

Scenes of Cognition: Performance and Conquest

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Theatre, as a space (*théātron* in Greek, a place for viewing), an object of analysis (a play), and a lens (theatricality), has long been associated with recognition and ways of knowing.¹ Plato and Aristotle may not have agreed on the value of what spectators learned, but they both granted the pedagogical force of dramatic representation.² Performance has also been considered a scene of communal, even crosscultural, understanding. Victor Turner, writing in the 1970s, asserted that populations could understand each other through their performances.³ Clearly these terms, like their objects of analysis, are constantly being rethought and reconfigured. Few scholars now subscribe to utopian fantasies that we can somehow transparently understand others

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I wish to thank my students in "Performance and Conquest" (Spring 2004) for reading and discussing this essay with me. Rigorous thinkers and demanding readers, they are a tough audience to please. I love them for it.

¹ Theatricality is the optic associated with theatre. I would argue that it is not simply an adjective of theatre (a "theatrical delivery") or a metaphor ("as if it were a stage"), but a way of seeing the constructed nature of the real. The relationship between this and performance is not straightforward. Performance, as used to denote a specific event (a play, a ritual, a demonstration), is also an object of analysis. Performance as a lens, however, denotes the constructed-ness of the critical apparatus as well as the object of analysis. It is the way in which the critic frames the event (for example, Argentina's Dirty War) that allows her to think of it as a *mise-en-scène* of the national imaginary and not, necessarily, the more visible staging of power and the positioning of social actors. Performance includes social imperatives (Jon McKensie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* [London: Routledge, 2001]) and normalizing practices that seem totally natural rather than theatrical (i.e., the performance of gender, racial, or national identity).

² For Plato, in Book X of *The Republic* (trans. H. D. P. Lee [Baltimore: Penguin Classics, 1955]), the skilled artist is a "charlatan" (375), who can "deceive children or simple people" (374) unable to distinguish between "knowledge and ignorance, reality and representation" (375).

³ "We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies," Victor Turner, "Planning Meeting for the World Conference on Ritual and Performance," Introduction in *By Means of Performance*, ed. Richard Schechner and Will Appel (New York: Routledge, 1980), 1.



Figure 1. Bernardino de Sahagún, Arthur J. O. Anderson, and Charles E. Dibble. 1950–1982. *General history of the things of New Spain: Florentine codex*. Santa Fe, N.M.; Salt Lake City: School of American Research; University of Utah. Book 8, fig. 64.

and other cultures, through their performance practices. Any theoretical lens, as we know from past experience, can occlude as much as it reveals. Much of my previous work has looked at issues of representation, misrepresentation, and disappearance in contemporary Latin American theatre and performance. In this essay—part introduction to sixteenth-century Amerindian performance and part polemic—I think about the ways in which these pre-Conquest practices trouble some basic givens about the terms “theatre” and “performance” and ask us, not necessarily to replace them, but to rethink them again, from yet one more perspective.⁴

Here is just one of many descriptions by sixteenth-century European chroniclers describing the performances they saw in the so-called New World. José de Acosta writes:

[A temple for the worship of Quetzalcoatl] had a courtyard of middling size, where on the god’s feast day great dances and celebrations were performed as well as very amusing theatrical performances. For this purpose there was a small theater about thirty feet square in the middle of the courtyard, thoroughly whitewashed, which they embowered and adorned for that day with all possible care, completely surrounding it with arches made of

⁴ Although there were differences in the belief and performance systems of Mesoamericans and the Andean populations in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, there are important similarities that allow us to speak of indigenous practice more generally in the Americas. Differences seem to be a matter of degree rather than of kind. The Mexica (Aztecs), Maya, and Incas highly valued song, dance, festivals, and other performance forms. A discussion of differences must be left for another occasion.

every kind of flowers and featherwork, and many birds and hares and other harmless creatures hanging between them at intervals, where the people gathered after having eaten. The actors came out and performed short comic pieces, pretending to be deaf, afflicted with colds, halt, blind, and missing an arm, all coming to the idol to ask for health. The deaf ones would give foolish answers and those with colds coughed. The halt, limping about, described their miseries and complaints, and made the people laugh heartily. Others came out representing vermin, with some dressed as beetles, others as toads, others as lizards, and so on. When they appeared they described their lives, and turning about they played little flutes, which pleased their listeners mightily, for they were very amusing. They also imitated butterflies and birds of many different colors, bringing out of the temples youths dressed in these costumes; they climbed into a grove of trees that had been planted there, and the temple priests shot at them with blowpipes, and there were comic verses in defense of some and against the others, with which they entertained the audience. After this was over they performed a *mitote*, or dance, with all these actors, and the festival ended; they usually did this at the most important festivals.⁵

This passage, one of many written by the European conquerors and missionaries during the sixteenth century, describes the importance that native peoples assigned to performance.⁶ However, the description reveals not just *what we know* but the complexities of *how we know it*. For one thing, Castilian-language writers used terms from their own tradition such as *bailles*, *entremeses*, *teatro*, *representantes*—translated into English here as “dances,” “theatrical performances,” “theatre,” and “actors,” respectively—as if they were transparent and universally valid. Less obviously, perhaps, this description by Acosta does not in fact reflect what he saw but what he read in Juan de Tovar’s *Códice Ramírez*. Although we know that Acosta copied this description word for word from the earlier manuscript, it is still far from clear who in fact saw the events described.⁷ Ramírez, who transcribed the Tovar manuscript in the nineteenth century, believed the work was originally written in Nahuatl by a sixteenth-century secular indigenous scholar. The derivative and reiterative nature of these descriptions characterizes many of the European chronicles.⁸ The formulaic frameworks of these scenes of

⁵ José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, trans. Frances López-Morillas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 5:326–27.

⁶ Aside from this passage, copied from Juan de Tovar’s *Códice Ramírez* (Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicana* and *Códice Ramírez* [Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1987], 9), see Fray Diego Durán’s *Book of the Gods and Rites, and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 135, and his *History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía)’s *History of the Indians of New Spain*, trans. Elizabeth Andros Foster (Berkeley: The Cortés Society, 1950); Hernán Cortés’s third letter in *Letters from Mexico*, trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (Mexico City: Ed. S. Chávez Hayhoe, 1945); and Fernando de Alva Ixtilxóchitl, *Historia chichimeca* (Madrid: Dastin, S.L., 2000), 173.

