Ideologies of Aztec Song

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BY NOW SCHOLARS have moved far to restore the writing of pre-
Columbian America; not so its singing.

Recent developments in archaeological, codicological, and anthropo-
logical interpretation, abetted by an upsurge in attention to indigenous
America in the years before and after the Columbian quincentenary of
1992, have brought us to a much fuller comprehension of the varieties
of expression and conception encoded in the various American scripts.
Numerous studies have put to work new interpretive strategies
growing from this deepened comprehension. They have reread famil-
 iar but insufficiently grasped indigenous texts, and they have begun to
read writings that were rarely before thought by Europeans to be
writing at all. They have shown much-traveled dichotomies of prelit-
erate versus literate or oral versus written societies to be predicated on
simplistic, Eurocentric judgments of what constitutes a sophisticatedly
meaningful script and what does not. They have begun to break down
long-held Western biases that extol the flexibility and semantic
richness of phonetic writing above all other approaches to script. And,
most provocatively, they have begun to uncover orders of meaning
that do not coincide with European notions of time, space, and human
movements through them.

But of the singing that was so often associated with the inscribed
traces of American cultures we still hear relatively little. American
voices have remained largely silent. This essay, in tandem with
another one published elsewhere and discussed further below, aims to
provide prolegomena for a broader restoration of the singing of one
particular group of cultures, the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central
Mexico, in the years before and after the coming of Cortés.¹

¹ Perhaps the most challenging and synoptic among the new readings of American
scripts is Gordon Brotherston’s Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas
through Their Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); more
technical, less venturesome, but of consummate interest is Joyce Marcus, Mesoameri-
can Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations
Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in
Mesoamerica and the Andes (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), reached me late in the writing of this essay; their relevance to my topic will be at least partially indicated below. For colonial mediations of indigenous writing in the central Mexican area, see Serge Gruziński, La Colonisation de l’imaginaire: Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), translated by Eileen Corrigan as The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993)); and James Lockhart, The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). With a few exceptions, most notably two articles in Writing without Words (Mark B. King’s “Hearing the Echoes of Verbal Art in Mixtec Writing” [pp. 102–36] and John Monaghan’s “The Text in the Body, the Body in the Text: The Embodied Sign in Mixtec Writing” [pp. 87–101]), all these studies pay at most fleeting attention to song. My own partner-essay to this one, discussing from other vantage points some of the issues taken up here (see the third section below, “The Cantares Deferred”) and advancing views on the connected materialities of Aztec utterance, writing, and subjectivity, is “Unlearning the Aztec Cantares (Preliminaries to a Postcolonial History),” in Object and Subject in Renaissance Culture, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), in press. Both the present essay and “Unlearning the Aztec Cantares” have profited much from responses to them by Jonathan Goldberg, Margreta de Grazia, Stephen Greenblatt, Peter Stallybrass, Nancy Vickers, Lillian Weissberg, and others.

1 For three studies whose reliance on poststructuralist insights is explicit, see Brotherston, Book of the Fourth World; and Elizabeth Hill Boone, “Introduction: Writing and Recording Knowledge,” and Walter D. Mignolo, “Afterword: Writing and Recorded Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Situations,” both in Writing without Words, ed. Boone and Mignolo, 3–26 and 293–313 respectively. See also Brotherston’s earlier essay, “Towards a Grammatology of America: Lévi-Strauss, Derrida and the Native New World Text,” in Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference, 1976–84, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, and Diana Loxley (London: Methuen, 1986), 190–209. Mignolo’s poststructuralism is, at the least, ambivalent. He rejects Brotherston’s call for a grammatology of New World writing, ascribing to Brotherston—mistakenly, I think—the advocacy of Derrida as a “model” for understanding American writing and the view that Derrida’s “thesis . . . is . . . automatically relevant to account for Mesoamerican and Andean writing practices before the conquest” (p. 303). In my reading Brotherston instead advocates—guardedly—Derridean argument as a starting point for critique of our general, Europe-infected notions of the relations between writing and speech; with this use of Derrida Mignolo has no quarrel (see p. 304). Mignolo’s idea of “rereading Derrida’s grammatology from the experience of the Americas” (p. 303) would be more feasible in a situation where the hegemony of Western language ideologies did not weigh heavily on us. Since in my view (and clearly enough in Mignolo’s as well) it remains burdensome, we need to bring analytic strategies for exposing its hidden structures together with careful study of native American traces. It is these parallel paths that I set out on below, with a reconceptualization of song in mind.
ways. Poststructuralist views have extended constructivist conceptions of language developed in the writings of Wittgenstein, Saussure, and others, in which language is seen as our primary means of conceiving the reality around us or even the medium in which we make and remake that reality. At the same time they have deepened Saussure’s insight that the meaningfulness of words arises from their differences from one another in linguistic networks; they have implicated this flux of difference more and more radically in linguistic constructions on and of reality. Poststructuralism has thus made language seem at once more fundamental to human cognition and more diverse and malleable in its applications. All these tendencies have promoted a more ecumenical stance in judging how people different from us, locally or globally, constitute through words their own worlds. They have also stimulated useful critique of the cultural limitations—the ethnocentrism, to put it more bluntly—of our most automatic assumptions about language and its capabilities.

The question of the relations between spoken and written language, which sits at the center of this critique, was raised in clarion tones in Jacques Derrida’s discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss in De la gramma
tologie.3 Here Derrida exposed the deep-rooted European ideology behind “The Writing Lesson,” a famous episode in Lévi-Strauss’s Tristes tropiques. He showed how Lévi-Strauss’s depiction of the corrupting advent of European writing among the Nambikwara of Brazil was constructed from a habitual European suspicion of writing, a nostalgic hankering after pristine “noble savages,” and a repressing of evidence concerning the Nambikwara’s indigenous writing. Derrida went on, in Of Grammatology, to uncover the roots of Lévi-Strauss’s distrust of writing and his privileging of speech in a widely dispersed and age-old Western ideology he named “logocentrism” or “phonocentrism.” This ideology granted a special status to the phonetic writing that accompanied it; in his critique of logocentrism Derrida crucially prepared the way for later writers’ attempts to repudiate this bias toward phoneticism.

