

INTERCULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS: PONDERING THE AZTEC HOUSES OF THE GODS

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Esto no es una escuela

“Conquest is not a European privilege”¹ and the institutionalization of teaching-and-learning (what we would be tempted to call schooling) might not only be a Modern European instrument of domination. This opening phrase is in no way apologetic of European imperialism. It was uttered by an Indigenous woman and cited by me (a Latin American woman) both of whom intend to communicate just the opposite. By quoting this particular sentence of Julieta Paredes’ speech, I do not wish to apologize nor create a rationale for the terrible actions taken on behalf of the conquering European nations; very much on the contrary. I wish to illuminate the fact that the idea of the Indian as the “good savage” is also an imposition of the modern world. We need to realize the construct of the Indigenous Ethos was not their own, but one that was created during the collision of Europe with America. In order to save Indigenous people from a crueler fate, missionaries concocted an amicable image of the newly discovered people, an image that reduced them to little more than children, lagging behind the productive and religious enlightenment cherished by the Europeans.

European modernity rejoiced in “finding” these people whose connection to nature and whose pureness they could contrast with their nascent modernization. Such themes can be read in the works of Montaigne and Rousseau. This “otherness” to which they contrasted themselves was no more than their projection of what they wanted the Indigenous people to be, stripping them of qualities that the powerful possess: the tendency to desire empires, conquer others and dominate over them. However, if we take just one minute to familiarize ourselves with the true history of pre-Hispanic Indigenous civilizations, that is what we find, especially when we inquire about the Aztecs or Mexicas. Their empire was built upon the conquest of the Valley of Mexico, and the expansionism of their empire by means of violent warfare and human sacrifice. This is exactly the argument I will be making throughout this paper, by focusing on another tool for conquest: the Aztec system of childrearing.

I propose that an iteration of organized, institutionalized, and compulsory teaching-and-learning was utilized as an instrument of domination and conquest was used in Mesoamerica before the arrival of the Spaniards. As I

1 → Julieta Paredes, “Feminismo Comunitario de Abya Yala,” *LÁPIZ* 3 (2018): 35.

see it, the Aztecs used such institutionalization for the economical-political-religious domination of the people who inhabited the Valley of Mexico before their arrival, as well as for the loyal submission of their own people. Systems of teaching-and-learning have been often—but not always—used by empires throughout the ages as one of their preferred mechanisms of control. The following argument is relevant to our study because of its paradigmatic obscurity in the history and philosophy of education. It is also an important conversation to have because it sheds light on the impossibility of ever fully understanding the otherness of the Mesoamerican peoples before and at the time of the conquest. What we know of these cultures has been delivered to us through the mediation of Catholic friars whose interpretations of that perplexing reality are marred by religious and cultural bias. It is impossible to ever truly know what life was like before Europe met America: their ontology, their epistemology, their *techne*, have all been lost and the glimpses we have are mere interpretations at best, of what people 500 years ago saw.

Two things which are analogous are not identical. At the very least, this presents a pressing problem for anthropologists and historians. Cultures use words in their natural language to describe their realities, but when another agent wishes to describe said culture's reality it resorts to using its own words, and sometimes the best word to describe another's reality is merely an analogy. In using a word which is analogous but not identical, the meaning of one people's culture becomes contaminated and twisted. To understand this better, I recommend looking at the Sapir-Whorf theory which states that each language has its own vision of the world.² Different languages entail different visions of the world, and these visions are incommensurable with each other. Hence, utilizing words from the Spanish language to describe the institutions, traditions, and beliefs of the Mesoamerican peoples is at best an *interpretation* which stems from the Spaniard world view, obfuscating forever the true meaning of things within the non-European cultural system before the conquest.