⁷ José Fernando Ramírez, who copied the manuscript now known as *Códice Ramírez* in 1860, speculates that the lost original was written in Nahuatl (“lengua mexicana”). The copy he worked from was written in two columns, he notes, and the right-hand one was left blank (*Códice Ramírez*, 9). The author, Ramírez conjectures, was most likely a secular native scholar (10). Ramírez estimates that the undated manuscript was written no later than the mid-sixteenth century, based in part on the irrefutable evidence that passages from it were lifted by Fray Diego Durán in 1579 (11). The manuscript also served as a basis for Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc’s *Crónica mexicana*. In 1876, Alfredo Chavero adds to the debate, claiming that “the author of this beautiful work seems to have been a pure blooded Mexican who wrote in his mother tongue” (*Crónica mexicana*, 161).

⁸ Fray Ramón Pané’s 1498 *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 2001), the first known chronicle written in the Americas in a European language, begins the formulaic opening that characterizes much of this literature: “I, friar Ramón, [. . .] write of what I have been able to know and understand of the beliefs and idolatries of the Indians” (3).

cognition make us question claims to knowledge based on supposedly embodied participation. Instead of evidence garnered from first-hand witnessing (part of the repertoire of embodied practices that generate, store, and transmit social memory that I have discussed in a recent book), archival sources provide the basis for this description.⁹ Archival memory, I argue, maintains a lasting core: records, documents, literary texts, archaeological remains, and bones that are supposedly resistant to change. The value, relevance, or meaning of the remains might change over time, as do the ways in which they are interpreted, and even embodied. Through tricks of the archive, the scene-as-seen gets reproduced and inserted, unabridged and unacknowledged, into written accounts. The how-we-know, then, seems based on assertions by unidentified witnesses and the highly suspect reworking of lost originals.

Does this mean that we should not try to understand what these performances looked like, or speculate about the religious, social, and political functions they served? Not at all. Most, perhaps all, of our efforts to understand and interpret present and past events are based on unidentified sources, insufficient information, nonexistent originals, and limited perspectives. I would suggest, furthermore, that the age-old claims that we cannot know much about pre-Conquest cultures (and therefore should not try) are fueled as much by a willful politics of forgetfulness and disappearance as by an acknowledgment of the difficulties. But it does mean that we exercise caution as we analyze what we know and how we know it. Terminology—words such as theatre and performance—comprises the how and the what simultaneously. The lens (the how) constructs the object of analysis (the what).

Here, then, I will argue that terms such as theatre and performance imperfectly signal sixteenth-century systems of incorporated practice that create and transmit social memory. Yet, I feel I need to continue to use them. Why retain these words, instead of looking for new ones? Why not, for example, use a word such as *olin* (meaning “movement” in Nahuatl), which signifies the force that generates the movement of the sun, stars, earth, and elements? Or *areito* (in Arawak) which refers to “sung-dance,” a term that effectively blurs the Aristotelian boundaries between art forms? For one thing, as I argue at length elsewhere, taking a word developed in a different context to signal a profoundly different worldview to fit our current analytical needs simply does violence to that term.¹⁰ All terminology reflects a history of practice. We cannot unproblematically create or adopt words to examine more complex objects of analysis. Nonetheless, in the revenge of the referent, the what ultimately puts pressure on the how; that is, the objects of analysis will demand that we scholars reexamine our own meaning-making systems, our critical lenses, our terminology. Words such as *olin* and *areito* remind us that any analysis that does not account for movement or blurred boundaries will fail. So, ideally, this essay should be as much about examining our own epistemic grids as about pre-Conquest theatre and performance.

Some events, such as the one described by Acosta, resembled what the chroniclers thought of as theatre. They included music, singing, dancing, recitation, dialogues,

⁹ See chapter 1 of my *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–15.

impersonation, acrobatic feats, critique, and humorous mimetic routines.¹¹ This description points to something that we know from multiple other sources: the performers were highly skilled. They used elaborate and highly colorful costumes, masks, body makeup, and, at times, puppets and stilts.¹² The sets were lavishly adorned with arches, flowers, animals, and all sorts of natural and artfully designed elements.¹³



Figure 2. “Danza de zancos” from *Código Troano*, reproduced in Fernando Muñoz Castillo’s *Teatro maya peninsular: Precolombino y evangelizador*. Merida: Capital Americana de la Cultura, 2000, pg. 33.

¹¹ The *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Maya Quiché, refers to dances as entertainment: “If only they’d come make a show for us we’d wonder at them and marvel,” the Xibalba said, referring to the two sacred ‘boys’—Hunahpu and Xbalanque. ‘Please entertain us . . . What do you want us to give you in payment [. . .]’ So then they began their songs and dances, and then all the Xibalbans arrived, the spectators crowded the floor, and they danced everything: they danced the Weasel, they danced the Poorwill, they danced the Armadillo.” *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, trans. Dennis Tedlock (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 151–52.

¹² Patrick Johansson, ed., *Teatro mexicano, Vol 1: Festejos, ritos propiciatorios y rituales prehispánicos* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1992), 26. Durán claims to have personally seen “a gigantic Indian who appeared in a procession of the feast of Corpus Cristi” who was, in fact, a man on stilts (*History*, 9). See too Angel María Garibay, *Historia de la literatura náhuatl* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1987), 333; María Sten, *El teatro franciscano en la Nueva España* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 2000), and *Vida y muerte del teatro náhuatl* (Xalapa: Editorial Universidad Veracruzana, 1982); and Tomoeda, Millones, and Kato, *Dioses y demonios del Cuzco* (Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, 2001).

¹³ See Motolinía’s description of the natural environment created for a Corpus Christi play in 1538: “there was constructed a mountain and from each mountain there rose a high cliff. The lower part was made like a meadow, with clumps of herbs and flowers and everything else that there is in a fresh field;

While we cannot know exactly what these enactments signified for their participants, there are certain things that we can know. The vast majority of the population learned and transmitted knowledge through the embodied practices that are the repertoire. Through formal and informal techniques of incorporation, rather than inscription, people memorized and rehearsed fundamental social precepts.¹⁴ Although the passage refers to “actors,” the population was rigorously trained in the *telpochcalli* (local schools) or *calmecac* (temple-schools) in key social behaviors such as sweeping, warfare, cultivation, and weaving. All were accomplished singers and dancers, having attended special schools, *cuicacalli* (house of song). Without exception, boys and girls aged twelve to fifteen “danced and sang long into the night, under the watchful eyes of the instructors.”¹⁵ Training was obligatory, and students spent many hours (from before sunset to midnight) in the *cuicacalli* perfecting their techniques in large, beautifully appointed spaces.¹⁶ Caballeros and warriors also trained regularly in recitation and dance. Even the ruler executed a “princely dance” on special occasions, as did the priests who embodied god-figures.¹⁷ Males and females danced in public, commonly in two parallel rows of dancers moving in straight lines, turning around, and dancing in the opposite direction or in concentric circles. The dances were massive, at times involving thousands of people. Diego de Landa, the Franciscan friar who became Bishop of Yucatán in 1571, describes a war dance “in which 800 Indians, or more or less, dance with small flags in a great war measure, among all of them not one being out of time.”¹⁸ Men, moreover, often dressed as women and mimed weaving and other gender-associated practices. Musicians played on drums (including dual-toned drums and turtle-shell drums), trumpets, gourds, notched bone, shells, flutes, and rattle-boards.¹⁹