What scholars who have profited from Derrida’s arguments have tended to ignore, however, is the fact that his central text in analyzing the structures and conundrums of logocentrism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Essai sur l’origine des langues, is almost as much a book about

3 Jacques Derrida, De la gramma
tologie (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as Of Grammatology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); see pt. 2, chap. 1. All citations in the text below will be from Spivak’s translation, abbreviated OG.
singing as it is about speech (and more a book about singing than about writing). Read in a certain fashion, Derrida’s analysis not only frees writing from its bondage to speech in Western language ideologies; it also points up the ideological pressures that have led us to subordinate song to speech. It indicates how song might resist this subordination and in so doing allies singing with writing, over against speech and its logocentric privilege. Exploring this Derridean stance raises suggestive possibilities for hearing song in certain instances of nonphonetic writing. More specifically, it facilitates a critique of the forces that have kept European observers of the indigenes of central Mexico—the Aztecs, as they are now commonly called—from hearing their singing over the last five centuries. Here I will pursue particularly the second of these possibilities and through it, to a lesser degree, the first.

Reading Derrida Reading Rousseau: The Play of Supplements

The most durable lesson of the Grammatology is that the connections and distinctions the modern West perceives between speech and writing are not natural and given in human communication but rather constructed in complicity with a whole metaphysics of presence. This ancient metaphysics uniquely valued the spoken word as the place where a divine being and meaning were most directly revealed; it was, in this way, speech- or sound-centered, logocentric or phonocentric. With the emergence through the Renaissance (and especially in the Cartesian moment at its end) of a new subjectivity, the metaphysical emphasis shifted from a divine presence in logos to an individual, reflective self-presence there (see OG, pp. 16, 97–98); but still the spoken word was exalted. As it has continued to be: from Rousseau through Hegel to Saussure, writing has been devalued as an indirect representation of a presence found embodied in speech; it has been seen as a sign of a sign of presence.

In a historical convergence that is not accidental, the period of the emergence and development of this modern, logocentric subjectivity is also the period of Europe’s growing contacts with and subjugation of vast stretches of the non-European world. It is the period of Europe’s first sustained encounter with many forms of nonalphabetic writing, including ideographs, hieroglyphs, and pictographs. In dealing with such writing, Derrida argued, logocentrism operated as language ethnocentrism and language teleology (OG, pp. 76–81). Language ethnocentrism, in that phonetic writing, while subordinate to speech, could nevertheless be raised over all other writing systems: it
aimed to inscribe the sound or *phonos* of speech, and in this it represented presence-in-speech more faithfully than nonphonetic writing systems. *Language teleology*, in that, as Derrida has it, the “decentering” that “followed the becoming-legible of non-occidental scripts” (*OG*, p. 76) was quickly accommodated in a vision of historical progress toward phoneticism, a progress then correlated with a putative societal evolution. For Rousseau, pictographs or hieroglyphs, ideographs, and alphabet “correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people, and the alphabet to civilized peoples.”

Derrida’s analysis of Western language ideology gravitates toward the eighteenth-century, a period, he notes, when questions as to writing’s place first irrupted from within logocentrism: “Neither Descartes nor Hegel grappled with the problem of writing. The place of this combat and crisis is called the eighteenth century” (*OG*, p. 98). Derrida devoted the lion’s share of his book to a reading of Rousseau’s *Essay* because he found there “the most energetic eighteenth-century reaction organizing the defense of phonologism and of logocentric metaphysics. What threatens is . . . writing” (*OG*, p. 99). And not only writing: singing threatens as well, as we may recognize from Rousseau’s *Essay* and from certain tangents in Derrida’s presentation.


* The fact that this historical localization is questionable does not affect, I think, the cogency of Derrida’s analysis. In forthcoming work I will suggest ways in which the difficulties in Western language ideology that Derrida sees emerging in the eighteenth century were broached earlier, in Renaissance humanist conceptions of language that themselves evolved and shifted under the impact of late-Renaissance awareness of non-European languages and cultures.
Singing and writing converge on speech from different sides, from the side of its potency as auto-affective phonos and from the side of its semiotic mechanics. By virtue of the characteristic surplus-over-speech that each carries, they resist the preeminence of speech within the logocentric scheme. They function as speech’s dual others, as traces that condition through the movement of différence its meanings and powers while it conditions theirs.6

Derrida locates a reflection of this problematic alterity of writing and singing in Rousseau’s use of the word *supplément*. This word, Derrida points out (pp. 144–45), can signify both an addition (or surplus or completion) and a substitution (or replacement or displacement). This dualism, replicating the general grammatological relation of différence by which the meaning of one sign depends on (is shifted onto) another, opens a rift in Rousseau’s defense of phonologism. For Derrida the rift is a window on the dispersed operation of the metaphysics (Rousseau’s and ours) that, by *suppressing the dualism inherent in the supplement*, has constructed for the West ostensibly natural and universal relations among song, speech, and writing. For us the rift will expose this, and also something more specific: an ideological apparatus or, if you will, a set of myths within our language beliefs that has helped determine Western conceptions of the Aztecs since the sixteenth century. The terms that sustain this apparatus will

