anatomist*, and *Autopsy*. Much like Bloom's statements on the similarities between artists and rabbis, Bloom also noticed correspondences between artists and spiritual mediums; he wrote, "The artist is the channel," and described the creative process as

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<sup>71</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 33.

<sup>72</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 131.

<sup>73</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 131–32.

<sup>74</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 132–33.

“contact with the unknown.”<sup>75</sup> Even though Bloom never professed clairvoyant or necromancing abilities, these statements reveal *The Medium* as another kind of self-portrait.<sup>76</sup> Also, Bloom’s “Medium” glows a yellow-gold light, much like the luminous Torahs and shining faces of the rabbi series.

I concede that *The Medium* lends itself most readily to the interpretation that Theosophy or Spiritualism is its primary theological mode. Yet I propose that the painting is also, in a sense, Jewish. My argument is—and this segues into wider concerns about Jewishness—that Bloom’s philosophical and spiritual explorations were themselves characteristically Jewish, even as they ventured far beyond Jewish doctrine. Paintings like *The Medium* demonstrate a kind of Jewish syncretism, particularly because of its resonances with the rabbi paintings and the corpse series. Although Bloom’s exploration of Asian religions predated the wave of 1970s “JewBus” (Jewish Buddhists), he was one among many American Jews whose interests expanded beyond Jewish doctrinal allegiance. It would appear actually to be very Jewish to engage with Asian religions. Some might say that this is a mere sociological fact, telling us something about cultural change or assimilation with nothing to do with Judaism itself. Such arguments rely on neat divisions between religion and culture, of which we should be highly suspicious.

#### Jewish Art, Jewish Life, Jewish Practice

Boyarin argues that there is no separating religion and culture in Jewish life. Pointing out that the term “Judaism” does not appear in any historically Jewish language, he maintains—radically and yet convincingly—that “Judaism” is, in fact, a modern invention.<sup>77</sup> Categorizing Judaism as a religion is a concession to modern (and Protestant) notions of identity. Boyarin offers the example of a

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<sup>75</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 131.

<sup>76</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 131.

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, Key Words in Jewish Studies 9 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

report in Josephus that when the Judaeans came to Jerusalem to observe a festival in the Temple, they discussed plans for the rebellion against Rome.<sup>78</sup> It is natural for modern ears to hear this as a (clever or hypocritical, depending on your perspective) “camouflaging” of politics in religious garb. Boyarin contends that this reaction reflects a misunderstanding. The Judaeans in question would not have seen their religious activity as distinct from their political activity. No part of their lives was cordoned off for what we now call “religion”; religion was integrated with politics, culture, and, yes, art.

This means that Jewish art is not easily segregated from Jewish religion, except by appealing to a notion of religion as a discrete entity in people’s lives that has little precedent in Jewish history. When Brennan says that Bloom was a “culturally assimilated Jew,”<sup>79</sup> she takes as evident terms that are anything but. To what did he assimilate? To American culture? Is American culture necessarily non-Jewish? In what sense was he still then a “Jew”? Ethnically, but not culturally? Or culturally, but not religiously? Why then did he fixate on Jewish religious symbols and themes in his art? Atalia Omer’s problematization of discourses on Jewish authenticity is useful here. Omer writes that when contemporary Jews seek to reclaim their heritage (what she calls “Jewish hermeneutic retrieval”), they are acting as authentically when they take up atheistic forms of Jewish socialism as when they orient around biblical prophets. She shows that “Jewish modes of identification” always “embodied both secular and religious frames.”<sup>80</sup> When Hyman Bloom threw away his hat, he discarded aspects of Jewish life (perhaps Orthodoxy, or *halacha*), but not all of Jewish life, as his lifelong commitment to Jewish art demonstrates.

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<sup>78</sup> Boyarin, *Judaism*, 27–28.

<sup>79</sup> Marcia Brennan, in “Hyman Bloom: Spirituality and Art.”

<sup>80</sup> Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 173.

Saul Zaritt proposes that Jewish culture is characterized by a translational paradigm. Focusing mainly on language, Zaritt shows that “Yiddish,” a language whose name means “Jewish,” was also called and can be fairly thought of as “Taytsh,” meaning “German.”<sup>81</sup> In a key sense, the language of the Jews is not their (our) own. To be Jewish is to live in the in-between and to remain immersed in perpetual translation across cultures. For most of the tradition’s history, Jews have been diasporic. Zaritt’s translational-paradigm hypothesis recalls not only Bloom’s theological syncretism but also Bloom’s artistic cultural blending and transgression. When discussing his corpse paintings, Bloom explained that while he was not aiming to shock or dismay viewers, he was after a “feeling of transgressing boundaries.”<sup>82</sup> Despite my proposal that the corpse paintings present a Jewish theme of the centrality of embodiment, they also certainly prod at Jewish taboos regarding the handling of human remains. It would be easy to look at a painting of an autopsy or a séance and conclude “not Jewish.” But that conclusion relies on binary reasoning, which a translational paradigm challenges. Bloom violated Jewish taboos while remaining in constant dialogue with the tradition. He permitted stylistic and symbolic links between his overtly Jewish paintings and his apparently “not Jewish” paintings. He read books on Jewish art, had works included in the 1947 opening exhibition of the Jewish Museum in New York City, but resisted the categorization of his work as Jewish.<sup>83</sup> He lived above a Legal Sea Foods so that he could eat shellfish daily, yet he insisted throughout his life that he wanted a Jewish burial.<sup>84</sup> His life was characterized by ceaseless translation and “ritual boundary crossing,”<sup>85</sup> which go hand in hand because crossing boundaries means moving between cultures as Jews always have.

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<sup>81</sup> Saul Zaritt, “A Taytsh Manifesto: Yiddish, Translation, and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies* 26, no. 3 (2021): 186.

<sup>82</sup> Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 23.

<sup>83</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 25–26; Hirshler and Slipp, *Hyman Bloom*, 8.

<sup>84</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 52; *Hyman Bloom: Spirituality and Art*.

<sup>85</sup> Brennan, in *Hyman Bloom: Spirituality and Art*.

Doctrine does not define Jewish life, nor truly any religious tradition. Robert Orsi argues that Catholicism is the religion of Catholics, including when their religious practices anger the Church and provoke condemnation, such as in the veneration of non-sanctioned saints or devotion to sanctioned saints in non-sanctioned ways.<sup>86</sup> Shahab Ahmed argues that Islam is a religion that captures utter contradiction, including, for instance, the long history of religious Muslims who consume alcohol.<sup>87</sup>

Orsi and Ahmed highlight the lived practices of real people under the umbrella of religious traditions. Artmaking is one such practice. Their lines of argument lead to wider and truer understandings of religion. Art historian Sammie Friedman captures Bloom's relationship to his ancestral tradition by proposing, "He doesn't celebrate Judaism as such. He celebrates Judaism through celebrating art."<sup>88</sup> The repeated inclusion of Jewish themes—both implicit and explicit—in Bloom's paintings attest to his artistic engagement with Jewish life.

Boyarin, Omer, and Zaritt offer arguments regarding lived Jewish experiences that are congruous with Orsi and Ahmed. Hyman Bloom's art is Jewish, neither because it triumphantly declares Judaism's excellence nor adheres to Jewish doctrine, but because it grapples with Jewish themes. Art critic Sydney Freedberg, writing about Bloom in the artist's heyday, points out that "rejection of dogma and specific teachings" are "usual to the Jewish youth brought up in the American environment." Freedberg rightly points out that Bloom's rabbi paintings display the artist's "strong sense of the singular meaning and stubborn force of the religious tradition behind him," including "that tradition's intensest spiritual poignancy and power."<sup>89</sup> Much like Ahmed's

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<sup>86</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, 2nd ed., Yale Nota Bene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>87</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>88</sup> Angélica Allende Brisk, *Hyman Bloom: The Beauty of All Things*.

<sup>89</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 37.

wine-drinking Muslims, Bloom's "rejection of dogma" and "strong sense of... the religious tradition" are both fully Jewish experiences.

Hyman Bloom has often been called a mystic. His description of his 1939 experience of transcendence gets quoted early on in every text about him: "I had a conviction of immortality, of being part of something permanent and ever-changing, of metamorphosis as the nature of being. Everything was intensely beautiful, and I had a sense of love for life that was greater than I had ever had before."<sup>90</sup> Retellings of Bloom's life, such as the documentary *The Beauty of All Things*, cite this experience as leading to his most visionary works completed in the subsequent decades. Bloom explained that he aimed to convey his transcendent experience through art, and this led him to paint "something that he knew," i.e., synagogues, rabbis, and Jews.<sup>91</sup> One might say that Bloom left Judaism, became a Theosophist-Spiritualist, and then seeing the transcendent in all things, painted images from memory (rabbis) that demonstrate a universal spiritual principle. But another way to interpret this chain of events is to suppose that Bloom was a Jew whose religious understanding expanded beyond Jewish doctrine, and with a syncretic Jewish-mystical identity, he painted transcendence through rabbis and other Jewish motifs. In other words, why say that he was raised in the particular, moved to the universal, and then painted in the particular? Why not see Jewish particularity all along the journey in the life of the painter (though lacking doctrinal or *halachic* allegiance)? Regarding the mystical nature of Bloom's work, Brennan states that "a mystic is a person who can occupy multiple locations simultaneously,"<sup>92</sup> referring to the many traditions Bloom drew upon. Thinking of Zaritt's notion of the Jewish translational paradigm, I suggest that occupying multiple locations is also very Jewish.

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<sup>90</sup> Adams and Brennan, *Modern Mystic*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> Angélica Allende Brisk, *Hyman Bloom: The Beauty of All Things*.

<sup>92</sup> Brennan, in "Hyman Bloom: Spirituality and Art."

I conclude this paper by observing that what I have offered here is a kind of Jewish argument—Jewish, not only because I am the one making it, but because it concerns the multifaceted quality of Jewish life. I have shown why three works of Bloom’s can be thought of as Jewish art and why Jewish art, as a lived Jewish activity, should be seen as a Jewish practice. Jewish practices are the things Jews do that are in relationship (both doctrinal and counter-doctrinal) with Jewish tradition. Bloom (may his memory be a blessing) may not have agreed with me. But he too offered Jewish arguments, such as when he proposed that the “Torah must be introverted.” I note that making Jewish arguments, even years after throwing away our hats, reflects the expansive notion of Jewish life for which I am arguing.

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# Smoking and Spoken: Volute Patterns as Aztec Cosmivision

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In this paper, I interpret the painted Aztec smoke glyph as the shape of the cosmos. By taking seriously Aztec metaphysics and cosmivision, this painted pattern reveals a foundational life force called *teotl*. This life force, both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible, moves in and between bodies. Following James Maffie's definition, I argue that *teotl* endlessly flows and spirals in the Aztec world. This is expressed across sixteenth century manuscripts through the swirling scroll shape. While the scroll is a prominent and well-known convention for conveying speech—particularly that of rulers, priests, and other entities—I turn concentrate on smoke. Ultimately, like speech, breath, vapor, and song, the shape of smoke allows us to reinterpret *teotl* through Mesoamerican motifs and Indigenous perspectives.