the mountain and the cliff were as natural as if they had grown there. It was a marvellous thing to see” (*History of the Indians of New Spain*, 103). Polo de Ondegardo describes the Andean festival of *Inti Raymi*: “In this festival, they threw many flowers on the roads and the Indians came very embixados (adorned), and the lords with bits of gold attached to their beards, all of them singing. It should be noted that this festival falls almost at the same time as when we Christians celebrate the solemnities of Corpus Christi, and in some cases there are similarities (as in the dances, representations, and songs) and for this reason it’s been said that nowadays there are Indians that seem to celebrate our festival of Corpus Christi when there is much suspicion that they are celebrating their *Intiraymi*” (quoted in Pablo José de Arriaga, *La extirpación de la idolatría en el Perú* [Cuzco: Centro de Estudios Regionales Andinos “Bartolomé de las Casas,” 1999], 58–59, fn. 181).

¹⁴ Paul Connerton distinguishes between incorporating and inscribing practices in *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 72–73.

¹⁵ Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 166.

¹⁶ Berdan and Anawalt write: “Not only were the songs and dances taught in the *cuicacalli* essential to the proper performance of most religious rituals and ceremonies, but a vast amount of information was also contained in the songs themselves. Predominantly religious in content, these songs praised the deities and told of creation, life and death, and the relationship between mortals and the gods” (167). See also Alfredo López Austin, *La educación de los antiguos nahuas*, vols. 1 and 2 (Mexico City: SEP, 1985).

¹⁷ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, trans. and ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, vols. 1–12 (Santa Fe: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1982), 1:30. See also Francisco Javier Clavijero’s eighteenth-century work, *Historia antigua de México* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1945), 2:43:300.

¹⁸ Friar Diego de Landa, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, trans. William Gates (Mexico City: Editorial San Fernando, 1993), 58–59.

¹⁹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*. Acosta, in *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, describes the following in relation to Peru: “They play different instruments for these dances. Some are like flutes or pipes, others like drums, others like conch shells; the usual thing is for them to use their voices, all singing” (375).



Figure 3. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 4, fig. 91.

Usually, the performances took place outdoors, sometimes in very public spaces such as temples and courtyards, sometimes in the semisecluded space of a private patio.²⁰

The aim of these performances varied, though they always involved a religious component. The comics in the description above praised Quetzalcoatl and asked for health. Celebrations and commemorations served simultaneously as a mechanism for social integration and as a vehicle for othering by ridiculing regional and ethnic

²⁰ See Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica*, 31: 153–57, in Sten, *Vida y muerte*, 22.

differences.²¹ Certain dances prepared warriors for battle or celebrated victory. At times, the sung-dance (such as the *areitos*, or *mitote* in Nahuatl, and *taqui* in Quechua) recounted group and individual histories and past glories. The sung-dances were common throughout the Aztec, Maya, and Incan territories, as the indigenous terms, images, and chronicles make clear.

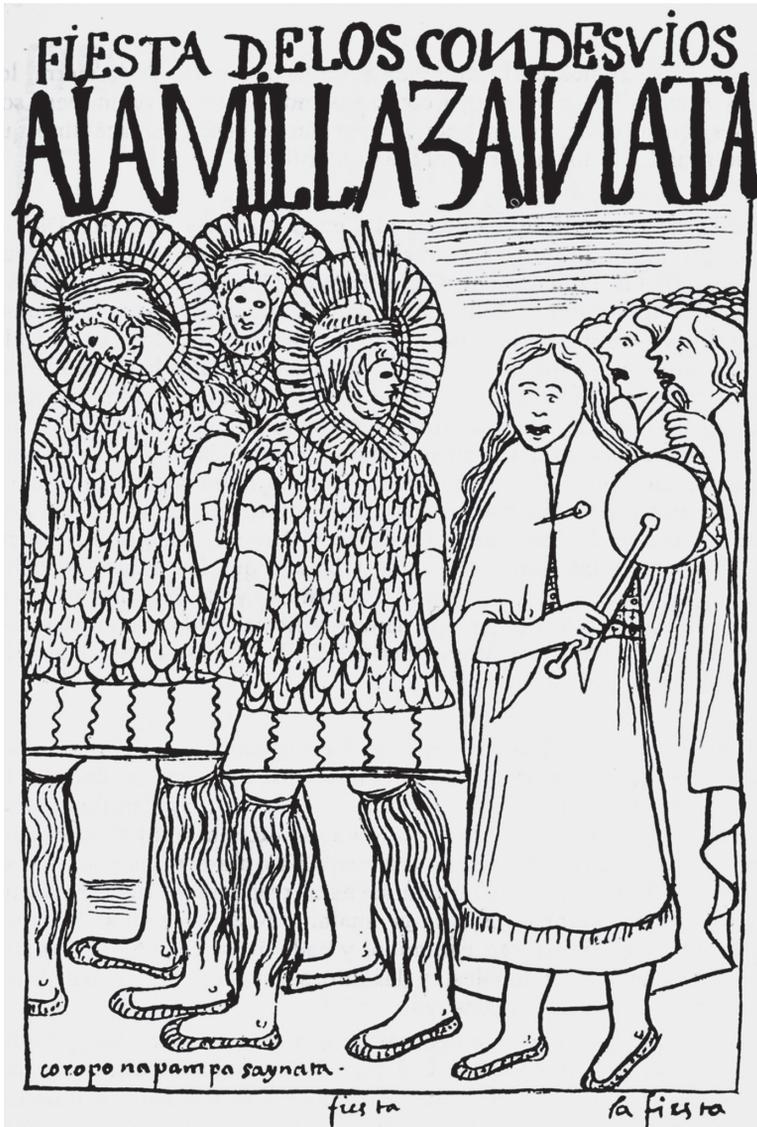


Figure 4. Fiesta de los Condesuyos. Guaman Poma, 246—note the masked dancers or *guacones* described by José de Acosta (1539–1600).²²

²¹ See Clendinnen's description of the Mexica's "memorable caricature of Huastecan weirdness" through dance in *The Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 34.