6 To review some basic issues: Derrida’s grammatology diverges from Saussurean linguistics in that it follows through to its conclusion Saussure’s view that meaning arises in systems of signs from the mutual differences that distinguish one sign from another. In what is one of Derrida’s most fundamental insights (it is surely his most well known), he called attention to the deferral implied in Saussure’s play of difference among signs, to the incessant slippage of meaning, from one sign onto another, entailed in the production of meaning through difference. Derrida coined the term différence to signal both Saussure’s play of difference and the deferral it entails. This insight carries with it the implication that meaning arises not from Saussure’s stable (if arbitrary) connection between signified things and signifiers (themselves related through their mutual differences), but from a deferral of difference from one sign to another that operates wholly within the system of signs; “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” as Derrida infamously put it. Meaning comes from the jostling andshouldering of one sign by others, in a manner loosely analogous to Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, where any unilateral significance of a word is constantly challenged and rivaled by numerous others. Difference, plurality, and otherness inhabit the heart of meaning. To this alterity, to “the part played by the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign” (as Spivak puts it in her introduction to *Of Grammatology*), Derrida gave the name trace (p. xvii). Such difference built into the sign creates in any single instance of it not only meaning but *remainders* to that meaning spilling over around it. These remainders are closely connected in Derrida’s thought to the play of Rousseau’s supplement (see below).
at the same time help us to unmake it by the token of their supplementarity. They are four: song, writing, poetry, and metaphor. The dual "logic of the supplement" undoes Rousseau's attempts to assign song an unequivocal role in his history of languages. Rousseau wishes to understand song as an addition to speech imitating its accents by a certain permanence not found in it: "There seems to be wanting to the sounds which form the discourse, no more than permanence, to form a real tune," he writes in the Dictionary of Music. This permanence seems to be a matter not only of sustained intonation but also of a codified, restricted system of intervals not observed in speech: "The different inflexions which we give to the voice in speaking, form intervals which are not at all harmonic, which form no parts of the system in our music." Because it requires this codification, it would appear, "the tune does not seem natural to mankind." It is an artifice added to supplement the speech of civil societies, and in this spirit it may be provisionally denied to "savages": "Tho’ the savages of America sing, because they speak, yet a true savage never sung."

At the same time, however, Rousseau envisions song as the point of origin of speech, as a privileged and primordial imitation of the passions from which speech first arose: "With the first voices came the first articulate sounds or sounds formed according to the respective passions that dictated them. . . . Thus verse, singing, and speech have a common origin. . . . the first discourses were the first songs" (Essay, p. 50). In this notion that the first language was sung he extends a European strain of thought with deep roots in ancient myth and pastoral ethos and their Renaissance revivals. The speaking voice reaches back through history to merge into the passionate idyll of song: "In a language which would be completely harmonious, as was the Greek at the beginning, the difference of the speaking and singing voices is null: We should have the same voice for speaking and singing. Perhaps that may be at present the case of the Chinese," Rousseau writes, again in the Dictionary. For Rousseau, then, song is not only a supplementary accretion on speech in civil society; it is also a supplementary displacement of speech at its beginnings, before civil


8 See Rousseau, Dictionnaire, s.v. "voix" (Dictionary, trans. Waring, s.v. "voice"); also quoted in OG, p. 198.
society. It is at once artificial, unnatural to the human voice, unfamiliar to savages, and the voice’s first, natural, most primitive and authentic expression.

Inevitably, the place of Rousseau’s “savages” in this reasoning is as equivocal as that of song itself. Because song is not natural to humankind but a civilized artifice, “a true savage never sung.” But because song displaces speech at its origin, aboriginal peoples or those closer than Europeans to them in Rousseau’s estimation remain nearer the passional origins of speech-song. Their present-day discourse may even still merge speech with song, as in “the case of the Chinese.” The primal, authentic speech-force of melody survives in Rousseau’s world only insofar as it is given voice by others inferior to Europeans.

This equivocation in regard to non-Europeans divides song against itself: civilized peoples systematize melody, in effect creating a phenomenon inaccessible to savages; but at the same time they slide farther and farther away from a preexistent and aboriginal song displacing speech. It is not much to my point here that Rousseau’s dilemma arises in part from his advocacy of melody and his polemic against part writing, harmony, and theorists of harmony like Rameau (another strain in his musical thought with roots reaching back to the Renaissance). But it is important to note that the dilemma ramified in another distinction in Rousseau’s thought: the distinction of song, the enactment of melody, from music, the degraded realm of harmony, far from authentic imitation of passions. In chapter 19 of the Essay Rousseau traced a European evolution by which “singing gradually became an art entirely separate from speech; ... the harmonics of sounds resulted in forgetting vocal inflections; and finally ... music, restricted to purely physical concurrences of vibrations, found itself deprived of the moral power it had yielded when it was the twofold voice of nature” (Essay, pp. 71–72). Music is for Rousseau a privileged depravity limited to only the most advanced societies. Harmony, as Derrida puts it, is “the evil and the science proper to Europe” (OG, p. 212).

So in counterpoint with Rousseau’s views on melody, grounded in the logocentric privilege of speech and its archaeo-teleology involving song, “music” emerges as an exclusionary principle. It takes shape as a conception that cannot embrace song fully but instead must overlap partially and uncomfortably with it, denying some versions of it its name. This “music” is an exemplary outgrowth of Western metaphysics, one anticipated in views earlier than Rousseau’s and greatly enhanced in later ones—and given a positive, not negative, valence in most of those enhancements. It is an ideological mechanism whose
operation will eventually drown out whole realms of others’ singing. The supplementary equivocation so marked in Rousseau’s construction of song is a control for turning down the machine.

In separating song from speech, Rousseau’s evolution of music tends to separate song from poetry as well. It proposes for the kinds of song it embraces a system of intervals that, as we have noted, distinguishes civilized song from savage utterance. By the same token, it pushes poetry closer to a body of rhetorical theory that historically had been allied more with speech (oratory) than with song. Of this civilized poetry, figurative language—metaphor—has always been a crucial identifying feature: figurative language viewed as a supplementary surplus added onto literal, rational language. For metaphor to exist, there must first be literal meanings that it may displace, transfer, and reorder. Within the ideology of music, poetry is no longer determined by its melody; it is defined by its tropes.

But this poetic phylogeny is undone by a supplementary ambivalence of poetry and metaphor similar to that of song. Following the pastoral mythos I mentioned above, Rousseau identifies poetry with song at the origins of language: “The first tales, the first speeches, the first laws, were in verse. Poetry was devised before prose. That was bound to be, since feelings speak before reason. And so it was bound to be the same with music. At first, there was no music but melody and no other melody than the varied sounds of speech. Accents constituted singing” (Essay, pp. 50–51; quoted in OG, p. 214). Poetry shares with song an intimacy with and fullness of passion not found in more rational speech. It cannot be only a refinement on speech but must simultaneously mark the origin of speech. The early interceding of reason and philosophy between passions and speech is antithetical to poetry and song and threatens to destroy them: when Greece became “full of sophists and philosophers, ... she no longer had any famous musicians or poets. In cultivating the art of convincing, that of arousing the emotions was lost” (Essay, p. 69; quoted in OG, p. 201).