In the past two years, I have forged a close relationship with copal incense. This aromatic tree resin is a powerful substance that has played a central role in many rituals of precolonial Mesoamerica and Latinx and Indigenous communities of today. As, I have written elsewhere, copal can be conceived as the blood of trees, a messenger of prayers, food for more-than-human entities, and a sacred bundle that has traveled through time and space for generations.<sup>93</sup> While researching copal academically, I was simultaneously redefining my own spiritual practices in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Though I had previously experienced copal in collective ceremonies, in 2020 Día de Muertos became a private, home-bound encounter.<sup>94</sup> As a result, I sought out ethically harvested resin from Mexico and began to burn copal regularly in my apartment. Very quickly, I became acquainted with billows of white smoke and the strong scent of copal filling the room, a rich, polysensory process. Copal has become an ancestral presence and ongoing guide for me in both intellectual and ritual contexts. As a result of this relationship, I have turned to 16<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>93</sup> See Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School [Spring 2021 issue](#) and ReVista Harvard Review of Latin America's Winter 2021 [Religion and Spirituality issue](#) for previous research on this topic.

<sup>94</sup> Día de Muertos (also known as *miccailhuic* in the Huasteca modern Nahuatl variant) is the most important day of celebration in Mexican and Mexican-American communities. It represents what is often called syncretism or hybridization between Catholic and Indigenous religions. It is essentially a period of time spent remembering and welcoming the dead into the world of the living. This includes public and private altars, music, food, and ceremony (See Nutini, "Day of the Dead and Todos Santos").

Mesoamerican manuscripts and precolonial Aztec writing and art to trace representations of and references to copal.

In many introductions to Aztec iconography scholars direct the novice's eye to notice the speech scroll pattern.<sup>95</sup> More formally termed a volute, this is one of the first glyphs taught due to its prominence and significance. The painted spirals emerge from the mouths of important speakers and harken back to overlapping oral and artistic traditions. Voices of rulers (*tlatoni*) and wise people (*tlamatini*) have been marked on paper and carved into stone for hundreds of years. Examples from the precontact period include a mural at Tomb #105 from the Classic Period civilization at Monte Albán includes “two people in succession, each one with a speech scroll that has two colors, red on the inside and turquoise on the outside.”<sup>96</sup> Similarly, fragments from the Techinantitla Mural at Teotihuacan include the curling glyphs.<sup>97</sup> Finally, the Ahuitzotl Plaque, carved around 1502 south of Tenochtitlan, employs the speech scroll to transform a “picture of the mythological water beast into a *buei tlatoni* (Great Speaker).”<sup>98</sup> Across these examples, these glyphs indicate that speech is occurring and highlight the importance of words—though they do not contain the exact words. Unlike cartoon speech bubbles, the volute shape does not tell us *what* is being said. Despite the name speech scrolls, in surviving documents from the early colonial period, volute glyphs represent a wide range of vocalization, from highest forms of *xochicuicatl* (flowery poetic speech or song) to the sounds of animals—with such diversity often occurring within the same document, as in the case of the Codex Mendoza or the Florentine Codex. Clearly, the shape is part of an intricate, interconnected method of recording history, telling stories, communicating knowledge, or imparting

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<sup>95</sup> In this paper I use the term Aztec to refer to the Late Post-Classic Mexica peoples of Tenochtitlan.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> “Teotihuacan: City of Water, City of Fire.” Digital Stories. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2019. <https://digitalstories.famsf.org/teo/#apartment-compounds>. (See also Hajovsky, 61).

<sup>98</sup> Patrick Thomas Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others: Motecuzoma's Fame in Aztec Monuments and Rituals* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 58.

wisdom. The pattern is abundant across Mesoamerica, traced back to Pre-Classic times and beyond Central Mexico.<sup>99</sup>

However, in my reviewing of 16<sup>th</sup> century codices, I noticed that the speech scroll was not the *only* painted volute of significance. Hovering over censers, emerging from burning temples, and emanating from the New Fire Ceremony drill were glyphs of approximately the same size and shape. This captured my attention and I encountered countless unique expressions in the volute form. While the speech scrolls is widely acknowledged across Aztec art and iconography, I hypothesized that there was more to understand about these shapes. Taking seriously Indigenous knowledge requires that we approach the unnamed painters and scribes with humility and respect while attempting to tap into their creative construction of a complex pictorial language. I begin with the assumption that, like speech scrolls, the smoke glyphs were placed with intention and purpose, potentially revealing important information about Ancient Mexican practices and perspectives. As I will describe in detail, there are certain conventions for smoke.

In the Codex Mendoza, one of my primary sources, purple-gray and orange volutes are regularly employed for writing and drawing smoke (see fig. 1). The Codex Borbonicus also employs the volute shapes for smoke, often with a similar two-tone glyph (see fig. 8b). These are artistic decisions made within ancient contexts and I trust that they are infused with both the theory and practices of Aztec life.

Thus, in this paper I propose that the Aztec smoke glyph can be interpreted as the shape of the cosmos. The volute expresses the ephemerality of a world in motion and the power of visible and invisible, tangible and intangible substances. Beyond mere representation of a physical phenomenon, I argue that paintings of the volute communicate a foundational metaphysical reality in Aztec

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<sup>99</sup> Stephanie Wood, "Scrolls: Air & Sound," Visual Lexicon of Aztec Hieroglyphs, 2021, <https://aztecglyphs.uoregon.edu/content/07-scrolls-air-sound>.

cosmovision. This reality is made up of a sacred life force called *teotl* and can be made visible through the spiraling scroll shape. Focusing on the expressions of smoke in particular, I seek to construct an extensive outline of patterns in Mesoamerican codices and possible interpretations. First, I begin with definitions of *teotl* to provide a metaphysical lens with which to read the smoke shape. I then provide three examples from the Codex Mendoza in order to clarify the various styles employed by the artists: smoke sounds as writing, drawings of smoke, and the smoke volute glyph. In the second half of the paper, I turn to a few observable patterns focusing on the volute convention. One section focuses on the motif of smoke in conquest and ceremony and the second features relationships between supernatural and natural entities and elements. In each example and interpretive hypothesis, I seek to center *teotl* and aim my analysis on the painted volute as a source of insight for our ongoing attempts to comprehend Aztec cosmovision.

### **Shapes and Sounds of Smoke: Metaphysics and Linguistics**



Fig. 1

### **Cosmic Shapes of Teotl**

Discourse on the shape and nature of the Aztec cosmos summons the scholarship of Mircea Eliade and David Carrasco. Specifically, Carrasco's scholarship has contributed greatly to our interpretations of the urban centers of Mesoamerica. Take for example, Teotihuacan, the center of the Aztec Empire from approximately 1325 C.E. until the Spanish conquest in 1521. Carrasco allows us to perceive the religious dimensions of this powerful place by mapping the city. Specifically, he reveals a vertical *axis mundi* in the Templo Mayor, and significance in the "cosmological" quadripartite layout of the city.<sup>100</sup> Drawing on Eliade's concepts of "architectonic symbolism of the center," Carrasco articulates how creation myths, astronomy, cosmic time and historical narratives informed the building and enacting of Tenochtitlan.<sup>101</sup> For decades these astute analyses have offered interpretive tools for understanding the religion and cosmology of this Postclassic civilization. Because of these foundational interpretations, I am inspired to propose that the scroll shape makes visible the substance of the cosmos. Whereas the pyramids are striking in their precolonial prominence and ongoing permanence, the scroll shape references divine substances in eternal motion—both visible and invisible, tangible and intangible. The ephemerality of speech, breath, song, vapor, and smoke does not result in their dismissal by the Aztecs, rather, these substances are valuable and powerful within a cosmovision founded on *teotl*.

According to philosopher James Maffie, within Aztec metaphysics, "everything that exists constitutes a single, all-inclusive, and interrelated unity."<sup>102</sup> However, this unity is anything but static. The universe is continually in process, in constant motion, and "defined in terms of becoming."<sup>103</sup> And this substance in motion, the core of existence itself, is *teotl*.

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<sup>100</sup> David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 36.

<sup>101</sup> David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 122.

<sup>102</sup> James Maffie generously offered comments on an earlier draft of this paper and provided helpful insights which are incorporated here. James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, (Louisville: University Press Colorado, 2014), 12.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

*Teotl* is an elusive concept which scholars have interpreted in many ways. In the colonial period, Indigenous scribes and Spanish chroniclers did not provide an obvious definition of the word.<sup>104</sup> And as Molly Bassett notes, as a morpheme *teotl* cannot be divided into smaller pieces to derive meaning.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, *teotl* cannot be reduced into particles. It can only be combined with other particles to form a phrase. According to Nahuatl scholar and teacher John Sullivan, while English uses a large amount of word roots, Nahuatl likely has no more than 1500 morphemes “that are combined... to construct words.”<sup>106</sup> This does not make the language less complex or advanced—despite colonial interpretations of “primitive” peoples. Rather, as an agglutinative language, words are transformed through prefixes, suffixes, and compounding concepts.<sup>107</sup> While *teotl* is combined with many other words to produce phrases and unique names,<sup>108</sup> there is no consensus on how the headword or standalone concept should be defined.

Though *teotl* has traditionally been translated as “god” or “divinity,” These modern interpretations undoubtedly must contend with the impact and violence of colonialism particularly in the realm of religion.<sup>109</sup> That which was divine for the Aztecs was considered demonic to the Spanish—as such, Western theologies and philosophies have obscured and distorted academic approaches to Aztec cosmovision for hundreds of years.<sup>110</sup> For a compelling and complete definition

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<sup>104</sup> I capitalize the “I” in Indigenous in this paper in order to give respect to Indigenous peoples and to recognize a history of colonial erasure and disrespect. This decision is informed both by personal relationships and by guidance from recent publications by Indigenous peoples. For more information see Dr. Kerrie Charnley’s resource, “Why we capitalize the ‘I’ in Indigenous: Guidance on writing with and about Indigenous Peoples” (2021), Gregory Youngin’s *Elements of Indigenous Style* (2018), and The University of British Columbia’s *Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines* (2021).

<sup>105</sup> Molly H Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies* (University of Texas Press, 2015), 90.

<sup>106</sup> John Sullivan, “Colonial Nahuatl,” Summer Course, University of Utah. 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Examples include *teocalli* (temple), *teoxihuitl* (turquoise), and *teocuitlatl* (gold). (See Wood).

<sup>109</sup> Joe Campbell identifies 290 variants of the word *teotl*, Maffie states that there are 260 types of *tonalli* per the ritual calendar, and Bassett compiled twenty-five words from the Florentine Codex that were modified by *teotl* as a prefix.

<sup>110</sup> Louise Burkhart acknowledges that for the Indigenous peoples, divinity is “more diffuse and less personalized” than in the “Old World” and therefore translates *teotl* as “sacred powers. Richard Townsend agrees that *teotl* is “a numinous, impersonal force diffused throughout the universe,” and functions in a world that is “magically charged.” (See: Burkhart (2010) 169 and Townsend (1997) 28).

I return to Maffie, who summarizes *teotl* as a “dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy.”<sup>111</sup> Fundamentally, *teotl* is the cosmos, and that which animates everything: plants, spirits, animals, gods, humans, and objects.