When it comes to analyzing cultural realities other than our own we cannot simply have an inclusive definition which encompasses all practices

2 → Umberto Eco, *Decir casi lo mismo* (Mexico: Lumen, 2008), 48.

that have to do with the formation of personhood. We would be inadvertently imposing our own views and interpretations onto others' practices. The term "education," as we will see later on in the essay, is not just a "catch-all" umbrella term—it is very specific to our particular modern reality of teaching-and-learning. In what follows, I paint a picture of the Nahua institutions called *calmecac* and *telpochcalli*. This description will hopefully demonstrate that these institutions were not related to the budding European systems of compulsory schooling. However unique this system might have been, we will never fully understand its novelty because the knowledge we have of it comes by way of the Spanish friars' interpretations of what they saw, and what they saw was easily construed by them to be educative.

Throughout this document, I am careful not to purposefully impose intercultural interpretations of a European episteme upon the Mexican prehispanic reality at the time of the conquest. It would be very easy to call the teaching-and-learning structures "schooling" or formal education. In fact, that is exactly what one finds is the official version offered by the Mexican government. The Secretariat of Public Education issues free textbooks to all students throughout the country. The sixth grade textbook published in 2018 reads: "La educación era obligatoria y existían dos escuelas, una para los nobles (*calmecac*) y otra para los demás jóvenes (*telpochcalli*)."³ With this short sentence, the government (oblivious to the underlying linguistic/epistemic/political problems inherent in this statement) communicates the existence of a formal educational system in our territory's past.

If we look to the most renowned Mexican historians and anthropologists, we find hesitancy in using Spanish-language wording to describe the Aztec teaching-learning processes and institutions. León-Portilla, a contemporary philosopher and historian, famous for his knowledge of Nahua history and culture, takes on the subject directly in at least three of his books.⁴ In these texts he warns of the dangers of not having a clear indication that the Nahua

3 → "Education was mandatory and there were two schools: one for the nobles (*calmecac*) and another for the rest of the youths (*telpochcalli*)." Carlos Alberto Reyes Tosqui, et al., *Historia Sexto Grado*, (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2018).

4 → Miguel León-Portilla, *Toltecáyotl* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014); *Aztecas-Mexicas. Desarrollo de una civilización originaria* (Madrid: Algaba Ediciones, 2005); *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2017).

utilized the concept of “education” to designate the formation of their people. Leon-Portilla points to the myriad texts that describe this learning-teaching iteration, and cautiously proceeds to use the term education. So he writes: “En el caso de la cultura náhuatl prehispánica, sabemos que existieron en ella diversos tipos de escuelas o centros de educación”⁵ and dedicates an entire chapter to the topic of “Los ideales de la educación” (Ideals of Education) in his book *Toltecáyotl. Aspectos de la cultura náhuatl* (Toltecáyotl: Aspects of the Nahuatl Culture) and another entire chapter titled “La educación prehispánica” (Prehispanic Education) in a later book titled *Aztecas-Mexicas. Desarrollo de una civilización originaria* (Aztecs-Mexicas: Development of an Indigenous Civilization).⁶

Alfredo López Austin, a notable Mexica scholar, created the first and only anthology which contains the texts that offer insight into “pre-hispanic education.” In his *La educación de los antiguos Nahuas 1 y 2* (Education of the Ancient Nahuas, Vols. 1 and 2), López Austin collects only what he calls “primary sources,” by which he means those texts written immediately following the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan in 1521.⁷ In his rendering of the Aztec reality, the Aztecs had a formal educational system and schools which he dubs *templos-escuela* (temple-schools). This hyphenated word works better to capture the religious element of their formation process. Of these *templos-escuelas* he writes: “el templo-escuela era el lugar por excelencia donde niños y jóvenes eran inducidos a adquirir el conocimiento que les permitía desempeñar en su presente y en un futuro adulto los papeles sociales que les atribuían los grupos dirigentes.”⁸

Throughout this paper I will provide some cautious justifications for why we might use the modern day terms for “school” and “education.” Although

5 → “In the case of the prehispanic Nahuatl culture, we know there existed many kinds of schools and education centers.” León-Portilla, *Toltecáyotl*, 190.

6 → León-Portilla, “La educación prehispánica,” in *Aztecas-Mexicas. Desarrollo de una civilización originaria*, (Madrid: Algaba Ediciones, 2005), 211-223.

7 → For a complete relation of these texts, see López Austin, *La educación de los antiguos Nahuas*, 2 vols. (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2002).