Just as the origin of language was song/poetry, so the earliest language was figurative, not literal. Rousseau develops an elegant historical fable to depict this first language:

Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them giants. After many experiences, he recognizes that these so-called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he. Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially attached to the word giant. So he invents another name common to them and to him, such as the name man, for example, and leaves giant to the false object that had impressed
him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word is born before the literal word. (Essay, p. 13; quoted in OG, p. 276)

Metaphor is thus imbued with supplementary ambivalence: it is at once a de-rationalizing ornament added as surplus to rational speech and a primal link between language and passion before rational speech. Rousseau writes: “As man’s first motives for speaking were of the passions, his first expressions were tropes. Figurative language was the first to be born. Proper meaning was discovered last. One calls things by their true name only when one sees them in their true form. At first only poetry was spoken; there was no hint of reasoning until much later” (Essay, p. 12; quoted in OG, p. 271).

Here again, as in the case of the linkage of melody and speech, Rousseau turns to the “barbarians” of his own world for an example: “The genius of oriental languages, the oldest known, absolutely refutes the assumption of a didactic progression in their development. These languages are not at all systematic or rational. They are vital and figurative” (Essay, p. 11; quoted in OG, p. 273). Imprecision and irrationality of style are linked with less-than-fully-civilized languages. (And not only by Rousseau; Condillac made the same association in his Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines, as Derrida noted, and offered an example we will recall in considering Mexican song: “Even now, in the southern parts of Asia, pleonasms are considered as an elegance of speech.” See OG, p. 273.) But at the same time imprecise, irrational metaphor forms a truer expressive language than any rational speech.

In this the poetry of primitive language would seem to be exalted above modern, theorized poetry, just as primitive song could seem more authentic than civilized song (or music). Except that by an imperious sleight of hand Rousseau allows himself an escape: “The illusory image presented by passion is the first to appear, and the language that corresponded to it was also the first invented. It subsequently became metaphorical when the enlightened spirit, recognizing its first error, used the expressions only with those passions that had produced them” (Essay, p. 13; quoted in OG, p. 276). Enlightened Europeans created metaphor, even though savages had first naturally deployed it, by joining it only with the passions appropriate to it. Derrida remarks of this quotation: “The Essay thus describes at the same time the advent of the metaphor and its ‘cold’ recapture within rhetoric” (OG, p. 276). There is more at stake here than a chronological narrative, however. In a movement exemplary of the whole European construction of others over the last half millen-
nium, Rousseau attributes metaphor to savages even as he withdraws it from them, recovering it for control by Europeans. He allows savages to construct their linguistic world, but with tools delimited and defined by Europeans. The strategy sits at the heart also of poetic/aesthetic readings of Mexican song, as I will relate. Meanwhile it is important to remember that Rousseau’s movement is a slight of hand, not a substantive resolution of the dilemma of the supplement. He recovers tropes for civilized peoples by means of their ability to use them “only with those passions that had produced them.” But where in his conception of primitive language use was there the possibility of savages misusing tropes, that is, aligning them with passions inappropriate to them?

Rousseau’s views of writing, finally, are caught up in much the same dilemmas of supplementarity as his views of song, poetry, and metaphor. Here it is the pictograph that stands in place of cherished melody, the alphabet in place of despised harmony. This devaluing of alphabetism is unexpected. In Rousseau’s logocentrism, writing as a whole is an addition to speech that more or less distantly reflects the presence embodied in it. Alphabetic writing is the calculus that comes closest to retrieving the spoken accent. It is phonography, an inscription of speech sounds themselves and hence closer to the presence of speech than other writing systems. For this reason, as we have seen, it is for Rousseau the most advanced writing, appropriate to “civilized people.”

But what of a writing that elides the signifying distance between speech and things? Pictography, if it claims no ability to inscribe sounds, inscribes things themselves. It writes gestures, which for Rousseau constituted a preverbal language, universal and independent of convention, in which primitive people expressed their needs and, less so, their passions. The original speech/song of these peoples was, in the historical scheme of the Essay, a supplement to earlier communicative gesture that arose in order to express passions more fully and effectively than gesture could (see the Essay, chaps. 1–2). If, as Derrida writes (p. 301), both pictography and phonography tend to efface themselves as signifiers in the presence of the things they signify, those things are nevertheless different in status for Rousseau. The modern spoken word signified by the conventions of alphabetic writing is farther from the passional origins of language than the gesture signified by a pictograph. As Rousseau puts it in the Essay, “The primitive way of writing was not to represent sounds, but objects themselves whether directly, as with the Mexicans, or by allegorical imagery, or as the Egyptians did in still other ways. This stage
corresponds to passionate language” (Essay, p. 17; quoted in OG, p. 237).

So while phonography is the writing closest to modern speech, it has already taken a step with that speech away from the articulation of passion at the source of languages. And this is a step larger than the step taken by pictography/gesture. Or, in the language of supplementarity: writing can be both a surplus brought to speech, recording its sound, and the record of a pre-phonic substitute for speech at or before its origin, namely gesture. Pictography can displace speech, substituting for it at the point of its emergence from gesture—at the very point, that is, where speech was still song. An alliance of song and pictography emerges from the supplementary play of Rousseau’s historical schema. The writing that touches this preverbal origin, that approaches more closely than phonography the primordial presence of passion, is not civilized writing but the writing of savages. It is the very savagery of pictography that ensures its priority over the purest, most authentic speech. The play of the supplement again renders equivocal Europe’s judgments of savage others.

In the play of the supplement the demand of metaphysics for an unequivocal, unilateral, and universal positioning of song, writing, metaphor, and poetry is undone. The working of logocentrism, which would make those things familiar by setting them in fixed, immobile relation to speech—a relation, usually, of devalued accretion—is replaced by a different operation of fluid interrelations between speech and its others. In their supplementary mobility they refuse to be tamed by metaphysics, standing outside the meanings found for them within it in an ineffable flux of différance.