When embodied in humans, *teotl* is referred to with other Nahuatl names as well, and some of these forces are particularly relevant to our understanding of the volute shape in the codices. These life forces such as warmth, breath, and passion allow us to better trace animism beyond the individual subject. Within each human, there is no singular soul, rather there are many forces flowing between bodies, inhabiting and evacuating spaces with regularity. First, the head or forelock of a human is the location of *tonalli*, which refers both to heat and warming (associated with the sun) and to one’s day sign and fate (referring to the ritual calendar).<sup>112</sup> As I will discuss later, *tonalli* can be lost, resulting in illness or death. This is a core concept in the Aztec view of power—both spiritually and politically. Notably, a fetus receives their life force by “creator gods... [who] drill into its chest with a fire drill,” and it is also said that the gods blow onto the fetus to grant *tonalli*.<sup>113</sup> Much like the heat of *tonalli*, breath is also a kind of *teotl*. In Nahuatl *ibiyotl* means breath, emanation, or a puff of air, it resides in the liver and produces passion and emotion.<sup>114</sup> And when breath is combined with words (*ibiyotl tlatolli*) it creates particularly “fine speech.”<sup>115</sup> These expressions of *teotl* are ultimately transmissions of energy in a world of fluidity and transformation. As Marus Eberel writes in “Divine Fire,” the Aztec conceptions of souls “emphasize not only material life forces but also dynamic corporeality. Bodies and life forces are not seen as immutable categories but as processes.”<sup>116</sup> Given

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<sup>111</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 12.

<sup>112</sup> Markus Eberl, “Divine Fire: Transformation in Highland Mexican Thought and Practice” in *Smoke, Flames, and the Human Body in Mesoamerican Ritual Practice* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2018), 59.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Stephanie Wood ed., “Ihiyotl,” Nahuatl Dictionary, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/content/nahuatl>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Eberl, “Divine Fire,” 67.

these definitions of *teotl*, how might this reality be represented in the codices? Where is the evidence of this relationship between cosmovision and smoky substances?

I propose that painted volutes uniquely give shape to the “ceaseless becoming and transforming” that is *teotl*.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, paying careful attention to their patterns grants access to more than motifs of speech and smoke. This hypothesis, as will be interrogated in the remainder of this paper, is not meant to argue for one singular shape for *teotl*. I do not propose that the volute shape is the only or even primary way to capture the cosmos. Rather, I seek to momentarily center these multiple spirals of transitory matter in order to trouble modern interpretations of material religion. By this, I mean that these spirals are truly made of matter. Smoke (like paint on the page, or water droplets in vapor) straddles the boundary between here and gone, perceptible and impalpable. These spirals of smoke invite us to consider that which goes beyond the ordinary senses that have been designated and naturalized as rational indicators of reality. Indigenous ontologies, as I will explore later, require new approaches to the topic of materiality. For example, while much attention is given to precious stones, impressive ancient sites, and durable bones, they are often mistakenly viewed as static and inanimate in contemporary contexts. Instead, how can we relate to these materials as alive and active? Spoken and smoking swirls uncover wisdom that has been victim to colonial epistemicide. In the following sections, I seek to interpret the smoke glyph and codices in accordance with Gregory Cajete’s definition of representations. In “Philosophy of Native Science” he writes, “signs and formulas of thought appear in many forms... The structures and symbols... serve as bridges between realities... Many Native symbols are representations of the nonhuman realities of nature.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 355.

<sup>118</sup> Gregory Cajete, "Philosophy of Native Science" In *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays* (Malden Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2004), 54.

This project, then, becomes one of moving across the symbol-bridge with respect and curiosity. Where European philosophy tends to devalue and objectify those deemed non-human, Native science dismantles those ontological and epistemological assumptions. Grounding theory in land and in relationships allows us to read artistic conventions as having animacy and agency. To that end, I will now focus on distinguishing and deciphering paintings of smoke in this spirit.

## Utterances of Smoke: Recognizing Writing and Interpreting Art



Fig. 2a



Fig. 2b



Fig. 2c

Alongside Aztec metaphysics, analysis of smoke volutes requires careful attention to Nahuatl language and glyphic writing. As Gordon Whittaker articulates in *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, this system is unique, name-oriented, and linked with precision to Nahuatl words and sounds.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, reading Aztec manuscripts requires acute awareness of different types of writing and representations. While some signs are linked to specific historical words and names, there are also paintings that tell visual stories that are not necessarily tied to a word-for-word reading of the glyphs. To clarify these distinctions, I provide three examples of smoke from the Codex Mendoza: first,

<sup>119</sup> Gordon Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs: A Guide to Nahuatl Writing*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 9–11.

smoke sounds in Nahuatl writing; second, drawings of smoke; and third, the stylized smoke volute glyph.

The Codex Mendoza's record of Chimalpopoca's reign provides one example that is widely cited as the use of the smoke glyphs as writing (see Fig. 2a, fol. 4v). Whittaker tells us that glyphs are distinguished from other forms of painting and drawing in the Aztec world because writing "was outlined and painted with a brush."<sup>120</sup> This means that in this particular case the volutes are not necessarily representing something smoking but instead utilized to produce a sound. As Whittaker writes, "writing is tailored to a specific language" and is "read with words chosen by the author" whereas pictures or icons can be interpreted by a society more broadly with "words chosen by the beholder."<sup>121</sup> Therefore, this first example requires a basic understanding of Nahuatl sounds and words. Specifically, the words for smoke in Nahuatl include the noun *poc(tli)* and verb *popoca(c)*. The noun form is generally translated as "smoke, vapor, fumes" while the verb is defined as "to smoke (for smoke to come out of a volcano, for instance); or, for a comet to appear."<sup>122</sup>

The name glyph Chimalpopoca is comprised of the verb "to smoke" in addition to *chimal(li)* meaning shield. Chimalpopoca was the third ruler at Tenochtitlan, ascending to power in 1417 and his name glyph appears twice on the same page of the Codex Mendoza (fol. 4v). In each instance his name is connected by a line to the *tlatoani* human figure as well as to the corresponding day sign.<sup>123</sup> The document records his conquests as well as his death. This glyph is an example of a "so-called sentence name" which consists of both a transitive verb and a noun; therefore, this glyph with purple-gray and orange smoke volutes above the shield reads: "He Smokes Like a Shield."<sup>124</sup> This

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<sup>120</sup> Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, 22.

<sup>122</sup> Stephanie Wood ed., "Poc(tli)" and "Popoca" Nahuatl Dictionary, accessed May 8, 2022. Both definitions are relying on Karttunen and Molina with attestations from Codex Chimalpahin, colonial annals, Sahagún, et.

<sup>123</sup> Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, 147.

convention is also applied in the name of a Tlaxcallan lore, Citlalpoca, or “He Smokes Like a Star.”<sup>125</sup> While this example is a verified historical name, there are other manuscripts, such as the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, in which Venus and stars are described and painted as smoking. As I will explain further, these require different treatment.

It is also worth noticing the blue speech glyph alongside *tlatoani* Chimalpopoca (fig. 2). This speech glyph is not meant to be interpreted in the same way as the smoking shield. However, in other instances the speech glyph is meant to recall the word *nabua(tl)*, “something that makes an agreeable sound,” and therefore can also be employed phonetically in Aztec writing as *-nabuac*, a locative meaning “near or next to” (having nothing to do with the word Nahuatl itself).<sup>126</sup> Distinguishing these creative and complex uses of shapes and sounds allows us to better interpret the codices. While I do not think writing using the smoke glyph is unrelated to the cosmic significance of smoke and the volute shape, this is not the primary focus of my research at present. As a final note, it is important to add that in the Codex Mendoza *teotl* and *tonalli* can also be written in glyphs. The former is written as half of the sun disc with the full sun disc being *tonatiuh* or sun.<sup>127</sup> The latter is written with four circles, a “quadripartite arrangement” likely representing cardinal directions and calendrical division of time.<sup>128</sup> As I mentioned earlier, I do not propose the volute to be the *only* shape to represent the cosmos, however, I do not consider these phonetic functions to discount my argument regarding the importance of the volute. Let us now turn to the second and third examples of smoke, which will clarify the present inquiry.

Next, we turn to an example of smoke rising from an incense ladle (fig 2b: fol. 63 r). In this instance, a priest is burning incense as a part of night rituals, certainly a process that is both smoky

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<sup>125</sup> Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, 30.

<sup>126</sup> Wood, “Nahuatl.” <https://aztecglyphs.uoregon.edu/content/nahuatl-02v>.

<sup>127</sup> Wood, “Tonatiuh” <https://aztecglyphs.uoregon.edu/content/tonatiuh-34r>.

<sup>128</sup> Wood, “Tonalli” <https://aztecglyphs.uoregon.edu/content/tonatiuh-34r>.

and sacred.<sup>129</sup> Yet, we do not see the volute glyph employed. Instead, above the ladle is a gray and black cloud of a more realistic, soft-edged style. The defined shapes emerging from the ladle likely depict fire or warmth, reminiscent a hearth painted in the wedding scene a few pages earlier (fol. 61r). Here the *tlacuilo* decided not to reference smoke through the volute shape.<sup>130</sup> This way of drawing smoke is repeated in a one other location in the Codex Mendoza. In the section on Daily Life an 11-year-old boy is held over chile smoke by his father for punishment, and an 11-year-old girl is threatened by her mother near the same drawing of red chiles and black fumes (60r). And while copal and tobacco are offered as tribute, besides the example of the priests above these are not depicted with smoke glyphs or drawings.<sup>131</sup> This second category requires further study to understand when and why the artists chose one convention over another. Yet, the inclusion of smoke of any style reminds us of the importance of this presence in ordinary life and as an agent of transformation in Aztec rituals.<sup>132</sup>

This last example is the first in a larger discussion of the volute glyph, which I propose to be a *teotl* shape in Aztec cosmovision (fig. 2c).<sup>133</sup> Turning to folio 70r of the Codex Mendoza, we find a page that is largely dedicated to depicting artisans. We encounter multiple blue speech glyphs across the page, some of which come from the mouths of artisans, others from youths, and a grouping from a singer with a drum.<sup>134</sup> Notice, however, the goldworker over a fire with the purple-gray and orange volutes emerging.<sup>135</sup> As Sahagún records separately in the Florentine Codex, there are two levels of goldworkers, and those who finish and design the gold are the “masters” who worshipped

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<sup>129</sup> These rituals are spelled out in detail in the Florentine Codex.

<sup>130</sup> Whittaker notes that the verb *tlacuiloa* can mean writing, painting, and/or drawing.

<sup>131</sup> Codex Ixtlilxochitl: folio 107r is an example of a smoking tobacco cane with realistic gray smoke, whereas the Florentine Codex shows tobacco ceremonies with the volute glyph.

<sup>132</sup> Eberl, “Divine Fire,” 55.

<sup>133</sup> This example served to clarify the use of the volute in distinction from the other styles previously detailed. Next I summarize the pattern more broadly and connect the convention to cosmovision.

<sup>134</sup> Codice Mendoza (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2014), <https://codicemendoza.inah.gob.mx/>.