²² "I also saw any number of dances in which they imitated different occupations, such as those of shepherds, farmers, fishermen, and hunters; usually all these were danced with a very slow and

These theatrical performances were staged within the context of a larger performance—the many religious festivals that took place routinely in the expansive cityscapes. These observances kept social rhythms in synch with the highly ritualized movement of time, made visible through the elaborate choreography of the calendars. Celebrations required their own design and conventions of participation. Spaces were transformed as they were cleansed and adorned. Human bodies became purified sites through fasting, sexual abstinence, piercings, sacrifice, ritual feasting, and drinking.²³ Everyone participated in these festivities that were “attended by the entire city,” according to Dominican friar Diego Durán’s *History of the Indies of New Spain* of 1581.²⁴

The ceremonies, as the descriptions suggest, often involved multiple acts of debt payment and sacrifice; the latter, especially among the Mexica (also known as Aztecs), included human sacrifice. At the apex of the pyramid, contact point between the heavens and the earth, the high priests reenacted the ur-scene of the giving and taking of human life. Victims—often illustrious war captives but also women and children—were bathed and prepared. The six priests who performed the sacrifice appeared on the pyramid dressed in large, colorful vestments, their bodies and faces painted. They adorned themselves like the god, “whom they represented on that day” (91). At the beginning of the ceremony, the priests “humbled themselves before the idol” (91). The victims ascended the temple stairs “totally nude.” A specially assigned priest came down from the temple, holding an *ixiptlatl* (god-image/delegate) in his arms, which “he showed those who were about to die” (92). The ritual sacrifice was formulaic: four priests held the victim’s arms and legs, another held the head, and the high priest (or *Topiltzin*) quickly cut out the heart, held it to the sun, threw it to the image of Huitzilopochtli, and rolled the body down the steps of the temple (92).

The bodies were collected and taken back to their appropriate *capulli* (neighborhoods), where they were eaten “to celebrate the feast” (92). In certain festivals, the head and skin of the victims were removed and performed as part of the celebration.²⁵ Multiple forms of human sacrifice were carried out in the Americas with regional variations.²⁶ While the practice sounds cruel, it reflected the belief that there was no firm division between life and death. Being was not considered ontologically stable but in flux, a transitive condition between here and there. The sacrificial victims would be joining the gods, at times taking messages from those on earth, while the victims’ energy and force would be transferred to others on earth through the donning of the

deliberate sound, steps, and rhythms. There were others danced by masked men, whom they called *huacones*, and both the masks and their movements were absolutely diabolical. Some men danced on the shoulders of other men.” Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 374–75.

²³ Arriaga, 56–62. Arriaga described ongoing fiestas in huacas that continued to involve ritual purification: fasting, sexual abstinence, staying up all night to sing, dance, and tell stories for five days or more.

²⁴ Note: page citations following, unless otherwise noted, are all from Durán’s *History*.

²⁵ See Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 2:31, for one of many examples.

²⁶ Among the forms of sacrifice were the opening of the chest and extracting the heart (preferred by the Aztecs), decapitation (preferred by the Maya), stoning, shooting the victim to death with arrows, and others (see the special issue on sacrifice in *Arqueología Mexicana* 11, no. 63 [2003]). Acosta states: “Although Peruvians surpassed the Mexicans in killing children and sacrificing their sons (for I have not read or learned that the Mexicans did this), yet in the number of men that they sacrificed and the horrible way in which they did it the Mexicans surpassed the Peruvians and even every other nation in the world” (293).



Figure 5. From Fray Diego Durán's *Book of the Gods and Rites*, plate 7.
 "A victim sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli."

skin. Notions of continuity and constantly recycling life forces, rather than cruelty or revenge, sustained these practices.²⁷ The Mayas, for example, referred to certain forms of sacrifice as *ahil* (acts of creation).²⁸

These performances served not only to honor the gods, but also to reinforce the network of belief systems and practices throughout the Mesoamerican and Incan worlds. In the Andean situation, as Peruvian anthropologist Luis Millones notes, the population was scattered. Because people farmed and raised animals, their contact with each other was minimal except during the designated fiestas that brought them together. While these were local affairs before the rise of the Incan empire, they increasingly became part of the imperial network created by the Incas for territorial control.²⁹

²⁷ Ross Hassig points out, "According to Aztec belief, all those who died in battle went to *ilhucac*, the place of the sun, as did those who were captured in battle and later sacrificed. After four years in *ilhucac* they were transformed into birds and butterflies and returned to earth." *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 118–19.

²⁸ David Stuart, "La ideología del sacrificio entre los Mayas," *Arqueología Mexicana* 11, no. 63 (2003): 28.

²⁹ Millones writes: "Organized in this way, the fiestas acquired political significance as lords from Cuzco started to participate. Every festival signified the temporal conformity in a space occupied by multitudes. Ceremonies invested the space with new ideological values." *Actores de altura: Ensayos sobre el teatro popular andino* (Lima: Editorial Horizonte, 1992), 22. My translation.

The same applies to an even greater degree with the Aztecs, who celebrated the same festivals, on the same day, in the same way, throughout Mesoamerica.³⁰ A thousand people, according to Durán, could be sacrificed during a particular ceremony (93). "After all these ceremonies, dances, sacrifices, farces, and games had ended—all performed for the gods—the actors, priests, and dignitaries of the temple took the image of dough and stripped it of its ornaments" (95). Participants ate the body of the god shaped out of amaranth dough (*ixiptlatl*) in an act that resembled communion according to Durán, who asked his "reader [to] note how cleverly this diabolical rite imitates that of our Holy Church, which orders us to receive the True Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" (95). The friars could not visualize a script or scenario other than the biblical one they knew. Their way of fending off radical otherness was by trying to fit the performances they witnessed into the familiar framework of Christian doctrine.³¹

These extraordinary performances took place within the context of yet a larger performance, the choreography of the sacred and earthly realms. For Amerindians, the earthly and cosmic world functioned together, mutually sustaining and reflecting each other. Mesoamerican creation myths, for example, tell of how the gods sacrificed themselves for human beings, quite literally spilling their blood, doing penance, and throwing themselves into the fire in order to create people and their world. The gods, in turn, required similar sacrifices on behalf of their creatures.³² These myths describe how four of the previous five suns ended abruptly, bringing a catastrophic end to life on earth. In order to keep the sun rising, the rain falling, and the earth free of annihilating earthquakes, windstorms, fires, and draughts, people had to carry out a strict series of ritual observances as forms of debt payment (*tlaxtlaua*) to the gods.

Through embodied performance, Amerindian groups perpetually reenacted the primal story of conflict and sacrifice. Performance, in this broadest sense, was the fundamental iterative act of existence itself, endlessly recreating the original act of creation.³³ The Mesoamericans particularly were master builders, architects of the

³⁰ Durán, in *History*, notes: "The same feast, the same rites, were performed in front of their god, just as was done in Mexico. All the provinces of the land practiced the same ceremonies. It was a universal ceremony [. . .] Every town sacrificed the prisoners taken by their own captains and soldiers" (92–93).