Song’s uncanny otherness from speech—an otherness lurking (if quietly) near the heart of many musicological endeavors—thus par-takes of the alterity and différance hardwired in the grammatological structure of meaning. Poetry, too, is understood now neither as a canonized “literature” nor as “primitive” song itself, object of nostalg-ic European attempts at capture and literary domestication, but rather as any number of heightened utterances that will always slip, in some measure, out of reach of either of these Western projects. This slippage means that the alterity of song and poetry cannot be assuaged from within metaphysics, by appeal to code words like “aesthetics,” “the sublime,” or even “music.”

Neither will it be assuaged by the development, parallel to and as it were from within alphabetic writing, of separate writing systems for song (i.e., music notations). As westerners have understood and deployed these, they work within the ideology of music to separate
song and poetry and fix the relations between them. By the same motion they assimilate poetry to speech, to speech’s own, limited writing (alphabetism), and to its “literatures.” In the encounter of non-European others, music notations arise—we will see two examples later—as a function of an absence within alphabetism, an outgrowth of the egregious insufficiency of phonetic writing to encompass the otherness of song/poetry. Music notations work in intimate complicity with the logocentrism that has determined our orderings of speech, song, and writing. They record and represent from within these Western orders, in the process excluding other musical writings that do not. Which is finally only to say that music notations, like the other phenomena we have treated here, must find their own supplementary flux. They instance once more the basic lesson ethnohistorians might draw from Of Grammatology: to create and define savages it is enough to rely on Western metaphysics; to converse with others we need to embrace the logic of the supplement.

*Mexican Song Captured/The Supplement Repressed*

Since the sixteenth century the ideological patterns of logocentrism have shaped European views of indigenous Americans. They have worked steadily to impose on Americans regimes of communication that have no necessary indigenous resonance. Controlled within these regimes, native cultures could be evaluated according to teleological evolutionary schemes more and more firmly associated with the regimes across the last four centuries. This is what is at stake in the European domestication of Mexican utterance: it is a broadly dispersed discursive adjunct—the most fundamental discursive adjunct, I believe—to the European conquest, subjugation, colonization, and extermination of native Americans. The logocentric capturing of Mexican utterance began to take shape in sixteenth-century Spanish responses to Mexican speech, song, and writing. It coalesced into a full-fledged (if unselfconscious) offensive on behalf of Western ideologies by the mid-eighteenth century, not coincidentally the era of Rousseau. And it has controlled the range of Western conceptions of indigenous Mexicans ever since.

Here I will sketch only these constraints on Mexican utterance, within the categories of song, poetry, metaphor, and writing that have emerged from my reading of Derrida. I am interested not so much in the substance of individual debates over Mexican poetry, writing, and the like as in the more basic assumptions reflected in them. These assumptions unite most if not all the parties to the debates, but they
also foreshorten their views. For the Western capturing of Aztec utterance reflects the West’s fundamental failure to comprehend the categories by which it has extended its control. In this way it portrays our repression of supplementary logic.9

The logocentric regime is most evident in the case of writing. Almost from the first moment of contact the Europeans worried over Mexican picture writing. The most common way of familiarizing this threateningly unknown script was by assimilating it to a cryptic writing nearer to home: Egyptian hieroglyphs. Peter Martyr pointed up the similarities of the two systems as early as 1530 (Decade IV; see Keen, p. 64), only nine years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, and they were raised again by numerous writers over the next two centuries (by André Thevet, for example, in his Cosmographie universelle of 1575; see Keen, p. 152). At least by the middle of the seventeenth century, however, the attempt to identify the two systems was challenged. The Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, always ready to express (at length) a view on any arcane topic, denied that Mexican pictographs carried the kind of secret meanings Egyptian hieroglyphs did (Oedipus Aegyptiacus, 1652–54; see Keen, p. 268). But the gulf opened here between Mexican and Egyptian writing did not undermine the familiarizing intent behind their earlier identification. Instead it marked the Western consolidation of an evaluative scale of writing systems in which Mexican pictography could be at once familiarized and devalued. The scale was accepted as the basis for discussion both by writers who adopted Kircher’s dismissive attitude toward Mexican writing, like Cornelius de Pauw (Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, 1768; see Keen, p. 261), and by those others, like Juan José de Egüiara y Eguren (Biblioteca mexicana, 1755; Keen, p. 224), Gian Riccardo Carli (Lettere americane, 1780; Keen, p. 271), or Francisco Javier Clavigero (Storia antica del Messico, 1780–81; Keen, p. 298), who insisted that the Mexican pictographs were not literal renditions of things but carried symbolic meanings as subtle as those of Egyptian writing.

By the late eighteenth century the full logocentric teleology of writing systems we have seen in Rousseau, from pictography through hieroglyphs and ideographs to alphabetism, was brought to bear on the Western understanding of Mexican writing. William Robertson,

9 This preliminary sketch will reflect my own reading of numerous reports on the Aztecs dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century; but for many other reports I rely for now on information culled especially from Benjamin Keen’s valuable survey The Aztec Image in Western Thought (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971). Further references to Keen will be given in the text.
for example, noted in his *History of America* of 1777 the Mexicans’ inability to progress from pictographs to hieroglyphs and the alphabet; he ascribed it to the brief duration of their empire (see Keen, pp. 281–82). (Robertson subscribed also to a Rousseau-like division of societies into savages, barbarians, and civilized peoples, though he located the Aztecs somewhat higher on this scale than Rousseau did.) It remained only for a rearguard action to defend the Mexicans, emphasizing not only ideographic symbolism in their glyphs but also an incipient phoneticism that had long been recognized in some of the codices. This deciphering of Mexican rebus writing was the work especially of J.-M.-A. Aubin (*Mémoire*, 1849; see Keen, p. 340). It brought the conceptualization of Mexican writing more or less to the point where it remains today in accounts like those of Miguel León-Portilla, with their untroubled distinctions of pictographs, ideographs, and phonetic glyphs.¹⁰

It is perhaps needless to emphasize that views like León-Portilla’s have the power only to shift the Aztecs slightly from one position to another on Rousseau’s scale of linguistic evolution. They have no power to undermine the authority itself of the scale. To do this we need to think again of the supplementary play in Derrida’s notion of writing, which loosens the bond of writing to speech in the Western relation of alphabetic phonography. Writing in this conception can come into meaning through a *différence* that engages orders of reality other than speech differently and more directly than alphabetism. Pictography exemplifies this other *différence*. In a broadened conception of writing it does not take its place in an evolutionary queue, patiently awaiting the forces of enlightenment that will nudge it toward phoneticism. Instead it finds its own set of valences between utterance and the world. We will return below, in an analysis of speech and song glyphs, to these valences as they may have formed in the Mexican world.¹¹

¹⁰ León-Portilla discusses Aztec writing in several works; for a recent overview see his study *The Aztec Image of Self and Society: An Introduction to Nahua Culture*, ed. J. Jorge Klor de Alva (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 52–55.