<sup>135</sup> Though the Spanish gloss reads “platero” the glyph sitting in the fire is that of *teocuitlatl*, gold.

Totec “in times of old.”<sup>136</sup> The painter of this page employs the volute shape instead of the black cloud drawings from the second example (fig. 2b). What might this volute tell us about the nature of the activity unfolding in the codex, and ultimately about *teotl*?

Momentarily pausing on this page of the Codex Mendoza, it is worth mentioning the overlap in speech and smoke volutes. In his book, *On the Lips of Others*, Patrick Hajovsky references speech glyphs as symbols of song, breath, divine incantations, and conveying rulership.<sup>137</sup> Hajovsky notes that speech and breath are “related to the human creative force of naming” and that often associated with songs and “orations in ritual engagements.”<sup>138</sup> Regardless of the specific action portrayed, they are “ephemeral forms... tied to ideas of transience,” connected to *teotl* through *tonalli*.<sup>139</sup> Hajovsky adds that *tonalli* “was changed or even transferred to another person through breath, speech, and song.”<sup>140</sup> Again, we find the movement of sacred life forces within and throughout the volute shape.

Looking again at these artisans in the Codex Mendoza (fol. 70r), we find speech is not only a tool of rulers but a way in which relationships are forged between and beyond human beings. As privileged positions in the Aztec society, the work of the carpenter, lapidary, painter, and the aforementioned goldworker are all accompanied by volutes. It is likely the glyphs reference speaking amongst youths and teachers. However, could an additional reading, through the lens of Aztec metaphysics, include transference of *teotl* as sacred power/*tonalli* or breath/*ibiyotl*? The carpenter speaks to the tree as well as to the apprentice, the painter infuses the *amoxtli* with words and stories, and the stone carver is in an exchange with precious materials. Certainly, these exchanges and conversations also include the invisible, intangible life forces.

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<sup>136</sup> Sahagún, Bernardino, Arthur J. O Anderson, and Charles E Dibble, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain. Bk 9*, (Santa Fe School of American Research: University of Utah, 1976), 69; Xipe Totec often called “Our Flayed Lord” is the patron of goldsmiths and a god of vegetation and sacrifice.

<sup>137</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 11; 62; 64; 66.

<sup>138</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 72; 11.

<sup>139</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 66.

<sup>140</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 73.

As Cajete eloquently summarizes, “language is animate and animating, it expresses our living spirit through sound and the emotion with which we speak. In the Native perspective, language exemplifies our communion with Nature.”<sup>141</sup> And according to Hajovsky, it is quite possible that there is intentional ambiguity in certain uses of the volute while precision is practiced in other places. He states, “perhaps pictorial ambiguity between flowers and smoke was an intentional conflation to connote the cross-sensorial aspect of prayer and the burning of incense or other ritual offerings.”<sup>142</sup> Certainly, since *teotl* is indeed infused in everything, relationships among entities are inherent and ontological boundaries are blurred. Through the spoken and smoky metaphysics, linguistics, and art of the Aztecs we find profound possibility for deeper interpretations of *teotl*. To continue the thread in this third example, I will now elucidate this pattern with further examples from the Codices Mendoza, Borbonius and other sources from both Pre-Columbian and early colonial documents.

## Smoke Glyph Patterns: Natural and Supernatural Expressions

Building on these unique utterances of smoke, I now seek to provide further evidence of smoke glyph patterns and argue for their cosmic significance based on their context in the codices. First, I look at the glyph in contexts of conquest and ceremony. The repeated motif of conquest in first section of the Codex Mendoza invites consideration of transference of *teotl* on both political and personal scales. In these instances, I point towards cosmic power as it is conveyed through the volute shape. Second, I analyze the presence of smoke glyphs with the fire drill glyph used to reference the New Fire Ceremony. Third, I conclude with overtly spiritual instances of smoke glyphs. Where fire is lacking, *teotl* is still often expressed in the volute shape. I suggest that the presence of smoke in

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<sup>141</sup> Cajete, "Philosophy of Native Science," 50.

<sup>142</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 77.

unexpected places invites rearticulation of the Aztec pantheon in line with critical interpretations of *teotl* beyond colonial constructs. Finally, I introduce relationships among so-called supernatural entities and natural elements where smoke is either present or probable.

## Conquest and Ceremony



Fig. 5

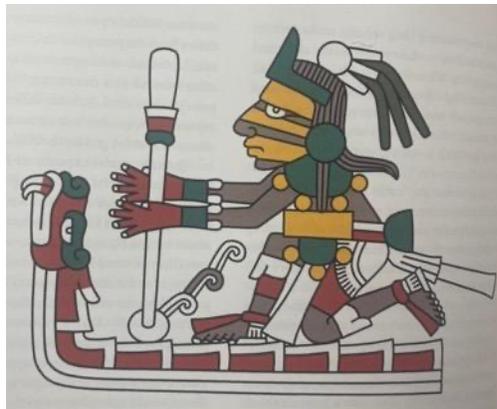


Fig. 6c

The founding of Tenochtitlan is depicted on frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza. At the bottom of this page are two conquest scenes with fire and smoke emerging from town and temple glyphs (*altepetl* and *teocalli*) (fig. 4 and 5). This section is dedicated to the story of territorial expansion of the Aztec empire across the Valley of Mexico.<sup>143</sup> Town after town, the repeated motif of conquest is painted with smoke, flame, and name glyphs of defeated peoples. With an eye for cosmivision, what might we see in this pattern?

According to Townsend, these paintings portray “at least... legendary historical reality,” and can be read as a “statement of policy and purpose.”<sup>144</sup> Reading these images as both military and mythic we acknowledge that the Aztec saw themselves as fulfilling a divine mission. Carrasco’s interpretations help us take a bird’s eye view of the sacred center and the peripheries. He makes clear

<sup>143</sup> From my research, the only other instances of volute glyphs from towns or buildings in the Codex Mendoza are as follows: the town named *Poctepec* (17v) in which smoke is phonetic; mist/vapor volutes from the *temazcalli* (bath house)(21v); and a building where salt was made (*Itztlaco*) (17v).

<sup>144</sup> Townsend, *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan*, 57.

the process of expansion “from the site of the nopal to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli and spread to the four quadrants of the city.”<sup>145</sup> Then, concentrating on the frontispiece we see conquest on an interpersonal scale—warriors grab the forelock of their enemies, a sign of stealing their *tonalli*. As Burkart describes, “the tonalli was a sort of soul, located in the crown of the head” and “tonalli loss resulted in illness and...death.”<sup>146</sup> If *tonalli* is transmitted through this embodied action in combat, I would argue that this too extends to the process of conquering towns. Therefore, just as *tonalli* transfer is made visible through the grabbing of the forelock, so too is the process of capturing or absorbing *teotl* in the smoke glyphs emerging from each *alteptl*.

In the Visual Lexicon of Aztec Hieroglyphs, Stephanie Wood’s analysis confirms this suspicion. She refers to these conquest clusters as “ideograms” and notes that the individual elements are not read phonetically.<sup>147</sup> Rather, in this motif all the parts are interpreted together. The images of “*tepehualiztli* (conquest, war making, or the defeat of enemies)” are often associated with the verb *popoloa*, to consume.<sup>148</sup> Since *teotl* is a “creative, destructive, transformative power,” the volutes can be understood as the consumption of *teotl* and expulsion of life force through smoky destruction. Instead of painting this Aztec expansion with large flames or amorphous smoke we find the volute shape. Before turning to other codices, returning to David Carrasco’s attention to urban centers and cosmivision, we can better understand the religious dimensions made visible through the painted manuscripts.

Specifically, Carrasco’s interpretation of the Codex Mendoza frontispiece guides us into the theme of smoke in ceremony and cosmic regeneration. Due to the presence of “major rituals and social practices,”<sup>149</sup> Carrasco reads this illustration as more than the founding of Tenochtitlan. In

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<sup>145</sup> Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 65

<sup>146</sup> Burkart, *Holy Wednesday*, 190.

<sup>147</sup> Wood, “tepehualiztli (13v).”

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. See also <https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/content/popoloa>.

<sup>149</sup> Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 28.

particular, the combination of “Mexican conquests and the sign of the New Fire Ceremony” in the bottom section of the page is evidence of the central importance of cosmic regeneration.<sup>150</sup> The sign Carrasco is referencing is that of the fire drill, or *mamalhuaztli* (fig. 6a). Like the calendar bordering the folio it is painted blue with four equidistant purple-gray and orange volutes.<sup>151</sup> The glyph marks the date Two Reed (*Ome-Acatl*) and refers to the New Fire Ceremony, or the “binding of the years” which occurred every fifty-two years.<sup>152</sup> Carrasco explains that the New Fire Ceremony was “one of the most profound and inclusive ceremonies of the Mexica world.”<sup>153</sup> This was a moment in which the power of *teotl* was concentrated and made concrete through various offerings and sacrifices. In the two calendar markers in the Codex Mendoza, there same four smoke glyphs emerge from the *mamalhuaztli*.<sup>154</sup>

In the appendix I have included images of the fire drill from Codices Borgia, Vaticanus, Laud, and Talleriano Remensis which can be compared with the Codex Mendoza (see figs. 6b-f). The smoke volutes are included in each of these examples. The drill appears repeatedly as a tool standing perpendicular to a piece of wood, often with four black marks and at least three smoke glyphs emerging. The smoke is almost always two-layered and two-toned. The volutes occasionally appear distinctive and separated from one another while in other cases they are strung together in a line or stream of smoke. As I have outlined, the volute shape in both conquest and ceremony appears to connect Aztec painting to the transference of *teotl*. Whether in major military battles or important rituals, smoke is present.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Wood, “mamalhuaztli (07v).”

<sup>152</sup> Townsend, *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan*, 62.

<sup>153</sup> Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 27.

<sup>154</sup> These four glyphs could be interpreted as the four directions (to which the priests regularly offered incense). Additionally, in Codex Borbonicus painting of the ceremony (fig. 7) four figures offer four bundles of wood to the fire. Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 101.

## Elements and Entities

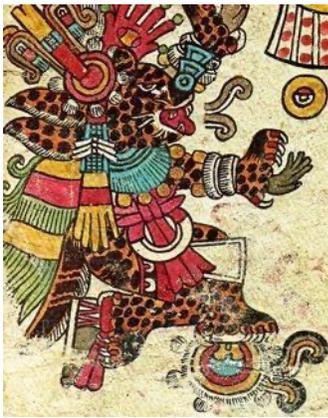


Fig 8a



Fig 9b.

Throughout this investigation, it has been clear that one could argue that these smoke glyphs are simply representing the presence of smoke, nothing more. Forging gold in fire, burning towns to destruction, lighting fire in ceremony—these are all instances in which smoke can be expected and therefore reasonably represented in the codices. This literal reading certainly has merit in a secular materialist sense, and illustrations of smoke could in fact portray small particles of carbon and organic materials turned to gas. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, fire is more than fire and smoke is more than smoke in Aztec metaphysics. Indigenous authors both ancient and contemporary and scholars across disciplines must wrestle with the legacy of colonial epistemologies. To take seriously these cosmovisions requires reading the codices with an intention to behold the ways in which life forces such as *teotl* shift ontological categories inspire new (or perhaps ancient) possibilities. Nevertheless, if it remains insufficient to argue that these literally smoky encounters are *more* than physical phenomenon let us turn to blatantly sacred and spiritual iterations of this glyph—the so-called gods of Aztec religions.

