

Pete Sigal. *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 361. Paper \$25.95.

Pete Sigal, currently a History Professor at Duke University, wrote *The Flower and the Scorpion* while teaching at California State University, Los Angeles. Influenced by scholars like Louise Berkhart, whom he has shown the difficulty of translating the Western conception of sin into Nahuatl, and Karma Lochrie, who has argued against using modern heteronormative concepts of sexuality on past peoples, Sigal interprets Nahua sexuality prior to and immediately after European contact. He finds that the Nahua and Spanish concepts of sexuality, gender, and sin did not align. In particular, the Nahua concept of *tlazolli*, translated as ‘trash’ or ‘excess,’ featured prominently in the Nahua universe. *Tlazolli*, believed to be fundamental to fertility, needed to remain in proper balance. The titular figures of the *flower* and the *scorpion* provide an entry to discuss Nahua ritual. The flower was linked to noblemen’s role in “enhancing the fertility of the universe” (6). The scorpion, symbolizing punishment from the gods for a variety of infractions, also figured prominently in healing rituals. The author analyzes the period right after the Spanish conquest from 1519 to 1521 until 1650, when the colonizers’ cultural influences were readily apparent.

Sigal examines primary sources such as Nahua art as well as journals of Spanish missionaries and other clerical documents. By comparing pre-contact Nahua art documenting rituals they performed with later writings by the indigenous and the clergy, Sigal reveals shifts in understanding and the assimilation that took place. Demonstrating the gulf between Spanish and Nahua concepts of gender, the Nahua depicted their main god, Tlazoteotl as a hermaphrodite. Spanish clerics tried to instill the concept of sin and sex through Tlazoteotl, the goddess of trash and

excess. Images produced after colonization show how the rituals changed and started incorporating the concept of sin and sexuality.

Sigal's analysis of clerical writings shows the progression of the Nahua as well as their influence on the Spanish. Many clergymen saw the indigenous as small children that needed to be taught right and wrong. The "sweeping ceremony," a ritual performed to clear excess and control trash, was used by the Spanish to relate sin to trash. However, Sigal also finds that Catholicism's power has been exaggerated when it comes to the colonization of indigenous people in Mexico. Cultural assimilation of the Nahua by the church was slow and inconsistent. The persistence of Nahua influences is evident in the ritual of sweeping the excess that remains common throughout Mexico to this day.

Sigal also discounts the notion that the Catholic Church and confession radically changed indigenous behavior and individual perceptions of themselves. Until the mid-seventeenth century the Nahua did not have significant changes in their culture or their sexuality. While creative and convincing, we must remember that Sigal is interpreting art, which is always open to individual perceptions. This is even more challenging since the culture that produced the art no longer exists. Nevertheless, scholars as well as undergraduate and graduate students interested in indigenous populations of the New World and sexuality will enjoy this book. It is a fascinating study of a culture that is better known for its sacrificial rituals and naïveté than its resistance to Spanish domination.

Angelica Saucedo