³¹ Durán writes: "basing ourselves on the evidence provided by these people, whose strange ways, conduct, and lowly actions are so like those of the Hebrews, and I would not commit a great error if I were to state this as fact, considering their way of life, their ceremonies, their rites and superstitions, their omens and hypocrisies, so akin to and characteristic of those of the Jews; in no way do they seem to differ. The Holy Scriptures bear witness to this, and from them we draw proofs and reasons for holding this opinion to be true." Fray Diego Durán, 3. Fr. Agustin de Vetancurt, in his 1698 treatise, *Teatro mexicano: Descripción breve de los sucesos exemplares, historicos, politicos, militares, y religiosos del Nuevo mundo occidental de las Indias* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1982), dedicates several chapters to this claim, part 2, Tratado Tercero, chaps. 8–10. See too Acosta, Book V, chaps. 24 (Mexico) and 25 (Peru).

³² For an excellent summary of the Amerindian creation myth, see Enrique Florescano, "The Nahua Concept of Time and Space," in *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). For Mayan creation myths, see *Popul Vuh* and *Chilam Balam*. For Andean creation myths, see the *Huarochiri Manuscript: A Testament of Ancient and Colonial Andean Religion*, trans. Frank Salomon and George L. Urioste (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

³³ Florescano writes of the Mexica: "Every creation is thus a repetition of the creation of the world, just as everything that is thus created is converted into a sacred space, governed by primordial forces" (*Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico*, 17). Also see Clendinnen's *The Aztecs*.

sacred. Temples, the human-made equivalent of nature's mountains, reached toward the heavens, forming a living link that conjoined the heavens above, the earth, and the underworlds below. The Mexica thought of these temples as the navel of the world, the umbilical cord that kept the blood and life flowing between mutually sustaining worlds. There was no concept of the original and its representation, as in Platonic thought. They were all aspects of one thing—the body, the man-made, the natural, and the cosmic order. They moved together: the light passed through the opening in the temple at a certain time, a child came into the world, and living sacrifices and human expenditure were offered back. The dance—or choreography—that held them in synch was vital for the existence of the universe. The city, then, was a site of sacred performance—a space in which everything was created, designed, and reenacted with a purpose. Nature was ritualized and ritual was naturalized in a choreographed balancing act. Nature, in itself, could not be trusted to assure the safety and continuity of life on earth. Only relentless human exertion could do so, and at staggering human cost.

Needless to add, perhaps, these performances also had evident political as well as sacred power. The performance-as-skit/farce/dance served as an occasion to critique and make fun of others as performers praised the gods. The massive performance festivals, moreover, made visible the very real economic and military power of a state that could afford to sacrifice hundreds—even thousands—of victims. Additionally, these performances permitted territorial expansion and control through a shared belief system. Both the Mesoamerican and Incan political systems were based on “persuasive and dominating influence” rather than simple force—that is, ideological and hegemonic control.³⁴ These spectacular synchronized acts were fundamental to maintaining power. Ideology—normalized through religion, social hierarchies, and so forth—only became visible in embodied practice. Beliefs were rendered visible as acts. And, finally, the sacred choreography aligning the earthly to the cosmic had obvious political applications. The architectural design and placement of the temples—positioned to throw off shadows or catch rays of light at precise moments of the equinox—indicate the degree to which priests and kings used stagecraft to position themselves as living conduits of the sacred.³⁵ These leaders, highly trained in astronomy and mathematics, dramatized their power by organizing huge public events around eclipses and other natural phenomena that they alone could predict. They, as delegates of the divine, could also threaten underlings with the death of the sun.

The term performance, then, suggests both a praxis and an episteme. It proves generative in that it allows scholars to view events such as those described here as layered and interconnected (i.e., as object of analysis, as repertoire, as spectacle, as

³⁴ See Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 17.

³⁵ A Mayan ruler could stand on top of a temple built up against the Caribbean sea in such a way that the sun rose and set behind him. “A Maya farmer, standing below this building for some ritual occasion, saw his ruler standing at the pivot of this symbolic program that represented the movement of heavenly bodies as they rose and set [. . .] By taking his place at the apex of the symbolic program, the king declared himself to be the causal force that perpetuated this order.” Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1986), 106.

worldview, and as analytical lens). Insofar as performance as a prismatic methodology expands our capacity to see multiple meanings and systems of equivalencies, it encourages us to be flexible and to make connections, sparing us the impossible task of fixing definitions and perspectives. These enactments are not static or transparent, and writers claiming to codify them in any straightforward way—either according to Biblical paradigms or classical Greek aesthetics—reveal more about their own mindset than about the practices they analyze. The how-we-know necessarily extends our cognitive maps onto the objects of analysis. Nonetheless, the objects—the whats—fight back. The plethora of reports, descriptions, and interpretations ruptures any constraining theory, and gives the lie to simple definition. The whats, reflected in the many descriptions left by sixteenth-century writers and reinterpreted by contemporary commentators, reveal complexity rather than certainty. And it is that complexity, simultaneity, and multivocality that performance theory enables us not to explain but to explore.

First, performance, as object of analysis, allows us to examine discrete embodied acts—each with a beginning and an end—that involve conventional behaviors including a dance, a skit, or a farce. These are learned, mimetic practices, some of which are aesthetically pleasing and entertaining. Participants enact socially agreed-upon roles. Everyone in a given community knows the rules of accepted behavior and interaction.

Second, performance encompasses far more than a set of distinct cultural practices. It also constitutes a repertoire of embodied knowledge, a learning in and through the body, as well as a means of creating, preserving, and transmitting knowledge. Without easy access to archival and writing forms (whether pictograms, hieroglyphs, or the knotting systems known as *quipus*³⁶), people learned through memorization, physical training, and participation in social events. Whether in *cuicacalli* or through ritual practice or at home, people learned about themselves and their history through enactment. Some of these practices were highly theatrical while others were made invisible through their quotidian quality. The repertoire of gestures, oral traditions, movement, dance, and singing required presence for transmission. People participated in the production and reproduction of knowledge by being a part of the event.³⁷ These performances passed on the life—past, present, and future—of the community itself. The *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Maya Quiché, begins: “It takes a long performance and account to complete the emergence of all the sky-earth.”³⁸ Even without knowing the exact translation of the original Quiché term, it is clear that the passage refers not to myth-as-information but its transmission through oral, bodily practice.

