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An Aztec Two-Spirit Cosmology

Re-sounding Nahuatl Masculinities, Elders, Femininities, and Youth

GABRIEL S. ESTRADA

Quetzalcoatl sparkles on the dark morning horizon as my mother pushes me out of her bleeding body. Quetzalcoatl, the morning star Venus, is a cool and dazzling twin to me, a steaming newborn birthed in the fiery menudo of the uterus. My mother’s words to my waiting father slowly pop like small pink bubbles on a red pool of adrenaline, “Well, you’ve got your boy.” He doesn’t hear her speak. In his dark reflective eyes, I am but a wavering mirage, a small sun waiting to envelop the whole world in my brightness, power, and laughter. Yet around this small mirage, the pale hospital lies like a silver sliver of moon in winter solstice, the longest night of 1970. Quetzalcoatl is but one of the last in a constellation of stars to flash a fading dance across an endless indigo sky. “Gabriel,” the name my mother dreams for me, will slowly bleed its indigo form onto the ivory of certificates, journals, or love notes scented in both rose and musk. From nine pulsating months of darkness, I am born into a sequined skywomb of greater darkness. Quetzalcoatl is a brilliant period in the spinning message sung by crystalline star white voices:

the farther you go
the more you return
to the Winter Solstice night
of your birth.

In western and colonized mestizo cultures, the darkness of femininity is feared even as it supports and creates all life. This fear of the dark is unnatural. Mammal eggs mature in the protective shade of skin and bones. A plant’s first
growth is away from the sun and into the wet shadows of earth, and dreams of what is to be flower best at night. Yet, as people mature into the light, they forget their very roots and the darkness that formed them in their youth. As a gay Indigenous person, or two-spirit, I do not forget so easily. After my birth, when the 1970s Chicana/o movements of Orange County, California, were flourishing, my family vanished into the protective darkness of the north. Far from the sunny smog of L.A., I grew up in the blue winter snows of Pullman, Washington, and Moscow, Idaho. I rooted myself at the feet of the soaring Rocky Mountains. There, my parents helped to organize campesinos and Chicana/o students to overcome a history of segregation. They also worked to help African Americans, Saudi Arabians, local Nez Perce and Coeur d’Alene Indians, women, and drug addicts around Washington State University. In the white snows and white communities there, I was a dark one. A white girl was so shocked to see my brown Indian skin at school that she asked if I was painted, never knowing the history of Native Americans or the genocide that her own people hid behind the blinding rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and Progress. A white boy asked if I was a boy or a girl; I never bothered to answer the strange and puzzling question until I was older.3

...Before every winter solstice in these early years, my mom, dad, sister, and I would drive south past waterfalls and even through a huge redwood to my grandmother’s house in Orange County. Christmas Eve tamales, cousins, aunts, and uncles waited for us there. People who didn’t know me used to ask, “Doesn’t having a birthday near Christmas ruin everything?” And I’d tell them, “No, I get two presents from all of my family.”

My parents’ separation in the mid-1970s paralleled the increasing separation of Chicana and Chicano politics as mujeres stood up for their rights when los hombres could not accept female power within their colonized brand of machismo. Although those long family trips to California stopped, winter solstice never stopped being my time of year. Far to the south, Huiztilopochtli, the small hummingbird sun, is always born as I celebrate another year of life. The winter solstice sun is small, like a child born at night. One year, I had the privilege to go to a Nahuatl village for winter solstice. As part of the celebration, I went with Don Jose, a Nahuatl elder, to gather the heart juices of the maguey. The journey began just as the sun set and the moon began to show its sliver. In growing darkness, I talked to the maguey and then drank from the sweet nectar. Night is the traditional time to gather aguamiel from the maguey with long gourds like hummingbird beaks. Aguamiel, waterhoney, is a good
name for the liquid produced by the maguey. While I’ve never cared so much for the fermented tequila that comes from the same substance, fresh aguamiel is uniquely refreshing, a cross between peanut butter, honey, and water flavors. As we walked back through the maguey fields, Don Jose explained that I should tell of my experiences or they would do little good. His message reverberated in the dark caves of my bat-like ears as we found our way home in the moonlight that poured over the tall spiky leaves of the maguey, pointing every which way.