8 → “The temple-school was the principal place where boys and youths were induced into acquiring the knowledge that would allow them to carry out, in the present and in their future adult lives, the social rules assigned to them by the leadership.” López Austin, *Educación Antiguos Nahuas 1*, 26.

critiques of these translations should be held in mind, this document is, in fact, partly an exploration of the possibility that there is no appropriate terminology—and never may be. Our paradigmatic distance from the Mesoamerican world is such that words can only describe their realities from our current point of view. With the prior information in mind, the following is a detailed description of those Aztec cultural realities which have been called (or interpreted to be) formal education and schooling. The descriptions come from what we can learn by reading the Mendocino and Florentine Codices, and the Chronicles of Motolinia, Sahagún, Durán, Mendieta, Torquemada and Ixtlixochitl, as well as by analyzing the modern-day interpretations of education in the Nahua world offered by León-Portilla and López-Austin.

HOUSES OF THE GODS: WHERE THE NAHUA YOUTH WERE REARED

Calmecac and *telpochcalli* are the titles given to the two most cited institutions of formal child-rearing and service in Prehispanic Mexico. In our own modern terms, we have interpreted these institutions to be their “schools,” although in Sahagun’s texts he never refers to them as such, and instead uses the term “house” when talking about these buildings.⁹

These institutions were not only a staple of Aztec culture, but in different iterations were manifestations of the larger Nahua “educational” tradition that had already existed in the Valley of Mexico and its surroundings hundreds of years before the Aztecs conquered the area. It was, however, Emperor Moctezuma the I (also known as Moctezuma Ilhuicamina) who in the 1400s officially instituted compulsory and universal attendance as part of his plan to consolidate the Aztec Empire and expand his dominion over neighboring territories and peoples.¹⁰ Fray Diego Duran describes the establishment of schools for all communities in the Tenochtitlan vicinity in his text which can be found in López Austin’s anthology.¹¹ Similarly, Torquemada wrote: “all parents in general were careful to send their children to these schools... and

9 → See Alfredo Lopez Austin, *Educación Mexica. Antología de textos Sahaguntinos* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1985).

10 → See Lopez Austin, *Educación Antiguos Nahuas I*, 25.

11 → Lopez Austin, *Educación Antiguos Nahuas I*, 58.

they were obligated to.”¹² Offering their child to the gods was not only a tradition amongst the Nahua people but a mandate from their ruler beginning in the late period of Aztec history. Parents were careful to send them because they were forced to. This highlights how the power dynamic between the people and the ruler were used to the advantage of the empire.

The *calmecac* was dedicated to Quetzalcoatl (Feathered-serpent god). It was usually reserved for the children of the elite class (*pipiltin*), although parents from all social classes were free to choose which institution to offer their child into, hence creating the opportunity for class mobility. Attendees lived there. These places of learning and service were housed in buildings erected next to the most important temples in their cities. It is estimated there were around eight or ten of them in Tenochtitlan.¹³

The *calmecac* was known for its strict rules, rigorous discipline, and elevated academic standards. Life within this institution was one of constant sacrifice and labor. Their upbringing and lessons were carried out through their everyday tasks and chores as evidenced in the following text by Fray Diego de Duran:

[They] swept and cleaned the house at four in the morning. . . . The older boys would go find spines of maguey. . . . They carried wood from the mountains on their backs, which was to be burned in the house each night. . . . They ceased work early, and later went directly to the monastery to serve their gods and do penitence, but first to bathe. . . . The food that they made they cooked in the house. At sundown they started to prepare the things that were necessary (for activities at night). . . . At midnight all of them got up to pray, and those who did not wake were punished. . . .¹⁴

12 → Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 2 vols., (México: Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, 1943), 187.

13 → See Ana María Valle Vázquez, “Nezahualcōyotl. Pensamiento, poesía y educación en México prehispánico,” in *Filosofía de la Educación en México*, Cecilia Diego (ed.), (LAPES: Mexico, 2015), 17-19.

14 → *Códice Florentino*, in León-Portilla, *La filosofía Nahuatl*, 226.