Third, performance as spectacle creates a network of relations in which social arrangements, hierarchies, and values are made visible. In the massive performances held around the temples, individuals saw their relationship to earthly and divine

³⁶ Quipus were threads, dyed different colors, used to keep track of dates, quantities, events, and other important information. The system was highly elaborate and precise. People who mastered the techniques were called *quilcacamayoc*. See Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno*, vols. 1–3, ed. Franklin Pease (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 270.

³⁷ See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, chapter 1.

³⁸ *Popol Vuh*, 71.

powers. These social actors—priests, victims, participants—were all invested in the system of norms and beliefs that governed social practice. It is only within this network that people could function and form a sense of identity. The generalized fasting, abstinence, bloodletting, and staying awake for nights on end, for example, induced an altered state of consciousness in members of the population, and made them active participants in the struggle to assure the continuation of the world. The network, held together by shared beliefs, expanded throughout enormous stretches of the Americas by means of synchronized ceremonies and observances.

Fourth, performance serves as a lens, a way of seeing and understanding the world. Mesoamericans and Andeans saw existence quite literally as a battle between the forces of creation and destruction, and they accepted their duty to fight ceaselessly for the continuation of life. These conflictive worldviews set all these practices in motion. It is precisely because Amerindians viewed life as an unending contest that the many acts of affirmation became necessary. The Mexica, for example, lived in and through performance because they experienced the unabated anxiety of extinction. The four previous suns had suddenly died out; thus, they lived in a state of perpetual liminality, on the catastrophic edge between destruction and continuity, trying to maintain cosmic balance through reenactment.

While performance helps elucidate the many interconnected levels associated with the Amerindian practices I have been examining, this term—like theatre—also points to ideological and epistemological frameworks that differ radically from those found in the Native Americas. My understanding of embodied practice in relation to the worldviews and enacted behaviors of indigenous peoples has little to do with European notions of linearity, representation, mimesis, image, and ephemerality, which are associated with theatre and, at times, performance. The idea of performance, Native American enactments insist, needs to be expanded.

Some of the events I have been referring to—the skits and farces, for example—could be thought of as theatre, and chroniclers unhesitatingly referred to them as such.³⁹ One of the distinguishing features of these accounts is the ease with which they overlook obvious obstacles—the lack of an understanding of what the observers were seeing and a vocabulary for description. The skits looked familiar enough: they involved linearity, representation, and imitation. Squeezed in between other kinds of spectacles, they resembled the art form Spaniards were familiar with—the *juegos* (games) and *entremeses* that formed part of larger religious festivals such as Corpus

³⁹ Interestingly, one of the oldest debates in relation to these materials is precisely around the question of whether or not Amerindians had theatre. These earlier discussions, not surprisingly, arise out of preoccupations different from mine. Several commentators use “theatre” loosely. For example, Miguel León-Portilla, one of the leading scholars of Mexica culture, refers to the “perpetual theatre of the Nahuas, with performances and sacrifices throughout the years which coincided with different religious festivals” (*Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, trans. Grace Lobanov and the author [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986], 97). But some commentators of the mid-twentieth century were deeply invested in proving that Amerindians had theatre in the classical Greek sense—embryonic perhaps, rudimentary, but theatre nonetheless. See my “The Making of Latin American Drama,” in *Theatre of Crisis* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), for a fuller discussion of this topic. Also José Juan Arrom, *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano (época colonial)* (Mexico City: Ediciones de Andrea, 1967), 10 and 21; and Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Historia Antigua de México*, v. 2 p. 300 (Books VII, XLIII).

Christi.⁴⁰ While the indigenous skits and farces had a clear beginning, middle, and end, they were part of a cyclical ritual practice that affirmed the continuity of existence. Never original, they were always reiterative, a re-creation of the original act of creation. The underlying intention of these efforts was precisely to forestall the end, conceptualized not as Aristotelian cathartic closure but, on the contrary, as catastrophic and world-shattering. So while an individual skit might be thought of in terms of linearity, it was embedded within another, circular, performance structure that resisted closure. Just as one calendar was placed within another to both recognize and align solar and lunar forces, one performance event functioned within and against another.

We might argue that performances in Spain also situated the particular skit within a larger religious framework and calendar (Corpus Christi, for example). I would suggest two differences—one of degree, one of kind. The separation between the secular and sacred aspects of European worldviews was more pronounced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries than it was in the Americas, which allowed for the increasing popularity of secular performance genres in sixteenth-century Europe. Moreover, the relationship between the particular performance (i.e., the skit) and the larger religious framework was different in these two cases. For the Europeans, the skit or miracle plays were representations that served to illustrate and elucidate the larger Biblical story for a predominantly illiterate audience. For the Amerindians, the acts were themselves presentations to the gods, one more offering in a complex and interconnected system of reciprocity.

The Western concept of mimesis, thus, is complicated by indigenous practice. Clearly, contemporary scholars need to remember that mimesis itself has a troubled etymology, and that what the sixteenth-century observers thought of as imitation and representation may have differed wildly from classical Greek notions.⁴¹ Although the European friars had read Plato and Aristotle, the notion of mimesis that comes through in the chronicles is equated quite simply with imitation, while representation is folded into the expanding language of idolatry. Time and again European chroniclers referred to Amerindians as excellent mimes, though they usually disparaged this as a sign of idolatrous, dishonest, and animalistic tendencies: “They go about like monkeys, looking at everything, so as to imitate whatever they see people do.”⁴² They could imitate anything—animals, plant life, people, and (to the consternation of some writers) the Europeans themselves.⁴³ Yet, by and large, the events I have described are not representations of an action or of men in the Platonic or Aristotelian sense. Intended to do something, make something happen, these acts were not metaphorical; they lacked the “as if” quality of representation. Rather, as Inga Clendinnen suggests, reenactment animated life-affirming forces, “render[ed] present by simulation.”⁴⁴

The word *ixiptlatl* (usually rendered as “image”) also indicates the ways in which European equivalences radically changed the fundamental Nahuatl concept. As I

⁴⁰ See Introduction to Melveena McKendrick’s *Theatre in Spain, 1490–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴¹ I am indebted to Loren Kruger for this observation.

⁴² Motolinía, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, 104.

⁴³ Friar Diego de Landa, *Yucatan*, 58.