Just as *teotl* has been and continues to be redefined beyond colonial Christian interpretations, so too must the idea of gods or deities be rearticulated. Maffie writes that “*teotl* is not a minded,

intellectual, or willful person, being, or agent,” nor is *teotl* a “a god, deity, or legislative being.”<sup>155</sup> Since *teotl* is not anthropomorphic, the broader metaphysics Maffie describes are non-theistic. Instead, the deities of the Aztec pantheon can be interpreted as “‘transfigurations’ of this single, undifferentiated divine force... The divine is fluid, endlessly self-transforming, and malleable.”<sup>156</sup> Townsend agrees with this interpretation interpreting the gods as “evanescent and immaterial,” that “dissolve in mists of allusion and allegory.”<sup>157</sup> Maffie explains that the Aztec pantheon was fashioned and described by the Spanish based on their understanding of the mythology of “ancient Greece and Rome,” and is therefore an approximation that is not native to the Aztecs themselves.<sup>158</sup> Perhaps then we can describe what Townsend calls the “supposed gods of Mesoamerica” as ephemeral and transforming aspects of the cosmos similar to smoke, speech, and song.

Though misinterpreted and represented by the Spanish, these entities are still essential in Aztec cosmivision, and Maffie suggests that we understand the deities as “different clusters of specific forces or energies.”<sup>159</sup> Certain personalities and names are then used to describe particular manifestation of *teotl*. Just as *tonalli* gives individual humans certain characteristics, *teotl* is expressed as Tezcatlipoca, Tlaloc, and others. These names are ways of marking “specific constellations of processes.”<sup>160</sup> In other words, they are interrelating, fluid categories with which we interpret the multiple embodiments of life forces. Working with this rearticulation of Aztec entities, I offer a final potential pattern of painted volutes.

First, and perhaps most obvious, is Tezcatlipoca. According to Carrasco he was “one of the supreme manifestations of the Aztec high god” whose name can be translated as “Lord of the

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<sup>155</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 80.

<sup>156</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 81.

<sup>157</sup> Townsend, *State of the Cosmos*, 30.

<sup>158</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 81.

<sup>159</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 86.

<sup>160</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 90.

Smoking Mirror.”<sup>161</sup> Townsend divides this name into the two Nahuatl nouns *tezcatl*, “mirror,” and *poctli*, “smoke.”<sup>162</sup> This entity (both as a historical figure and myth) originated in the north and was strongly associated with the element of obsidian. This volcanic material turned mirror was used for scrying, or, as Townsend writes, it was “a talisman whose smoky depths could be contemplated for oracular guidance.”<sup>163</sup> In this image from the Codex Borbonicus (fig. 8a) we see Tezcatlipoca in Jaguar pelt, with two scrolls emerging—two speech scrolls near his mouth, and two smoke volutes with three layers emerging from the obsidian mirror beneath his left foot. An additional obsidian mirror with volutes is also seen in his headdress (see also: figs. 8b-d).

Beyond the volcanic glass offering a “smoky” dark reflection, why are these volutes used here? The mirror does not literally smoke as in the case of earlier examples and the painting are more than a name glyph—likely illustrative of a cosmic reality. Maffie writes that Tezcatlipoca is a manifestation of “destructive transformation.”<sup>164</sup> And *The Legend of the Suns* reports that “Tezcatlipoca smoked the skies with the new fire he created in the year 2 Reed.”<sup>165</sup> The former is reminiscent of the conquest glyphs and the latter references the date of the New Fire Ceremony. The human *teixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca, the sacrificial representative, was taught to “smoke with dignity” and “serves to represent the visual, audible, and olfactory powers of the deity, represented by the scrying device, the flute, and the tobacco tube.”<sup>166</sup> The scrying device—or mirror—is a living entity, speaking back to humans, the flute is often drawn with a flowery volute shape of music, and the tobacco tube produces sacred smoke for divination and communication. The volutes in the example, therefore, are likely inclusive of smoke, speech, and other spiritual substances. These

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<sup>161</sup> Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, 108.

<sup>162</sup> Townsend, *State of the Cosmos*, 58.

<sup>163</sup> Townsend, *State of the Cosmos*, 35.

<sup>164</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 167.

<sup>165</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 443.

<sup>166</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 73.

shapes in Aztec art serve to make visible the motion of life forces and make tangible the cosmic energy clustered in supernatural figures and in the natural world. It seems possible that this pattern, the pairing of Tezcatlipoca and the smoking obsidian mirror, would be repeated by other entities and elements.

Incense provides compelling evidence. In the Codex Mendoza copal is represented in its raw form as tribute to Tenochtitlan—these balls and baskets of copal are not yet visibly releasing volute shapes.<sup>167</sup> However, in the Codices Borbonicus and Tudela, smoke glyphs emerge from incense (fig. 9a-c). The burning and offering of *copalli*, or copal incense is recorded multiple times throughout Florentine Codex. Specifically, copal is centrally located at the top of The Templo Mayor, held in the left hand of the statue of Tlaloc—the entity associated with fertility and water.<sup>168</sup> The priests of Tlaloc, or the *tlaloqueh* also carried pouches of copal.<sup>169</sup> Maffie writes that this smoke in particular “nourished the gods and transmitted messages from the human realm to the upper realm.”<sup>170</sup> Copal was understood as the blood of trees and was offered to Tlaloc, Huitzilopochtli, and others in many forms: large braziers, handheld censers, anthropomorphic figurines, on paper, and more. This smoke was indeed more than smoke and functions as speech and alongside speech in many instances. Copal becomes speech while carrying prayers to the sky and combining with song and breath to communicate in ceremony. While more research can be done to further articulate the relationship between Tlaloc, copal, and smoke glyphs, these clusters and curlicues of cosmic energy seem to convey transference of *teotl*.

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<sup>167</sup> According to the Codex Mendoza, Tepequacuico provided 400 baskets of white copal while Tlachco paid 8,000 balls of copal every eight weeks for ceremonial purposes. These numbers alongside other colonial sources tell us of the sheer quantity of copal in addition to the value assigned to this substance.

<sup>168</sup> Cecelia F. Klein and Noali Victoria Lona, *Mesoamerican Figurines* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009), 263.

<sup>169</sup> Inga Clendinnen. *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>170</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 324.

Before concluding, it is worth mentioning a few probable points of connection in which smoke and cosmovision merge. First, Maffie records the many names and forms of fire entities including: “Huehuateotl (‘Old, Old Teotl,’ eldest of the gods), Xiuhtecuhtli (‘Turquoise Lord,’ ‘Fire Lord’), and Chantico (‘In the House,’ ‘Goddess of the Domestic Hearth Fire’).”<sup>171</sup> Both Townsend and Hajovsky also note the association of smoke glyphs with Xiuhtecuhtli.<sup>172</sup> An example of a name glyph from the Codex Mendoza (fig. 10), utilizes two volutes from the nose and forehead of Xiuhtecuhtli. As the Turquoise Lord, these volutes are fittingly blue. Turquoise is an important color throughout the codices, seen in previous examples of the calendar of the Codex Mendoza, the New Fire Ceremony in the Codex Borbonicus, the color of speech glyphs, water, and ritual clothing in various documents. For the Aztecs this was “the color of the center and navel (xictli) of the cosmos... It was associated with vegetation, maize, blood, water, earth, and sky, and associated more broadly with fertility, renewal, and ultimately life-energy itself.”<sup>173</sup> Perhaps most relevant to the question at hand is the association between smoke with precious stones.<sup>174</sup> In Book 10 of Florentine Codex Sahagún reports:

“...if, verily, that which was a precious stone were inside a massive rock, they could find it; and if a wonderful precious stone were somewhere in the earth, they could find it...when the sun came up, they took great care to look carefully in all directions, they say, in order to see by means of wet earth where the precious stones were in the ground. And when the sun shone, especially when it appeared, they say, a little smoke, a little mist, arose there where the precious stone was, either in the ground or within a rock. When they saw it, it was as if the rock were smoking.”<sup>175</sup>

The associated drawing (fig. 10) shows a stone that produces smoke or mist. While this is not depicted in the volute shape this information invites further inquiry into how smoking makes visible

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<sup>171</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 295.

<sup>172</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 84; Townsend, *State of the Cosmos*, 61.

<sup>173</sup> Maffie, *Aztec Metaphysics*, 107.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 167.

precious elements underground. Is this similar to the magic of the obsidian mirror? Is this akin to smoke messages sent by copal?

Finally, where turquoise smokes from the ground, stars smoke in the sky. When the Nahuatl words star and smoke (*citlali* and *popoca*) are combined it refers to a comet, when the adjective *hueyi* (big, large) is included it refers to Venus.<sup>176</sup> Additionally, is an example of a smoking star from the Codex Vaticanus B (fig. 12). Townsend connects this entity to the New Fire Ceremony writing: “a cycle of 65 Venusian years equaled 104 solar years, that is, two 52-year cycles, a long period called huehuelitzli, ‘an old age.’ At the end of this period the new beginning of the solar and Venusian cycles coincided.”<sup>177</sup> Again, there is much more to understand about the generative motion between and among celestial and earthen bodies seen in the volute shape.

Nonetheless, in this final section I sought to elucidate connections in which supernatural entities and natural elements engage with smoke in a spiritual sense. Beyond literal interpretations of smoke and sound, the Aztec pantheon offers fertile soil for continued investigation. Though Tezcatlipoca and the smoking obsidian mirror are more obvious *teotl* manifestations in the volute shape, more evidence is required to apply the concept further.

## Summary and Future Directions

There is an undeniable need for incorporating decolonizing analytics into interpretation of precolonial art. More work must be done to map power and articulate the overlay of European conventions onto Aztec and other Mesoamerican materials. This is an issue at the intersections of art history, philosophy, religious studies, and beyond. Taking a hemispheric approach which centers Indigenous cosmovisions in the Americas is one way to unearth the unnamed assumptions of these

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<sup>176</sup> Townsend, *State of the Cosmos*, 61.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

disciplines. Additionally, granting more access and power to Indigenous communities and descendants is necessary in order to guide future research and challenge prevailing narratives.

Knowledge is emergent from the land, from oral and pictorial histories, and embodied in many “otherized” knowledge-sources and theorists. Respectful, decolonial research is possible and we must continue to dismantle the systems that exclude and extract from Indigenous and Native peoples and places. In this paper I have attempted to incorporate these values and visions into my interpretations. I trace the movement of *teotl* in the ephemeral shape of the smoke volute with deep appreciation to my many human and non-human teachers.