Life for the Nahuatl children and adolescents was entrenched in violence, hardship and fear. The level of discipline and physical strength needed to carry out their work was met with a sense of duty and honor, as well as a good dose of punishment. The endurance necessary to fulfill their time at the *calmecac* has been seen as a huge success.

In his *Toltecáyotl*, León-Portilla refers to the *calmecac* as centers of higher education because the Nahuatl's most elevated knowledge was taught there. Rhetoric (how to speak well in a poetic manner), military and ecclesiastical arts, astrology, and astronomy were among the subjects taught.

They taught the children to speak well and how to greet and bow. . . . They taught them all the verses of songs to sing, which were called divine songs. . . . And they taught them astrology of the Indies and the interpretations of dreams and the counting of the years. . . .¹⁵

They were also taught how to read the sacred codices, how to sing the sacred/religious songs, and how to interpret the calendar. Most importantly, through their discipline in everyday life and academic-intellectual studies, they learned self-control. It was at the *calmecac* that the ruling class would acquire the needed knowledge to rule. Hence the importance of becoming models of morality and knowers of the sacred arts, as well as of military strategy. The high level of performance needed to fulfill the academic requirements and high moral standards of the *calmecac* meant high social praise for those who were able to finish their studies. There was a level of social mobility-stability involved in the completion of the *calmecac*. As a *pipiltin* it was important for maintaining elite status, and for those from a lower class, making it through the *calmecac* implied moving up in society.

The *telpochcalli* or house of young people was dedicated to *Tezcatlipoca*, and was the "school" for the *macehualtin*, or common folk. These institutions were found in the villages, not in the big cities. The Nahuatl had a particular geo-political division which functioned like modern day rural neighborhoods and were called *calpulli* (row of houses), and each had its

15 → *Códice Florentino*, 226.

own *telpochcalli*. The buildings for the *telpochcalli* were said to have had different chambers: some for the boys and some for girls. Although students also slept there, rules of housing were more relaxed than in the *calmecac* and children often wandered back home for lunch.

Though presumably less rigorous than the *calmecac*, sacrifice and discipline were also central. Penitence in both schools was severe. It is described in detail in Fray Diego Duran's writing and entailed the use of maguey spines to continuously prick oneself until blood was drawn.¹⁶ At the *telpochcalli*, attendees were purposefully malnourished, slept on uncomfortable surfaces, and were subjected to a life of austerity. Fasting was an important practice. Malnourishment was a result of being fed very little so students would become used to austerity and would survive extended periods of war, famine, or drought. At night, they would stay up, forsaking sleep as penitence or offering to the gods. Punishment and reprimand were central to this hierarchical methodology. Keeping busy, and always having something to do was an important part of their moral formation: idleness was punished and greatly frowned upon.

Special attention was placed on each child's particular abilities, and teachers would steer them towards the activities they seemed most apt to develop.¹⁷ Subject matter, according to León-Portilla, had to do with mastering the art of war.¹⁸ In comparison to the *calmecac*, where teaching was centered on mastering the intellectual strategies of warfare, the *telpochcalli* developed students' ability to fight in war: they became adept at archery, spear throwing, and sword mastery. The ideals of military and religious values were not merely transmitted, but embodied in physical education. Being fit was most necessary for military training soldiers but also as part of religious practices, as students were taught how to sing and dance their sacred rituals. Among the disciplines taught was also art: painting, sculpting, modeling, etc. Moral conduct and good habits were of the utmost importance. Chastity was a value enforced by fear of death.

16 → López Austin, *Educación Antiguos Nahuas I*, 78.

17 → In López Austin, *Educación Antiguos Nahuas I*, 74.

18 → León-Portilla, *Toltecáyotl*, 190.