⁴⁴ Clendennin, *The Aztecs*, 253.

argue elsewhere, friars and chroniclers referred to *ixiptlatl* as images, bad objects, and idols. *Ixiptlatl* were objects that exceeded all Western notions of objecthood: they belonged to a flexible and dynamic (i.e., living) category that referred to the many manifestations of the gods. The Nahuatl word makes clear that the process (not the object) is sacred, and that the liminality of making and unmaking offers the opportunity for human and superhuman forces to commingle. As a living object, as activated materiality (made and unmade for the duration of the event), the *ixiptlatl* constitutes yet another form of life, of performed embodiment. Thus, if we were to try to find an equivalent for *ixiptlatl* using European terminology, we might think of the consecrated wafer. For some, the wafer is an inanimate object, but for Catholics, it is the body of Christ, a living essence. This living object puts pressure on performance studies to follow Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's lead in recognizing that the lifelessness usually attributed to the ethnographic object is not the deadness of the object (of analysis) but the violence of the theoretical approach/lens, "the manner in which [these objects] have become detached, for disciplines make their objects and in the process make themselves."⁴⁵

Ephemerality, another key concept theorized by theatre and performance studies, also might be revised in light of these Amerindian practices.⁴⁶ *Ephemeral* (existing only for a day) usually accentuates the fleeting because its common usage in English occludes an important part of its meaning: "table showing the places of heavenly bodies for every day of a period [. . . an] astronomical almanac."⁴⁷ Amerindians certainly saw life as fleeting. Nahuatl has a word for what we would call ephemeral—*cahuilitl* (that which leaves us).⁴⁸ Aztec songs are full of lamentations. For example, Nezahualcoyotl (1402–72), perhaps the Mexicas' most celebrated ruler/poet, describes the aching awareness of disappearance: "Not forever on earth / only a little while here. . . ."⁴⁹ Like many other poets, however, he also stresses the continuity of life, and the persistence of human affirmation: "My flowers will not come to an end, / my songs will not come to an end. . . . Even though flowers on earth / may wither and yellow, / they will be carried there, / to the interior of the house / of the bird with the golden feathers."⁵⁰ As long as this fleeting life on earth sustains a higher, heavenly, order, life will not end. The almanac, that shows the heavenly bodies in regular, endless motion, is the key to understanding the vital, mutually sustaining relationship of that which disappears and that which endures. The constant making and unmaking points to the active role of human beings in promoting the regenerative quality of the universe, of life, of performance—all in a constant state of reactivation. Through these reiterative acts, Amerindians made sense of the past and the present, even as they tried

⁴⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Ivan Karp and Stephen Levine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991), 387.

⁴⁶ See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (New York: Routledge, 1999). These performance theorists make ephemerality and disappearance the defining features of performance.

⁴⁷ C. T. Onions, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Miguel León-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

to secure their future. These acts also served to transmit their knowledge, memories, and values from one generation to the next, thus simultaneously assuring their future at another, related, level.

For the Europeans, of course, the persistence of indigenous memory and cultural practices was exactly what needed to be annihilated. Performance-as-ephemeral was central to a conquest that willed native cosmologies into extinction. Nonetheless, as Franciscan Friar Bernardino de Sahagún clearly recognized in his momentous *Florentine Codex* (1569), the so-called pagan and idolatrous beliefs were transmitted through performance. The Devil takes advantage of songs and dances and other practices of indigenous people as “hiding places in order to perform his works [. . .] Said songs contain so much guile that they say anything and proclaim that which he commands. But only those he addresses understand them.”⁵¹ The colonist’s claim to access is met with the diabolic opaqueness of performance. Shared performance and linguistic practices constituted the community itself. Others could not decipher the codes. The spiritual conquest, these friars feared, was tentative at best.

In order to supplant native performances, the friars introduced missionary theatre shortly after the Conquest to use what they saw as the Amerindians’ love of spectacle for evangelization. They hoped to affect indigenous beliefs systems (the what-they-know) by slightly tampering with the hows, or ways, of knowing. The plays developed by the friars and acted by native peoples set out to maintain native performance forms while transforming the content. Even though they were performed in native languages and looked familiar—staged with thousands of flowers, arches, artfully created landscapes, and fabulous stagecraft—the worldviews were radically different. One example: *The Final Judgment* (Juicio final), attributed to Andrés de Olmos and staged in Tlatelolco (in 1531 or 1533), is considered to be the first play performed in the Americas. Even though the work aims explicitly to frighten native peoples into marriage under threat of hellfire, its ideological intervention goes far deeper. For one thing, it presents the character Time as a linear, universalizing force, antithetical to native understandings of cyclical motion. Furthermore, Christian salvation (following death) is depicted as an individual fate. Prior to the Conquest, people thought that only extreme group effort could sustain life on earth and maintain the vital connection between the sacred and the mundane. After the Conquest, the collectivity of experience gives way to individual responsibility: “They must take their own defense in the presence of God as they are individually called.”⁵² Moreover, conquest now meant that native peoples had to forsake their own gods—not simply add new ones to their pantheon, as previous conquests had demanded. This was a whole different world, made visible through the many acts that, on one level, looked so familiar. Small wonder, then, that native participants and spectators wept and marveled to see such stagings. As Franciscan Friar Toribio Motolinía recounts, native peoples cried as they saw the play depicting the story of Adam and Eve. Their loss of Paradise was “so well performed that no one who saw it could keep from weeping bitterly.”⁵³ We might be forgiven for asking if the native spectators (formerly participants)

⁵¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Prologue, 1:45.

⁵² Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz, *Early Colonial Religious Drama in Mexico: From Tzompantli to Golgotha* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 145.

⁵³ Motolinía, *History*, 109.

were grieving the loss of Paradise or the loss of their own world. The massive performances often ended with the theatrical defeat of the infidels and the supposed salvation of the Amerindians at the performance's conclusion, thousands were baptized in a mass ceremony.⁵⁴

Initially, the friars celebrated the ways in which their new converts took so enthusiastically to Catholicism, as if the learned behaviors reflected a change of heart. Edicts and ordinances mandated that neophytes kneel and pray to God, hoping the acts themselves would produce faith.⁵⁵ "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe," Althusser quotes Pascal as saying.⁵⁶ Gradually, however, they understood that embodied behaviors were not a stable or uncomplicated indicator of belief. Although corporeal practice makes ideology visible, as I noted earlier, it can also do the opposite. Scenes of cognition resulted in misrecognition. The friars grew to suspect that the bent knee at church did not guarantee orthodoxy, and that the neophytes' apparent acceptance of Christianity hid deep ambivalence and misunderstandings. The repertoire has its own tricks. The frustrated and disappointed Sahagún accused the Amerindians of "idolatrous dissembling"—believing one thing and doing another.⁵⁷

To add insult to injury, many of the practices that Sahagún described—the fiestas, masked dances, processions, building altars with offerings to the departed—continue to this day. Innumerable communities throughout the Americas have kept alive their fiestas, and practitioners continue to employ performance genres (such as *pastorelas* [shepherd's plays] and *moros y cristianos* [mock battles enacted between make-believe Moors and Christians] developed during the sixteenth century to deal with uneasy relations between peoples and religious views. Plazas, *atrios* (churchyards), and theatres are full of Moctezumas, Atahualpas, Malinches, Tepoztecatls, Quiché warriors, Yaqui deer dancers, and other famous indigenous ancestors who help contemporary subjects negotiate their present. Many of these so-called folk performances continue to be presented in the same public spaces, atrios, plazas, and other places associated with ancient stagings. They emphasize participation over spectatorship,

⁵⁴ There is an excellent bibliography on evangelical theatre in the Americas during the sixteenth century. To this end, see Othón Arróniz, *Teatro de evangelización en Nueva España* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1979); Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz, *Early Colonial Religious Drama in Mexico*; Louise M. Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Fernando Horcasitas, *El teatro náhuatl: Epoca novohispana y moderna* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1974); Max Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians: Festivals of Reconquest in Mexico and Spain* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); María Sten, *Vida y Muerte del Teatro Náhuatl*; Adam Versényi, *Theatre in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and *El teatro franciscano en la Nueva España*, ed. María Sten (Mexico City: CONACULTA, UNAM, FONCA, 2000).