To conclude, reading the codices with careful attention to patterns of smoke and spiraling glyphs, it became clear that generative, destructive, and all-encompassing life forces are manifest in multiple forms. However, smoke—like speech, breath, song—is a powerful motif for the Aztecs. I have offered evidence from a range of sources, and I sought to provide general cosmological concepts from which to interpret the codices. The good news is that I have barely scratched the surface—this paper opens up possibilities for ongoing dialogue with these ancient patterns. While I have mapped a portion of the possible instances of *teotl* in smoke shapes, each codex could be combed for examples of smoke shapes and each smoke shape could be dissected in order to better test these hypotheses. The Florentine Codex certainly requires more advanced translations of colonial Nahuatl, which may reveal further articulations of smoke beyond the painted glyphs. Hajovsky’s work with the speech and name glyph serves as an example of a more complete project on this topic. While focusing on smoke, combining wisdom from philosophy, history, religion, art history and Indigenous sources will allow us to continue to interpret sacred energy.

The smoke glyph appears in Nahuatl writing, name and date glyphs, Aztec artistry, imperial expansion, fire drills, incense burners, tobacco pipes, mirrors, stones, planets, and more. And for the Aztecs “everything in the world... things, animals, people, transitory phenomena had the capacity to

manifest some aspect of the sacred.”<sup>178</sup> Is smoke simply like everything else that manifests *teotl*? Or perhaps, does the shape of the volute tell us something extraordinary about the cosmos? Certainly, capturing smoke and speech was worthwhile for many Indigenous scribes and painters, perhaps because “like speech in prayer, smoke... appeals to the gods precisely because it disappears.”<sup>179</sup> As such, I humbly hold open the possibility that smoke is not meant to be fully grasped.

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<sup>178</sup> Townsend, *State and Cosmos*, 28.

<sup>179</sup> Hajovsky, *On the Lips of Others*, 66.

# Appendix

## Codex Mendoza



Fig 1. Smoke, Poc(tli)  
Codex Mendoza, folio 46 recto



Fig 2a. Chimalpopoca, name glyph  
Codex Mendoza, folio 4 verso



Fig 2b. Incense ladle with smoke painting  
Codex Mendoza, folio 63 recto



Fig 2c. Gold worker and smoke glyphs  
Codex Mendoza, folio 70 recto



Fig 3. Speech, Nahua(tl)  
Codex Mendoza, folio 71 recto



Fig 4. Fire/Flame, Tle(tl)  
Codex Mendoza, folio 13 recto



Fig 5. Conquest, Tephehualiztli  
Codex Mendoza, folio 2 recto

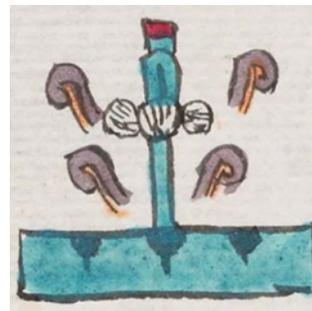


Fig 6a. Fire drill, *Mamalhuaztli*  
Codex Mendoza, 15 verso

## Other Codices



Fig 6b. Fire drill, *Mamalhuaztli*  
Codex Vaticanus 3773, fol. 82r

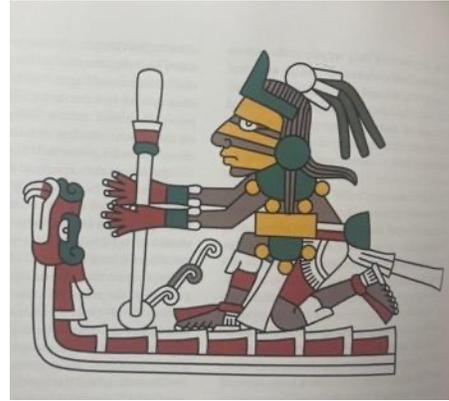


Fig 6c. Fire drill, *Mamalhuaztli*  
Codex Laud fol. 17  
(Drawing by Markus Eberl)



Fig 6d. Fire drill, *Mamalhuaztli*  
Codex Borgia fol. 46 (Drawing by Markus Eberl)



Fig 6e. Fire drill, *Mamalbuaztli*  
Codex Talleriano Remensis



Fig 6f. Fire drill, *Mamalbuaztli*  
Codex Talleriano Remensis

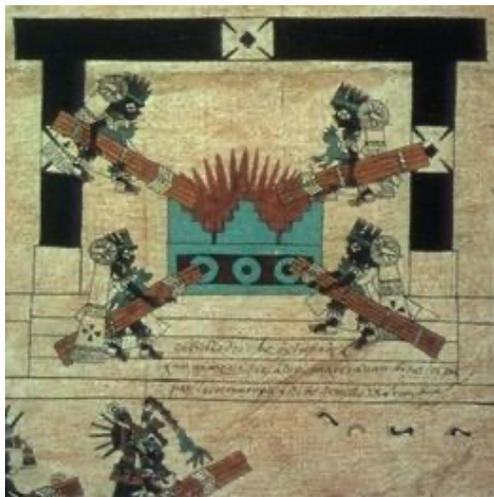


Fig 7. New Fire Ceremony  
Codex Borbonicus  
PM.1 Az 74 Bor 35

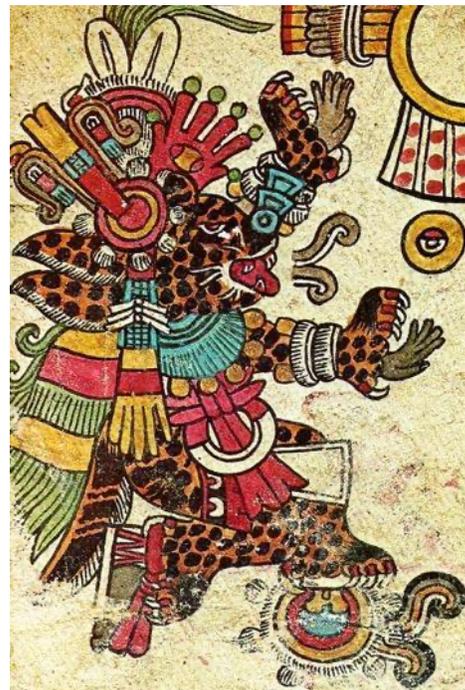


Fig 8a, Tezcatlipoca, "Smoking Mirror"  
Codex Borbonicus



Fig 8b, Carrying a smoking mirror  
Codex Azcatitlan, fol. 7b



Fig 8c, Smoking Mirror  
Codex Borgia, fol. 63



Fig 8d, Smoking Mirror  
Codex Borgia, fol. 17



Fig. 9a Incense  
Codex Borbonicus  
PM.1 Az 74 Bor 08



Fig. 9b Incense  
Codex Borbonicus  
PM.1 Az 74 Bor 26



Fig. 9c Incense  
Codex Tudela fol. 50r

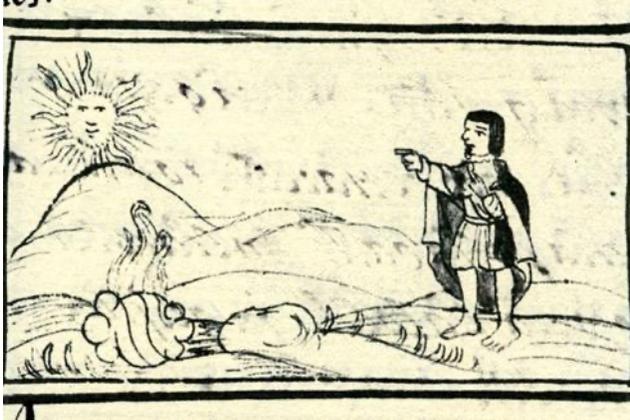


Fig 10, Precious Stones, Smoking Turquoise  
Florentine Codex Bk 11



Fig. 11 Xiuhtecuhtli  
Codex Mendoza, fol 13 r.



Fig. 12 Venus, Smoking Star  
Codex Vaticanus 3773, fol. 88

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[https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.gr.1209](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1209)

Florentine Codex, 1577

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667837/>

# BOOK REVIEW

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*Constance Furey, Sarah Hammerschlag, and Amy Hollywood. Devotion: Three Inquiries in Religion, Literature, and Political Imagination. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 200 pages. \$25.00.*

In *Truth and Method*, Hans Georg Gadamer insists that “it is from *language as a medium* that our whole experience of the world [...] unfolds.” For him, language, especially in the temporally privileged form of text, is the coursing blood of meaning, community, and environment, the fabric of present and possibility for everything from cognition to political action. Thus fiction, poetry, philosophy, and other literary modes are fundamental modes of world-making in affective, emotional, and social modes as they are read, interpreted, and contested by various readers.

*Devotion: Three Inquiries in Religion, Literature, and Political Imagination* is cast after this spirit. It parses the existentially vital function of literature through its central concept, “devotion,” a concept which authors Constance Furey, Sarah Hammerschlag, and Amy Hollywood give fresh nuance for the current century’s concerns in politics and literary studies. Notably, three authors wrote the book; rather than a collected volume of essays, it features a jointly credited introduction and conclusion alongside three individually authored chapters.

This approach exhibits the diverse commitments of the authors to literature as “enabling new forms of thought, habits of mind, and modes of life to be enjoyed, reveled in, experimented with, thought through, deeply felt [...] in sum, at least for a period of time, inhabited.” The goal, then, is to demonstrate the generative effects that a reading practice of devotion might enact a

network of intersecting and divergent affects that texts inspire, finding generative upshot from a way of treating texts that is not merely critical or scholarly.

By dispersing this affective exhibition across three authors and three pieces, the text aims to flesh out the attachments and commitments that come from different instances of devotion, in life and reading alike. Furey's essay about Sir Philip Sidney and Martin Luther addresses the question of devotion to religious text and their venerated authors. Hammerschlag engages Sarah Kofman and Jacques Derrida in pursuit of questions about the devotion to a canon and its claims of knowing. Hollywood concludes the volume by exploring her devotion to the real possibilities of fictive worlds in the work of H.D., Susan Howe, Carl Schmitt, and Herman Melville.

Running throughout and looming over these three approaches is the general notion of devotion on which they draw: reading, re-reading, and scrutinizing a literary text through agreement and discord, harmony and ambivalence, in a sustained mode that parallels religious practice. For the authors, these devotional readings may afford alternatives to contemporary obstacles posed by a logic of sovereignty, in which politics and literature alike are loci for fixed truths and control.

Furey's contribution, "Vivifying Poetry: Sidney, Luther, and the Psalms," sees the English poet Sir Philip Sidney and the German reformer Martin Luther "engaged in what Vincent Wimbush calls 'scripturalization' [...] the kinds of writing or inscribing invested with the authority to constitute or complicate—to make, unmake or remake—the human." More specifically, Furey frames both authors as mining "socially authoritative sources" to "confront aspirational ideals," lending both their works a political bent.

She differentiates herself from existent literature on Sidney to claim that the poet saw little divide between secular verse and the Psalms. Sidney understands all poetry to draw on form, "the energy *of* the words," and shape trajectories for faith and rhetoric alike. For Sidney, God's moral,

ethical, spiritual, and eschatological revelations inhere in words themselves, rather than from an appeal to faith or ecclesiastical authority.

Luther, meanwhile, “equates faith with the vivifying *power* of the Word. Christ *is* the Word.” Furey argues that Luther imbues Christian scripture with an immediate link to the divine. As Furey herself practices devotion to these two offers, she exhibits the difference in their own religious devotions: Sidney seems to prioritize the wordliness of literature as an equalizer between scripture and other writing, while Luther retains the privileged place of scripture’s particular Word.