¹¹ The history of the development of Mesoamerican writing systems may be seen to reverse the logocentric teleology, that is, it moves in the broadest view from the phoneticism of Maya glyphs to the generally iconic usages of Mixtec and Aztec writing. For the outlines of large cultural shifts that may have militated for this history, see John M. D. Pohl, “Mexican Codices, Maps, and Lienzos as Social Contracts,” in *Writing without Words*, ed. Boone and Mignolo, 137–60, esp. 155–56. From such outlines scholarly views of the cultural efficacy (rather than inadequacy) of post-Classic Mesoamerican writing are beginning to emerge.
Mexican song and poetry too were brought under the sovereignty of logocentric thought. More precisely: Mexican song was incorporated into this reign by means of the European invention of Aztec poetry and music. The logocentric repression of song’s ambivalent supplementarity was the driving force of this invention. It came more and more to enforce, across the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, a Europeanized view of Mexican song as a compound of speech and a separate, more or less straightforward addition to it. It distributed Mexican song across two familiar Western discursive practices. In the process it obscured less familiar ties to other forms of utterance and to the world that might have made Mexican song meaningful in its indigenous contexts. It ushered what is most accessible to the West in Mexican song into the realm of poetry, aligned in the early-modern period especially with oratory and in later centuries more and more with a new category, Literature. (It is a poignant irony that the voices of a civilization so often dismissed for its lack of letters should ultimately be coopted under the imprimatur of Literature.) In so doing, the repression of supplementarity set apart the elements of Mexican song “added” to speech—its songish elements, so to speak—as a substandard, primitive, and in any case essentially unknowable form of another Western category, Music.

This Western dissection of Mexican song set in slowly after the first Euro-American contacts. Some of the earliest Europeans in Mexico, men like the clergyman Vasco de Quiroga, could hear in native song echoes of the pastoral Golden Age that would later unsettle Rousseau’s evolutionary schemes. The most substantial accounts from the sixteenth century, some of them almost ethnographic in their on-the-scene observation and detailed reportage on society and culture, adopt a related stance. Toribio de Benavente alias Motolinía, Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán, and others of this period depict Mexican song as an activity integrated in a broader setting of (idolatrous) festival, ceremony, and religious observance. They tend not to use words like “poetry” and “music,” preferring to call the songs cantares and to refer to the usual ensemble of dance, song, and drumming by means of the Taino-derived word areito.12

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12 For Quiroga’s references to Mexican song, from his legal brief of 1535 entitled “Información en derecho,” see Vasco de Quiroga, La Utopía en América, ed. Paz Serrano Gassent (Madrid: Historia 16, 1992), 218; also Keen, The Aztec Image, 108. For Motolinía’s account see Memoriales de Fray Toribio de Motolinía, ed. Luis García Pimentel (Mexico: published by the editor, 1903), bk. 2, chap. 26; although it remained unpublished until Pimentel’s edition, this account was widely dispersed, being echoed in Francisco López de Gómara’s Historia de las Indias y conquista de Mexico.
Already in the waning sixteenth century, however, perhaps as the shock of unfamiliarity of Mexican society wore off, European observers began to graft their own categorical distinctions of poetry and music onto autochthonous practices. Diego Muñoz Camargo, writing his Historia de Tlaxcala in the last quarter of the century, assimilated the Nahuatl language to European poetic traditions, extolling it in part because “one can easily compose verses in [it] according to the rules of meter and scansion” (quoted in Keen, p. 129). Michele Zappullo, writing in 1603 in the vein of condemnatory writers like Francisco López de Gómara, asserted that the Mexicans possessed neither music nor letters, in one motion dismissing the Mexicans and imposing on them the European division of the two (see his Historie di quattro principali città del mondo, cited in Keen, pp. 140–41). By the middle of the next century the Europeanized view was prevalent. Eguíara y Eguren celebrated “the love of the Mexicans for poetry and oratory” (quoted in Keen, p. 224). And Joseph Joaquín Granados y Gálvez, in his dialogues of 1778 entitled Tardes americanas, discussed separately and at some length ancient Mexican music and poetry. On the one side he praised the consonance and melodiousness of the music, its ensemble of voices and instruments ably concerted so as not to overwhelm the words, and its varied and delightful melodic figures capable of inducing ecstasy in its listeners. He compared the Mexican musicians to celebrated musicians of ancient Greece, and he distinguished three styles of Mexican “compositions,” warlike, pathetic, and grave, that clearly enough harken back to Platonic descriptions of modal ethos. Although he could not find in Mexican poetry all the genres practiced in the ancient European world, he succeeded in locating at least the “mathematical” (i.e., astronomical) style of

of 1552 (see Robert Stevenson, Music in Aztec and Inca Territory [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968], 105) and taken over almost verbatim in Juan de Torquemada’s massive Monarchia indiana of 1615 (see the facsimile reprint of the 1723 edition [Mexico, 1943], bk. 14, chap. 11). Sahagún’s remarks on song are scattered through his huge Nahuatl compilation known as the Florentine Codex (see Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, ed. and trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 12 vols. [Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research and University of Utah Press, 1950–82]) and his Spanish Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España, ed. Angel María Garibay K. (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1956), abstracted from the Florentine Codex; for particularly rich descriptions of song and dance in situ see the accounts of merchants’ banquets in either work, book 9, chaps. 8–10. For Durán’s account, from his Historia de las Indias de Nueva-España e islas de la tierra firme, see Stevenson, Music in Aztec and Inca Territory, 109–10. Stevenson’s book gives a useful overview of many early accounts on pp. 85–120.
Manilius, the tragic and comic modes of Seneca and Euripides, and the heroic style of Silius Italicus.\(^\text{13}\)