⁵⁵ "All people must bend the knee before the sacrament, recite the prayers fixed when the Ave is rung, and reverence the cross and images," in "The Ordinances of Tomás López," in Landa, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, 180. See too Maya Ramos Smith et al., eds., *Censura y teatro novohispano* (Mexico City: Colección Escenología, CONACULTA, INBA, CITRU, 1998).

⁵⁶ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 168.

⁵⁷ Sahagún is wrong when he accuses the native neophytes of being perpetual performers, engaged in "idolatrous dissembling." See Sahagún, *Historia general*, 3: 352. This is also quoted in Florescano, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico*, 133–34.

debt payment to the gods rather than entertainment for audiences. The Latin American dramatists who have also found reasons to reactivate Amerindian scenarios of conquest and resistance throughout the centuries are too numerous to list, though by and large they remain unexamined.

I am not arguing that we can speak of uninterrupted or authentic practices—as if there were such a thing—transmitted intact from generation to generation. Some of these performances have ancient, pre-Conquest roots (such as the *Rabinal Achí*); some are eighteenth- and nineteenth-century inventions based on legends. The texts of these performances were in all cases written after the performance tradition was well established, and they change as the performances change. Dennis Tedlock's recent translation of the *Rabinal Achí*, based on the performance he saw in Rabinal, Guatemala, in 1998, differs, necessarily, from the text that French priest Charles Etienne Brasseur wrote down (with the help of Bartolo Ziz, the Mayan performance specialist) after he saw the dance performance in 1855.⁵⁸ The archive, like the repertoire, invites revisions and new interpretations.

What I am advocating, however, is that systems of embodied practice stemming from pre-Conquest days continue to make themselves felt throughout the Americas, particularly in popular performance modes such as fiestas, Day of the Dead celebrations, and commemorative reenactments of ancient conflicts. Many of these events continue to be presentations to the gods—Christian and indigenous—rather than the representations we find on Latin America's theatre stages. *Danzantes de fe* (faith dancers) continue to perform according to traditional rules mandating that they dance for three days straight and commit to undertaking the dance for a period of roughly three years. While the guidelines vary from the Andean regions to the highlands of Guatemala to the Southwest of the United States, they continue to underline a shared purpose: performers offer a gift of human expenditure to divine forces rather than entertainment for an audience. However, these performances tend to fall out of discussions of Latin American theatre and even performance, because theatre usually refers to Western systems of mimetic reenactment, while performance, especially in Latin America, too often limits itself to performance art, a contemporary and culturally specific art form that has little to do with the phenomena I have been discussing here. Our terminology, then, blinds us to certain forms of transmission.

Here, then, I want to propose that we start by thinking about terminology and various forms of embodied practice before we turn to the discussion of any specific object of analysis, be it a play or a festival. Performances, as acts of transfer, allow for the transmission of traditions, trajectories, influences, and histories.⁵⁹ If we limit ourselves to arguing that plays can represent history, or at times even intervene in history, we ask too little of corporeal practice. Performance practice transmits history; performance theory can make historical claims. How would we, as scholars, go about examining corporeal practice from the past, once the very bodies that constitute it have disappeared? We would analyze all the archival sources available—texts, buildings,

⁵⁸ Dennis Tedlock, trans., *Rabinal Achí: A Mayan Drama of War and Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The Brasseur version was published as *Teatro indígena prehispánico (Rabinal Achí)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1979).

⁵⁹ Paul Connerton uses "acts of transfer" in his *How Societies Remember*, 39.

artifacts, and so forth—but with an eye to understanding live practice in its particular context, as part of a network of internal and external relations. We would, however, also examine the use of performance space, techniques of the body including specific movements, dance-steps, and gestures. We would explore language, the logic of participation, intended audience, assumptions about presentation and representation, the social hierarchies that configure or delimit the performance of self (in terms of status, gender, social function, and so on), the role of social myths and legends, the competing and simultaneous activities surrounding the performance, the ways in which the (agricultural, religious, budgetary) calendar frames the event, and the importance of the landscape in the construction of the physical and symbolic staging. We would also need to consider the economic infrastructure of the event—who is sponsoring the event, and why? A curious example in relation to the 1998 performance of the *Rabinal Achí* that Tedlock fails to mention is that it was sponsored by the International Red Cross, seeking to use the confrontation of the two honorable warriors as a model for thinking about armed conflict in Guatemala. Does that make a difference to the meaning of the performance, or does it change the participants' commitment to what they are doing? By bringing together various interconnected layers, we would try to flesh out the role of performance in the highly regulating function of social spectacle.

Contemporary performances, based on past practices, are always necessarily reinventions that involve speculation and performatic leaps. The same, however, is true of historiography. As historian Greg Dening writes in *Performances*, "'Presenting the Past' will always imply bringing the past and present together. It will also imply that the past will not be replicated or repeated, but represented, shaped, staged, performed in some way other than it originally existed."⁶⁰ Theatre studies, performance studies, area studies, history, archaeology, anthropology: all offer approximations to the past—using diverse methodologies, to be sure. Even though history involves theatrical representation, it claims archival legitimation in a way performance—as the so-called ephemeral—has not been able to. But what we know is linked to how we know it, and it seems urgent to recuperate embodied practice as a way of knowing and transmitting knowledge. The past is not dead; it's not disappeared; it's not even hidden from view. Current practices always exist in conversation with past events, sites of remembrance, and embodied traditions. The repertoire and the archive work in tandem, transmitting knowledge in different but usually complementary ways. Perhaps, as the Mexica believed, meaning is not a thing but a practice that requires the tireless and repetitive process of doing, making, unmaking, revising, retheorizing, and reconfiguring the many, many parts.

⁶⁰ Greg Dening, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), xv.