This property of Christian practice shapes Luther’s guileful yet violent political footprint: by insisting on immediate reception over interpretation, Luther attempts to delegitimize Jewish faith, which he claims overemphasizes interpretation of the “Law.” Furey synthesizes her readings to argue that devotion and its texts are “always political;” even as an emphasis on the live power of poetic language makes an inspiring example of these two authors for contemporary practice, it neglects the political consequence inherent in their writings.

Hammerschlag’s chapter, “A Poor Substitute for Prayer: Sarah Kofman and the Fetish of Writing,” examines Kofman’s corpus to promote writing as an alternative to faith and learned mastery. To suggest as much, Hammerschlag argues that Kofman is a “more faithful practitioner of the ethic that she saw deconstruction as entailing.” Here, Kofman’s friendship and collaboration with Jacques Derrida highlights a shared interest in knowledge’s structural aporias. Hammerschlag emphasizes that Kofman “reanimates the relationship between philosophy, religion, and literature in their competition for truth, but always by positioning herself in the derivative position.”

Kofman’s tendency to expose and subsequently venerate necessary ambiguities in so-called masters of knowledge like Aristotle, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud relegated her to a marginal footnote in the archives on these thinkers, as her works were viewed as derivative critique. Hammerschlag sees them otherwise: they are not contributions to a systematic knowledge on

masterful thinkers, but commentaries on so-called masters that rejoice in the impossibility of a systematic appraisal. Kofman “champions writing and literature” by pointing out that “meaning can only be established as proper if an improper counterpart is designated.”

Though philosophy might try to exclude literary ambiguity, this exclusion, and not its inmost merit, constitutes its claims to truth; this conviction drove her works and Derrida’s, though Hammerschlag positions Derrida as culpable in the drive to perfect knowledge he disavows. This leaves Kofman as an evocative figure for the devoted, whose deconstructive works and humble work ethic alike make “one want to imagine a world in which we learn to judge by criteria other than mastery.”

Hollywood’s chapter, “Dystopia, Utopia, Atopia,” offers the volume’s final portrait of devotion. She writes that literature “refuses the logic of sufficiency entirely” as it presents alternatives for the world. No literary vision, properly considered, will be sufficiently bad or good enough to orient political and social worldmaking, but will compel readers elsewhere, to “create the space” that they do not yet have. She terms these pockets of potentiality “a-topia,” an “alpha privative” that refuses a “logic of sufficiency,” negating the conditions of time and sociality to allow imagination unencumbered by historical and temporal conditions, past and future. Unlike literatures of utopia and dystopia, the atopic does not squeeze dreamed social or ontological arrangements in a particular telos, vision, or moral status, instead freeing the imaginative reader to dream completely otherwise from their given circumstances.

Hollywood locates atopia in two clusters of texts. The first centers Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, which makes ambiguous sovereignty and control between enslaved Black men and a white enslaver on a ship, but which was discounted by paradigm-setting political theorist Carl Schmitt as a simple parable about how sovereignty (white sovereignty) can restore its legitimate hold on violence once ousted.

The second cluster treats the poems of H.D. and Susan Howe. Hollywood claims that H.D. intentionally engages “unknowing” to open new spaces for familiar social orders, like womanhood, while Howe scrambles traditional poetic forms in pursuit of new metrics for “joy.” Taken together, Hollywood calls these atopic imaginings “pivoting stationary marginal centers” that, to the devoted reader, open forms of life for unheralded consideration.

Hollywood’s line about multiple centers aptly describes the volume itself, too: no chapter here stakes a definitive claim to devotion or its potentialities. Though they work as independent pieces, each of their claims simultaneously characterizes the whole volume without erasing the other’s legitimacy. In their complimentary and non-exclusive theorizations, we might see Hammerschlag and Hollywood as working out what it means to be devoted to a living text and mindful of one’s blind spots after Furey, Furey and Hollywood as exploring new alternatives to mastery after Hammerschlag, or Furey and Hammerschlag as opening new atopic dreams after Hollywood.

The tight coordination of the three essays opens capacious opportunities by which to interpret them, inviting a sort of devotion to this book itself, not just its literary citations, to tease out the potentialities. In this sense the work actively precipitates the intellectual practice that it advocates; it effectively calls for a new way of reading. In doing so, the volume hopes to align itself with a trend across religious and literary studies that “focus on textuality and [...] concern for the cross-pollination across religious traditions and beyond them.”

Alongside these affective alternatives for reading and critique, the text offers an explicit political agenda. Its introduction and conclusion emphasize the political exigency of devotion, though the explicit political engagements across the three essays themselves are comparably diffuse. Putatively, the authors offer devoted reading as a method of supplanting classically liberal and neoliberal figurations of the political and the individual—the afterward suggests that all three

chapters underscore “the lie of a political theory that constitutes humans as discrete bundles of choices and personal freedoms.”

Schmitt, whom Hollywood critiques directly, espouses ideas about legitimate violence and necessary overreach of sovereign power that place intense emphasis on individual decisiveness and military efficiency to create a prosperous society. As nationalist resurgences, the pandemic, and a periodic string of global finance crises underscore, the volume’s conclusion suggests that individualist outlooks are (either willfully or ignorantly, maliciously or naively) incapable of letting us think the volatile and precious interdependencies that weave human societies.

That said, it is unclear whether the book’s political impact emerges suitably by the apposition of the essays, or if more could have been done by each author to underscore the political import of the three chapters. For instance, Furey recognizes her previous scholarship on Luther as culpable in sanitizing his antisemitic tendencies, but she stops short of explicit suggestions that may redress these readings and their culpabilities, instead stating that Sydney is a “much safer” object for devotion and merely gesturing to Luther-devotion’s role in a “vast history of Christian cruelty.” A referential nod seems inadequate, given Western religious studies’ tacit and explicit participation in this history. Hammerschlag delivers compellingly subversive twists to the canon but gives no explicit indication whether re-evaluating someone like Kofman might aid in a meaningful reconfiguration of humanism and its archives. With Hollywood, it seems that if atopic visions lack active communities to work through their practical resonances, they risk being idle daydreams. Though atopia insists upon a radical alterity as its privilege, one wonders how actual peoples and communities can prepare for (though not prescribe) acquaintances of the alternate and the palpable. The common tendency for all three authors is to stop short of an actionable polemic.

Even within the small-scale scholarly audience that the text targets, such practical recommendations seem feasible. For Furey and Hammerschlag’s pieces, this might mean

considerations of renovating the archives or interrogating the structures and incentives of the academic publishing industry. For Hollywood's, such an assessment may consider what integration of atopia, even at the level of an imaginary, into a lived life and its communal footprint could be. In all three instances of devotion, one wonders what this new reading could look like in conversation with other contemporary movements to unseat or problematize logics of sovereignty: unionization drives, more just endowment strategies, housing and policing in university neighborhoods, and so on. Technically speaking, the book styles itself as an inquiry in "political imagination," not political action. Regardless, if the precarity of our situation is as acute as the introduction warns, we must learn to think and read as we walk.

In spite of these political scruples, the book is a potent resource for anyone interested in meaningfully transgressive approaches to reading religion alongside literature. In its academic and theoretical interventions, each essay's intertextual and reflective dynamics enact believable exchange of ideas across their sectional partitions. This spirit of exchange was left to me during my reading; each chapter further brings forth a fine-grained sample of what devotion might look like, giving anyone interested in the form plenty of starting points to consider their own devotions. As it stands, this volume compellingly urges revaluations of reading and truth across scholarship, religion, literature, and the political imaginary; it is a stark, evocative work for anyone with stakes in these three domains or their development in the developing present.

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# Alternative Stories of Fulfilling Lives:

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENNA MOORE

*Dr. Brenna Moore is a professor in the Department of Theology at Fordham University. She studies modern Catholic intellectual and cultural history in Europe.*

Interview conducted by Laura Mucha and Madeleine Scott

**HDS Graduate Journal: How did you initially “meet” the subjects of your 2021 book *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism*? Did they emerge from archival work in which you were already engaged, or did you come across them and then seek out archives?**

**Moore:** As an MDiv student, I was in a Harvard Divinity School (HDS) class with Francis Fiorenza, who taught a course on *Nouvelle théologie*, the theological movement in France that laid the foundations for Vatican II. I found the theology a bit abstract and distant from my own experience. So, I started to read some biographies and correspondences, things that got a little closer to the lives of the *Nouvelle* theologians: letters between Henri de Lubac, the Jesuit theologian, and Etienne Gilson. Their lives were so rich and fascinating, and I could connect with them as people. They were living in the midst of the Holocaust and still doing such creative theological thinking.

Their correspondence is so male-dominated. The French clerical system is all men talking about other men, lots of Thomas Aquinas—it's definitely a boys club. But in a letter to Henri de Lubac, Étienne Gilson referred to a woman, Raïssa Maritain, as an “irate angel” who splintered the Thomists. That was such an awesome image. This woman's name appearing in here, especially such an unusual woman's name, I just kept thinking: who is this Raïssa Maritain? I took a note of it: look up that woman. She's this fabulous mystic, contemplative, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, and ended up being the topic of my dissertation and my first book, *Sacred Dread: Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival, 1905-1944* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

As I was researching her, I realized that friendship was by far the most important thing in her life. Her memoir, *We Have Been Friends Together*, has “friendship” in the title. It wasn't just that she had a lot of friendships that were meaningful, but that friendship was the spiritual and theological center of her life. But writing my first book, I thought, I couldn't be too “feminine,” I'm a woman, a young professor. Something like friendship is too lightweight. So instead, I felt obligated to do something that would be considered more robust: modernity, suffering, war. And that was my first book.

By the time I was ready for a second book, I thought, screw it. Friendship is the most important thing, religiously, theologically, politically, in this intellectual world. There's nothing being written about it. I need to get this out of my system. I thought it was going to be about the Maritain circle, but I soon realized this vast, international circuit of friendship sustained Catholic intellectual life during the 20th century. They had connections to Paris but had lives all over the world, in places as distant as Chile, Cairo, and Harlem. It included men and men, men and women, women and women. Raïssa was an entryway into this vast emotional undercurrent of Catholic theology.

**HDS Graduate Journal:** The sheer volume of *stuff* you had to look at to write this book is astounding. What did your archival research process look like? So much of the material you draw upon in this book is by your own admission unorthodox: personal letters and pressings in envelopes, among others. How did you identify archives that might have the information you need, and how did you sift through them?

**Moore:** I was trying to find sources that would give me glimpses of their interpersonal lives: eulogies, letters, things that weren't always published in a library, more informal sorts of materials. But I was also trying to unearth people who haven't been integrated in the mainstream canonical narrative of Catholicism, so it required a lot of archival work. I started with Raïssa. Then I traced a footnote: okay, so she published a book. Then I tried to find that book, in the process finding more things that she had written in out-of-print Catholic Leftist journals that came out of France or the United States. I found more intellectual material that was defunct, out of print, no longer available. I remember being at Widener looking on microfilm and finding some of her poems. Catholic thought suddenly looked less clerical and male, more diverse, more rich and interesting.