At both the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli*, different didactic materials were used depending on the type of content to be learned. When practicing the art of war and hunting, students used weapons like blowguns, clubs, darts, bows and arrows, shields and swords and other instruments like nets and rocks. For intellectual work, teachers and students made use of pictographs and codices as tools for learning astrology or history. However, what is most peculiar to the Nahuatl teaching “didactic” was their use of pictographs as a mnemonic device to learn songs and poetry.¹⁹ In contrast with the Greek poets that had no writing system for composing and reciting their poetry, the *cuicapicque*, or “song smiths,” could rely on the pictograph in their books. This can be found in the following poem by a Nahuatl poet:

In noncuica amoxtlapal,
Ya noconyazozoutinemi,
Nixochialotzin,
Nontlatetotica
In tlacuilloalcalitic ca.²⁰

(I sing the paintings in the book,
As I unfold it,
I am like a colorful parrot,
I speak of many things
Within the house of the paintings.)

López Austin points out that while these two “schools” were the most commonly mentioned in the Nahuatl primary sources, there were others dedicated to other gods. Another institution mentioned in Fray Diego Durán’s text was named *cuicacalli* and was dedicated to the teaching-and-learning of singing, dancing, and playing instruments. It was the teachers who instead lived in the *cuicacalli*, and the students—both male and female—would

19 → See Ana María Valle Vázquez, “Nezahualcōyotl. Pensamiento, poesía y educación en México prehispánico,” in *Filosofía de la Educación en México*, Cecilia Dieguez (ed.), (LAPES: Mexico, 2015).

20 → *Cantares mexicanos*, fol. 51v, in Miguel León-Portilla, *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl* (México:Diana, 2006), 14.

attend daily. In contrast to the *calmecac*, where music played a central role in religious ritual, at the *cuicacalli*, young people were taught profane songs which recounted historical accomplishments of the people's history.²¹

IN IXTLI IN YOLOTL

It is possible to interpret these primary sources as suggesting that “formal education” played a preponderant role in everyday Aztec life and culture. There was a profound anthropological ideal that motivated these people towards teaching-and-learning. In Nahuatl the ideal is phrased: *in ixtli in yolotl* (your face, your heart). This phrase denotes an indigenous ontology, a way of being and a way of wanting to be in the world. It also gives identity. A model Nahuatl would possess a wise face and a strong (courageous) heart: the Nahuatl people upheld extremely high moral standards. Hence, “education” (both in the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli*, but also in the household) was always aimed at the formation of the wise and courageous man. This ideal is expressed in the following poem:

El hombre maduro:
Un corazón firme como la piedra,
Corazón fuerte;
Un rostro sabio,
Dueño de un rostro, dueño de un corazón,
comprensivo.²²

(The mature man:
A heart as firm as a rock,
Strong heart;
A wise face,
Owner of his face, owner of his heart,
Understanding.)

21 → López Austin, *Educación Antiguos Nahuas I*, 84-92..

22 → *Códice florentino*, vol. II, b. X, fol.7v.

In addition to *in ixtli in yolotl* as the anthropological ideal held by the Aztecs, this rhetoric also sheds light on their particular approach to knowledge. Yolanda Chávez Leyva offers a breakdown of the inherent epistemology in this ancestral phrase. She writes that, depending on the context, *ixtli* can be used to mean face or eyes.²³ The *ixtli* was tied to perception, to gaining knowledge. The *ixtli* is the part of a human being with which he/she feels: “it is the perception of the world through the senses.”²⁴ The *yolotl*, or heart, was believed to contain our knowledge, the heart was believed to house memory. Working together, the *ixtli* and the *yolotl* would “create insight.”²⁵ This particular phrasing alludes to an ontology as well as an epistemology, and since it was central to adults’ teaching efforts, it illuminates their moral ethos.

In ixtli in yolotl is also a necessary concept for understanding the role of the “teacher” in Nahua society. As Valle Vázquez writes: “The words *teixcuitiani* and *teixtlamachtiani*, which can be translated as teacher, literally mean ‘the one who makes the others take a face/a perception’ and ‘the one who gives wisdom, a face/a perception, to the others.’”²⁶ To teach would be the action of giving wisdom to others’ faces. In Nahuatl the word for this type of teaching is *ixtlamachlizti*.