By the end of the nineteenth century, finally, in the wake of intensive new source studies led by Eduard Seler and Francisco del Paso y Troncoso and with the recovery, of paramount significance, of the manuscript of alphabetized Nahuatl song texts entitled *Cantares mexicanos*, Mexican utterance was well on the road to consolidation under the aegis of Literature. The capstone of this whole logocentric co-option and domestication would wait another half century. Father Angel María Garibay K.’s monumental *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*, published in 1953–54, divided and classified prehispanic Mexican speech/song according to the Western genres that had defined Literature in the first place: religious poetry, dramatic poetry, epic poetry, lyric poetry, didactic prose, historical prose, and fiction (“imaginative prose”). Meanwhile pre-Hispanic “music” was left in its own Western camp, the province of conservatory-oriented orchestral composers with a nationalist and archaeological bent like Carlos Chávez.

The European invention of Aztec music and poetry depended on the denial of song’s supplementary dualism, on the preeminence of its supplementing-by-addition to speech and the submergence of its supplementing-by-substitution for speech. But this second *différence* of song was not entirely repressed; its propensity to surface unexpectedly is signaled, after all, in the possibility of views like Vasco de Quiroga’s.

Another such surfacing occurs in the *Idea de una nueva historia general de la América septentrional* of Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci (1746), a précis for a larger work on ancient Mexico never completed. The extraordinary importance for Mexican studies of Boturini’s work was signaled at some length by Benjamin Keen in *The Aztec Image in Western Thought*; it remains to be fully explored. Moreover, the significance of the *Idea* extends well beyond its subject matter: it is a bellwether of European conceptions of the speaking, singing, and writing of others. Boturini’s small book marks the advent in European studies of the Americas of a full-fledged Rousseau-like aporia concerning song.

Boturini did not entangle himself in song’s supplementary ambivalence by direct contact with Rousseau’s thought but rather by reading an earlier work important in forming Rousseau’s ideas as well: the *Scienza nuova* of Giambattista Vico (1725). Boturini borrowed from

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\(^{13}\) See Joseph Joaquín Granados y Gálvez, *Tardes americanas: Gobierno gentil y católico: Breve y particular noticia de toda la historia indiana* (Mexico, 1778), 88–90.
Vico a whole historical philosophy that divided societal evolution into three ages, the divine, the heroic, and the human or rational. He took over the idea that all societies pass, independently of one another, through these ages in their evolutions and thus that all societies share a common developmental history. Armed with these notions Boturini proclaimed the autonomous achievements of Mexican culture and combatted diffusionist views, current in his day, that linked them all to some time-shrouded dependence of Americans on Europeans. Most importantly, Boturini borrowed Vico’s conception of knowledge in the divine and heroic ages as distinct stages in a pre-rational “poetic wisdom.” This wisdom, in Vico’s view, shaped every aspect of society and thought—logic, morals, economy, politics, and physics, to give some of Vico’s categories. It took the forms of poetry, fables, and hieroglyphic writing, and was superseded by natural reason only in the third, human age. Following the lead of Vico’s poetic wisdom, Boturini in his Idea gave an emphasis to songs and pictographic writings that was probably unprecedented in earlier Mexican studies.\(^14\)

But Boturini did not accept Vico’s estimation of the historical age that American societies had attained at the time of the European invasions; from this his difficulties sprang. Whereas Vico regarded the Americans as still in the heroic age, Boturini wished to portray them (or at least the Mexicans) as more advanced. He located all three of Vico’s ages in the history of Mexico, dating the last of them from the establishment of Toltec society in 660 c.e. In the process he extolled the sophistication of their writing, the truths garbed as fables in their pantheon of gods and their tlamoxtli or divine book, and the refinement and subtlety of their poetry. On this last point he was unequivocal; once he completed his history, he claimed, European “poets would drink, in the cantares, the nectar of the Indian Parnassus.” Boturini devoted most of a lengthy chapter to the Mexican cantares. He ascribed them to poets of the heroic age, distinguished their different genres according to European models, and described

the poetic means, including their “elevated metaphors and allegories,” that made them “una optima Poesía.” And he singled out for special praise the poems of the Texcocan king Nezahualcoyotl.\(^\text{15}\)

Boturini’s dilemma is all too clear: How can the Mexicans have traversed some eight centuries of their Viconian human and rational age and still embody the truths of their culture in the pre-rational form of poetic wisdom? How can primordial poetic wisdom display all the aestheticized refinement and evolutionary unfolding of “una optima Poesía”? How can a voice like Nezahualcoyotl’s represent so manifestly the poetic, heroic age almost a millennium after the end of that age? Vico portrays song unilaterally, as the collective voice of the peoples of divine and heroic societies. Boturini, in wishing both to see it as such and to assert the rational attainments of the Mexicans, instead broaches the supplementary dualism of song that would soon plague Rousseau. The cantares, for him, bear the dual burden of aboriginal utterance and post-rational refinement.

Metaphor is the final Western construct that has captured and held Aztec utterance. The earliest European notices of Mexican songs already called attention to their frequent and difficult metaphors. Diego Durán wrote that “all their cantares are made up of such obscure metaphors that there is hardly anyone who understands them.” Sahagún also reported on the obscure meanings of songs he knew, though for him this amounted to Satan’s attempt to conceal their idolatry. He reserved the word metaphoras—and the Nahuatl coinage machiotlabtollī (approximately “sign-speech”) that he used interchangeably with it—for his admiring observations on the buehuetlatabtollī, the “elders’ talk” or ritualistic speeches delivered on various civic and domestic occasions. The mestizo chronicler Juan Bautista Pomar, writing his Relación de Texcoco in 1585 and probably himself the compiler of a collection of cantares entitled Romances de los señores de la Nueva España, closely related to the Cantares mexicanos, admired the many truths to be gleaned from such songs but admitted that it required a “great linguist” to understand their images. Another mestizo writer, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a descendant of the kings of Texcoco and the first great propagandist for their wisdom and learning, absorbed European conceptions of poetry and figurative language from the Franciscans at their College of Tlatelolco. He

\(^{15}\text{For Vico’s views on Americans, see for example The New Science, 116–17, 142–43, 414. Boturini’s “Indian Parnassus” remark is on p. 160 of the Idea; the cantares are discussed in chapter 15. For one of the earliest accounts of Nezahualcoyotl’s songwriting abilities, see Torquemada, Monarchia indiana, bk. 2, chap. 45.}\)
described the songs as “very obscure, being allegorical in form and adorned with metaphors and other figures of speech.”