That started the process I am still in today. You're looking at this old microfilm of a poem that Raïssa published in 1840 that was referred to in a footnote, and then you see on that microfilm there's another amazing article by another woman who you've never even heard of and need to track down. Sometimes I'll look online, Google "archive" with a name to see if there was an archive for any of these people. Or maybe there is a conference or a celebration in honor of person I am interested in. I will reach out to older living people who knew them or had some connection to them. They often write me back and say, their archive is held this way, or you must talk to this person who's still alive and knew her. I go to a lot of convents and monasteries, as well as doing interviews with people who knew the people I study.

A few of the people in *Kindred Spirits*—Claude McKay, Mary Magdeleine Davy—have incredible archives, but it was mostly following footnotes and seeing who I could find. I found Davy's archive because of this generous elderly intellectual in Paris, who had hosted a conference for her recently, and wrote him a letter asking to learn more about her. I find that people are so happy when they meet someone who's interested in recovering the stories of people who are obscure in the history of Catholic thought today, but were prolific, influential artists and writers in the early twentieth century. This man was incredibly helpful, told me where to go, connected me to the archive. I met with him in Paris. I was relying on the generosity of living people for whom the protagonists in my book are still living memory. It's lots of detective work. But I found that a lot of fun, and very meaningful.

**HDS Graduate Journal:** You make clear in the introduction that there are certain aspects of these people's lives you intentionally chose to exclude, as well as addressing your inclusion of some very unflattering material as a central part of this narrative. How did you draw that line of privacy when examining these materials? What informed your decision to highlight behavior in private lives that might be deemed reprehensible?

**Moore:** A topic I didn't pursue too much was actual physical sex in this network. It was something I struggled with as I wrote the book, and I still don't know if I made the right call. My research took place over a 10-year period, during which the absolute violence that has taken place in the world because of Catholic silence around sexuality became more and more visible. Catholics have already locked sexuality in some untouchable box. This silence about physical sex is deeply entangled with a culture of shame, abuse and cover up. I wondered if not addressing physical sex in my book would just be one more perpetuation of unending Catholic silence.

On the other hand, for us to assume that sex is the most important, interesting truth that can be told about adult love is a very reductionist way of thinking about it. I spent so much time with these people's materials, and that isn't the main thing that they were after. They were most interested in a theological and a spiritual quest, their friendships with one another standing in for God, or the relationship itself generating spiritual experience, ecstasy, real examples of a different, supernatural love.

It seemed more empirically true not to prioritize that, because it didn't seem to be as much of a priority to them. Also, the protagonists in my book were mostly women and people of color, who were harassed about whether they were having sex all the time when they were alive. Especially Claude McKay, the Black writer, who said, "white people are constantly obsessing about my sex life. Enough, go see a therapist!" In talking about a Black male writer and women who are just entering academic discourse, sometimes for the first time, I thought it was disrespectful and reductionist to hunt for details about their sexual practices. But there were other troubling aspects to look into. I did learn about, for example, what I call the anti-family sensibility in these friendship networks, and what this meant for some of the children in this culture. I write about how tragic it would have been to have been a child of any of these people, or an elderly mother or a sibling.

They were so anti-family and that seemed central. It didn't seem disrespectful to write about because it was true. They traded their families for spiritual friends, which was painful for their families. Some of what I found in the archives was sad and disturbing. Gabriela Mistral had an adopted son who died by suicide. In the case of Louis Massignon, I found some wild lines in his correspondence, very unflattering things he said about his own family. To write a purely positive version of things wouldn't have been true, and it's not as interesting. There's a dark side to anyone. The anti-family sensibility in this world was quite dark.

**HDS Graduate Journal: Your epigraphs and epilogue engage so many amazing secondary texts: WG Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Zadie Smith, Patti Smith. You've also written about pop musicians, such as Sinead O'Connor and Beyonce. Which "non-academic" materials inform and enrich your work? How do you see these as working alongside the more explicitly theoretical and historical sources upon which you draw?**

**Moore:** There is so much happening in the world that is truly awful, unbelievable. But we are also living in a time where there's just so much incredible music, incredible journalism, incredible fiction and essays. I am intellectually sustained by reading and listening to all kinds of other cultural material. It ultimately keeps me a little closer to the worldview of the people who I studied, who weren't traditional academics. McKay was a poet. Davy was an academic who wrote on medieval mysticism, but she was an independent scholar. By the end of her life, she was out there writing about yoga experiences and merging with the light.

Reading Sinead O'Connor's new memoir—I love that memoir so much—probably brings me a little closer to the protagonists in my book than that of colleagues in my department or academic people I meet at academic conferences. I'm inspired by people who are eccentric and unusual, people following the spirit in some way. In my epilogue, I open with reading *The New Yorker* and discovering Zadie Smith. These artistically inclined, critical thinkers have helped me have a certain sensibility as I approached the people I study, not to be so harsh, and to be open to the artistic, the poetic, and the spiritual.

At my university or when I go to conferences, political frameworks are the dominant way of looking at your resources, your material. We are living in such a tumultuous political time, and I take very seriously the political in my classes and my teaching, but I don't think that's the only framework, especially in terms of these Catholic thinkers in my book.

**HDS Graduate Journal: What is the import of the classroom to your research and how has your teaching experience affected your research?**

**Moore:** I've been at Fordham 14 years, so I've been in conversation with thousands of students over the years, and I've come to value my time as a teacher. I learn so much from my students, as cliché as that sounds, but they keep you grounded in ordinary reality. As a graduate student, I was reading de Certeau and Foucault. They provide a more theoretical way of framing religion and viewing the world, and I led with more of that theory when I first started at Fordham.

But then you're in conversation with somebody on the swim team whose parents took out a second mortgage for them to be at Fordham. I have found it so important to invite students like that, the athletes, the students who are in my class because they are required to be, into the strange world of theology by first meeting them where they are. I've realized the power of rich thinking on very basic topics, topics common to any student. Friendship is something that even the bro on the swim team can relate to. *Kindred Spirits* was in part inspired by honoring some of these ordinary categories of human experience and was an attempt to talk about them in ordinary ways. I pick other categories to invite students in: solitude, or music, mystery, or work or play, sacrifice, journey. These things that anyone can relate to. Then I complicate them with theological and religious materials. It is a way to meet my students where they are.

The critical theorists who influenced me, Foucault and de Certeau, completely shape how I approach the category of friendship, the kinds of sources I use, and the complexity we need to think about that topic. But I wouldn't lead with scholars like that anymore. You lead with something a little more inviting and basic, like friendship, and then slowly make my way into the tough thinkers for my students.

My students also teach me. For example, I admit that when I first started to teach about this friendship stuff, I wasn't picking up on how everyone was so queer. I could see it, but I wasn't making it a big deal. My students were ahead of me in thinking about LGBTQ issues, queer experience, queer theology. And they held up a mirror when they said to me, you realize this is all very queer, right? It pushed me to think more explicitly about that and consult some queer analyses, but it started with the students saying, yeah, you're going to need to unpack that a little more. It was helpful for them to remind me to make the queerness of these friendships more visible and to take it more seriously as an important analytic category.

**HDS Graduate Journal: How might the relational model of spiritual friendship supplement or provide alternatives to narratives of being that center the family as the fundamental social unit? What does a study of relationships – particularly relationships forged on shared political and social goals—have to say about contemporary modes of community building and social change, for better and for worse?**

**Moore:** As I was writing this book, I was raising two small children myself. My family life was so central to the life I was living. My family and work did seem like the only thing that was going on for several years in a row. I found it very, very life-giving to immerse myself in sources that pointed to other possibilities, that said, work and family isn't all there is—although it did feel for a time that all there was for me was working and kids. But I found the horizon so much more open as I immersed myself in the stories of these people's lives. Although this was 100 years ago, I found that at that time, there were more possibilities for women in terms of forgoing marriage and children. I have friends who are unmarried or have no children, and they still talk about how people ask them, when

are you going to adopt? They assume that there's something so core missing at the heart of a woman's life if she is childless.

As far as I could tell, that was not an assumption then. I read these women's lives and the world of their friendships and the world of their art. It's so obvious that lack is not the word you would use to describe it. It was fullness, and not just because they were busy. I mean emotional and spiritual fullness, total, relational fullness. For readers, for my own students, it's always good to have on the horizon multiple possibilities of what a fulfilled human life can look like. Especially in my classroom, I always want to open up the horizon for students. Life can look so many ways, but we can only imagine possibilities based on things we've seen, or words we've heard, or stories that have been told to help provoke our imagination. These are completely alternative stories of what a fulfilling life can look like. I find them very countercultural and refreshing.

**HDS Graduate Journal: How did you forge your own “spiritual friendships,” both with the subjects of your book and in your academic communities? How has writing this book changed the way you situate yourself in your own world?**

**Moore:** This research opened so many doors for me. For example, Davy, who came to me early in the research project process, was part of this network and was friends with the Maritains. The more I studied her, the more I knew I wanted to write about her. She was fascinating, a wonderful figure and really active in the resistance to Nazism. But I couldn't find letters that explicitly expressed the actual living friendship life around which my project centered. I thought I couldn't have her in the book because she didn't fit the Maritians' model of friendship, actual friends who love and miss each other.

Then, I realized that she did use the word friendship a lot. But it wasn't to living people. It was to Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystical theologian. She wrote about the topic of friendship in medieval Christianity. Not only can I still include her, this completely expands my understanding of friendship to include the living and the dead, friendship in the realm of memory, imagination, prayer. It completely expanded the project and got me towards something more capacious and true.

If you're investigating something that's you love and it isn't fitting, think about why. Maybe the category you're trying to fit them in is too narrow. Maybe my thinking needs to be adjusted. That is what happened for me with Davy. Now, when I help students who have hit a wall in their research, I encourage them to think about how to work with this wall rather than trying to work around it.

In writing *Kindred Spirits*, I found the talk of invisible friendship—friendship in the realm of memory, friendships of the heart, friendships with the absent, accessing the grace of those who have departed or who you've only met in books—totally helpful. It confirmed my instinct to spend ten years with Raïssa Maritain and her husband, to go to her gravesite, to create a palpable sense of intimacy with these people as I looked through their archives and handled their personal material.

I think I didn't have a way of putting my finger on it before, but they were explicit about saying, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux is my best friend. There is no embarrassment, no hiding it. I found that language helpful in describing what I had experienced during my research. Many of us researchers really feel this when we find time to spend with these people. It's comforting, like revisiting an old friend. To do these kinds of projects, you have to make time for those people as if they were your friends, so it is nice to spend a whole day reading their words or their correspondences. It really did enrich my life.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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**VIRGINIA SCHILDER** (she/her/hers) is a second-year Master of Divinity student at Harvard Divinity School. Virginia's interests include Catholic theology, eco-theology and Earth-based communities, and the ways in which theology informs visions of justice in public policy advocacy. Previously, Virginia studied at Brown University, where she wrote her senior thesis on gender and clericalism in the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to her academic work, Virginia has worked with NETWORK Catholic Social Justice Advocates and will complete a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education this summer.