Miguel León Portilla, in his *Toltecáyotl*, offers an even more exhaustive analysis of five different terms for “teacher” in the Nahua language; each one describes a particular attribute and action of the teacher. The first three words listed here are related to *ixtli* (the face/the eyes/perception), while the fourth and fifth words are related to the *yolotl* (heart). *Teixcuitiani* alludes to the teacher as “he who makes others take a face,” *teixtlamachtiani* refers to “those who make others’ faces wise,” and *tetezcahuiani* denotes “he who holds a mirror in front of others”. On the other hand, *netlacaneco (itech)*, which could be translated as “thanks to him (*itech*), people humanize their

23 → Yolanda Chávez Leyva, “In ixtli in yólotl/ a face and a heart: Listening to the Ancestors,” Studies in American Indian Literatures Series 2, Vol. 15, No. 3/4 (Fall 2003/Winter 2004): 102.

24 → Valle Vazquez, “Nezahualcoyotl,” 20e.

25 → Chávez Leyva, “In ixtli in yólotl,” 102.

26 → Valle Vazquez, “Nezahualcoyotl,” 21e.

love;” and finally, *tlayolpachivitia*, the Nahuatl word for he who hardens hearts.²⁷

The fourth concept, *netlacaneco (itech)*, is the most enigmatic to me so far. In *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes*, León-Portilla remarks that it points to a certain ideal of what was understood to be “human” as a moral quality. He also hints at the possibility that this ‘humanization of love’ is one of the basic concepts in their understanding of “education.”²⁸ In that same text, León-Portilla develops a chapter where he takes this up in detail. Although he clearly points out our Nahuatl ancestors *did not* develop a science of education (to develop a science of anything is a modern endeavor), they cared deeply about “forging others’ faces,” and “humanizing peoples’ love.”²⁹ Such cultural preoccupation with a particular type of ideal formation can possibly be construed today as “education.”

TLACAHUAPAHUALIZTLI

León-Portilla underscores there was no science of education, however, in a prior chapter of *La Filosofía Nahuatl estudiada en sus fuentes* he also highlights the Nahuatl had a rich conception of the “art of child-rearing (*crianza*) or educating men” (*tlacahuapahualiztli*).³⁰ The difference is subtle but telling of our contemporary knowledge on the subject. While León-Portilla clearly affirms the Nahuatl had no science of education because there was no “science” as such before the modern era, he is also cognizant of the fact that they had a robust corpus of knowledge and knowhow on the formation of men towards their ideal *in ixtli in yollotl*, and this, he points out, is signified in the Nahuatl word *tlacahuapahualiztli* [*tlaca*=man; *huapahualiztli*=child-rearing (*crianza*) or education]

Before I continue with the analysis of *tlacahuapahualiztli* I have to address the usage of the word “education.” When one reads the original 16th century texts from the Spanish friars Bernardino de Sahagún, Gerónimo de

27 → León-Portilla, *La filosofía náhuatl*, 115.

28 → *Ibid.*

29 → León-Portilla, *La filosofía náhuatl*, 269.

30 → León-Portilla, *La filosofía náhuatl*, 271.

Mendieta, and Fray Diego Durán, the word “education” is not mentioned even once. (If you read the modern interpretations of these texts, then it is certainly present.) This is because the use of the word was first introduced into Spanish after the second half of the 1500s.³¹ The word that was utilized to identify the concepts of learning-and-teaching toward a commonly held ideal was *crianza*, which loosely translates to child-rearing. When the word *educación* was introduced into the Spanish language, it was used indistinctly with *crianza*. Eventually though, child-rearing and education became two very different concepts, with the concept of education becoming the broader and richer of the two, particularly in our current understanding of it as an institution likened to maybe only healthcare.

León-Portilla tells us *tlacahuapahualitzli* refers to the education or child-rearing of man. However, as I have written, the word and modern concept of education would not have been used by the friars when translating or describing the reality of pre-conquest *tlacahuapahualitzli* because on the one hand it was not in usage, but most importantly, because it has come to mean something broader, which was not what they were seeing or describing. I therefore believe it more adequate to use the concept of *crianza*; and *tlacahuapahualitzli* would hence be the art of childrearing, not the art of education or the science of it.