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Night is a valued part of who I am. I could not live actively in the day without resting at night. Night balances day. The Aztec calendar is another way we witness this cosmic harmony. For example, the ideal relationship of the Aztec calendar is the circle, which reflects both the roundness of our Father Sun, Tonatiuh, and our Mother Earth, Tonantzin. The sun that begins with rising masculine energy in the east becomes descending feminine energy as it crosses to the west, only to become masculine in the east again in a never-ending cycle of night and day. A similar movement occurs as the earth tilts north and south toward the sun throughout the solar year. The south is the youth of summer and the north is the age of winter. In both cases, energy only exists in relation to other energies, and one kind can transform into another, just as matter can transform into energy and back if given the right time and place.

Night holds the bigger picture, the cosmic dimensions and dreams of who we are and how we can live during the day. Feminine night is integral to who I am. In a male body, I rely upon the flexibility and strength that my feminine and darker side allows in terms of the inner activities that some mistakenly call “passivity.” Inner strength is not weakness. Outer masculine strength cannot succeed until the inner emotional strengths guide outer interests. I feel so strongly about this feminine side that it is an honor to identify as a gay Indian, or two-spirited person. Two-spirit means someone who is androgynous, bisexual, or homosexual, but it also means more than that. Two-spirited people are sexually mixed beings who enjoy a living relation with their Indigenous ways and spirituality. Because of Catholic influence, Hispanicized people often reject what is not heterosexual and male, although the majority of Indigenous people are traditionally respectful of two-spirit people as a group. In fact, because we, as two-spirits, find misunderstanding in most colonized philosophies, we are often the first ones to defend and embody the ways of our ancestors who accept us for the way we carry all our energies at once—both male and female, day and night. I strongly feel that my birth in the epicenter of annual darkness reinforces my respect for a Nahuatl sense of feminine dark-
ness, an obscure internal landscape where emotional needs and desires find space for evolution.

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Even today, some Nahuatl look up at the Milky Way to see a gigantic snake in the night sky. I close with a poem that I wrote in the Sonoran desert, which extends across the U.S.-Mexico border on what is traditional Tohono O’odham land. I write it in memory of the snakes I used to pick up in the wheat fields of Pullman, Washington. Sometimes, I’d just stare back at those snakes. The prettiest were the rattlers all coiled up. As I move into changing times and places, their rattles echo in the caves of my ears eternally. Shkshkshksshksh-skhskhksssh . . .

_Cihuacoatl_

I saw her snake
into my redwood bathroom mirror again.
Her slit still eyes fill mine.
I feel the moon polish
my obsidian shields of scales
hear the house rattle in wind
as we slither
through small holes in time.

A coiled mass,
she is slowing molting
beneath the rippling black pools of my eyes,
emerging
with the glittering voice
of hard white
diamond
stars.

Her song circles
with the rhythm
of her rattle:
_“the farther you go
the more you return
to the Winter night
of your birth.”_
NOTES

1. Quetzalcoatl is a Nahuatl (Aztec) word that means “feathered serpent” and refers both to the Morning Star and to a series of priests and leaders in Toltec and Aztec history. Over one million Mexican Indians speak Nahuatl today. Nahuatl University was gracious enough to improve my Nahuatl and better my understanding of the codices and Nahuatl cosmologies that includes balanced gender roles (Nahuatl University, Ihuihukayomachiyotl: Reencuentros en el Cosmos, Agenda 2002, [Ocotepec, Morelos, Mexico: Asociacion Cultural Mascarones, A.C., 2001], 4).


5. For a good refutation of the theory that all homosexuality was completely outlawed by the Aztec, see Clark L. Taylor’s “Legends, Syncretism, and Continuing Echoes of Homosexuality from Pre-Columbian and Colonial Mexico,” Latin American Homosexualities, ed. Stephen O. Murray (Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press, 1995), 82.

6. One of the more influential Chicana lesbian works is Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).