I make this distinction because it is essential to our overall understanding of education, and whether or not the pre-Columbian practice was indeed education. The Nahua, as expressed in multiple accounts, had a collection of practices geared towards the young which had the objective of *in ixtli in yolotl*. The Aztec empire in particular had a *compulsory* and *universal system* that we need not call schooling or education, yet was clearly a mechanism of power. The Aztec empire utilized the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* to bring up their young strictly in accordance with their beliefs and values, but also to instill unwavering reverence to their leaders, to train their soldiers, to adore their gods and offer penitence, and as free labor, promoting above all things the importance of keeping oneself from being idle. Furthermore, as Fray

31 → See Lisardo Doval Salgado, “Acercamiento etimológico al término “Educación,” *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, vol.37, no. 146 (1979); M.S. Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education* (New York: Counterpoints:2008); Gustavo Esteva, *Desafíos de la interculturalidad* (Oaxaca: Proyecto Andino de Tecnologías Campesinas, 2017).

Diego Duran writes, the establishment of universal-compulsory attendance was a political act by Moctezuma Ilhuicamina who implemented this reform at a crucial time in the expansion of the Aztec Empire as a measure to secure its continuity.³² This is an example of how institutionalized learning has been utilized as a mechanism for the submission of the young by the established and growing powers of imperial endeavors. At this point it is worth keeping Paredes's words in mind: "Conquest is not a European privilege."

It is by studying Fray Diego Duran's text that López Austin writes about the *calmecac* and *tepochcalli*:

[T]odas estas casas eran lugares donde los jóvenes, al cumplir sus funciones sacerdotales, adquirirían los conocimientos y la disciplina necesarios para desempeñar específicas funciones en la edad adulta.

(All these houses were places where, upon completing their priestly functions, youths would acquire the knowledges and discipline necessary for carrying our specific functions in adult life).³³

López Austin does not call Aztec learning institutions schools, but rather temple-schools. This brings to our attention to another important aspect of these spaces: they were not instituted as places of learning, but of worship, and it was through their permanence there that learning took place. Let us also keep in mind that the Nahuas and first friars who wrote about these institutions called them neither schools nor temples but houses—houses where the gods dwell. Was learning in these houses epiphenomenal? Are we simply impaired to ever comprehend the reality of these Nahua spaces because of our limited modern lens?

32 → Fray Diego Durán, "Los jóvenes dedicados a los templos," in López Austin, *La educación de los antiguos nahuas I*, 57-92.

33 → Ibid.

CONCLUSION: MAKING PEACE WITH NEVER FULLY UNDERSTANDING OTHERS' ALTERITY

An expected ending would be for me to conclude whether or not the reality of teaching-and-learning in the Aztec Empire was schooling and/or education. As I hope to have demonstrated, this is more than a mere problem of semantics, and it is also much more than a mere translation problem. We are faced with an intercultural dilemma and hence, it might be more useful to ask: What good would come of using a particular modern European qualifier on a pre-Colonial reality rather than affirming its use? In what way and to whom is it useful if we reduce one people's reality to our own? Unfortunately, when two worldviews are brought together, the best we can hope for is an intercultural interpretation. We must make our peace with never fully understanding others' alterity.

With this said, I ponder whether their particular institutions—whatever we call them— were conducive to the submission of their population for the consolidation of the empire. These institutions, which promoted all their youth to serve their gods, were places of worship and learning, but mostly of labor. This labor was not remunerated. The reward was, in a sense, the social position maintained or gained by virtue of having gone through the institution. Once the Aztec nomadic tribe was able to establish a stronghold on the land in the Valley of Mexico, they quickly moved to establish a compulsory system which obligated all children to be promised to a god at birth and then sent to serve him. It is the particular way in which the adults decided to utilize the young people's time and efforts that truly defines it as a power dynamic. The ultimate objective of these institutions then was not childrearing or learning but the inclusion of the young into a society of service: service to the gods and service to their emperors. The hierarchical structure of the "houses of the gods" sheds light on Mesoamerican power structures which were much more complex than we have been led to believe by the myth of the "good savage."