Later writers continued to call attention to the metaphors of Nahuatl songs, whether admiringly or with the view that they reflected the roundabout expression of an impoverished language. Particularly in the latter, negative assessment we are reminded of Condillac on the imprecisions and pleonasms of less-than-fully-civilized languages. In the coexistence of both views we are brought again to face the duality of metaphor-as-supplement. Figurative language is a pre-rational confusion of savage and barbarous tongues and, at the same time, a civilized transcendence of reason in poetry. (Or again, in Rousseau’s imperious attempt to resolve the dilemma, it is a natural impulse not meriting the name “metaphor” until brought under European control.)

It was left for Garibay to exalt the positive interpretation of Mexican metaphor and dispel the last suspicions of Nahuatl expressive inadequacy. He did so, not unexpectedly, by bringing Nahuatl metaphors under the umbrella of a Western aesthetic made universal (in language that looks all the way back to the seventeenth-century theorist of metaphor Emanuele Tesauro): “The metaphor is the mother of all beauty. In essence it comes to be the nucleus of all poetry. . . . Nahuatl poems teem with [metaphors].” But in effect this only reiterates Rousseau’s evasion of metaphor’s supplementarity through the arrogation of all metaphor to Europe. Metaphor, for Garibay, is not a speech-act that might be rethought at or beyond the boundaries of Europe’s “poetry.” It is, instead, the very engine of the poetic ideology.

And it is a powerful engine. Garibay’s conception of Nahuatl metaphors has been dispersed by now through many accounts,

16 Durán’s quotation comes from his Historia de las Indias de Nueva-España; I take it from Angel María Garibay K., Historia de la literatura náhuatl, 2 vols. (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1953–54), i:74; see also the translation of this passage in its larger context in Stevenson, Music in Aztec and Inca Territory, 109–10. For Sahagúin see his Florentine Codex, ed. Anderson and Dibble, i:81. Pomar’s remark is quoted by John Bierhorst in Cantares mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 171; Ixtilxochitl’s Relaciones históricas are quoted by Keen, p. 199.

17 See for instance Boturini, Idea, 2, 6, 88, 96, 162; Granados y Gálvez, Tardes americanas, 94; and Thomas F. Gordon, History of Ancient Mexico (1832), cited in Keen, The Aztec Image, 350.

18 For example Francisco G. Cosmes, La dominación española y la patria mexicana (Mexico, 1896); Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, in Désiré Charnay, Cités et ruines américaines (Paris, 1863); and Edward J. Payne, History of the New World Called America (London, 1904); all cited in Keen, The Aztec Image, 435, 438, and 445 respectively.

19 Garibay, Historia 1:76; my translation.
scholarly and popular, of Aztec culture. To judge from these, its attraction is the result especially of a specific technique Garibay identified as the essence of Nahuatl figurative language. He called this technique *difrasismo* or diphrasis.20 It is the joining of two concepts in grammatical conjunction to signify a third: for example, *in atl in tepetl*, literally meaning something close to “water and hill” but metaphorically “town” or “settlement.” The most famous of the *difrasismos* Garibay identified is an expression that, for his followers, came to signify poetry itself in indigenous culture: *in xochitl in cuicatl*, approximately “flower and song.”

In this technique of diphrasis Garibay banished any negative valuation of Nahuatl pleonasms. He upheld the literary status and the figurative subtlety of Mexican “poetry” and even found for it an indigenous name. Some of his followers have gone farther. Writers like Birgitta Leander, Luis Alveláíis Pozos, and, most importantly, Miguel León-Portilla have seen in the metaphorical naming of poetry the reflection of a whole indigenous humanism and aestheticism. They have linked this view of life built around *xochicuicatl* to the great university supposedly sponsored at Texcoco by Nezahualcoyotl and his son Nezahualpilli, the story of which is traceable back through Boturini’s *Idea* and other sources to Ixtlilxochitl. And they have seen in the figures of these Texocan rulers poet-philosophers embodying universal wisdom in their songs and opposed to the militarism and sacrifice of neighboring Tenochtitlan. In Davíd Carrasco’s summary of this interpretation, the poet-philosophers “used language, instead of blood, to communicate and make offerings to the gods. . . . They preserved honored traditions, produced and read the painted manuscripts, and developed refined metaphors and poems to probe the true foundations of human existence.” They devised “techniques to open the depths of the human personality to the illusive world of truth. The main technique was the creation of *in xochitl, in cuicatl*, or flowers and songs.”21

20 Ibid., 1:18–19.
The linchpin of this construction of Aztec poetic humanism has been the *Cantares mexicanos*, the most important of the few collections of song texts in alphabetized Nahuatl surviving from the sixteenth century. This is true not least because the headings of some of the *cantares* have encouraged some scholars to consider them the work of the Texcocan kings and other like-minded rulers. It is true also because the *Cantares mexicanos* is a chief source, along with the other, closely related collection of song texts mentioned above, the *Romances*, of the diphrasis and *xochicuicatl* imagery singled out by Garibay and basic to León-Portilla’s poetic humanism. So even those scholars—writers like David Damrosch—who do not put much stock in the ascriptions of particular *cantares* to specific pre-Hispanic rulers nevertheless tend to ground their readings of the texts in León-Portilla’s and Leander’s humanism, aestheticism, and belles-lettresim.22

Among post-Garibay writers on the *cantares*, only John Bierhorst has seriously challenged the ideology of metaphor and poetry imposed on them. In his transcription, translation, and analysis of the song texts he advanced an interpretation of them as “ghost-songs” intended, in the manner of certain more recent native North American practices, to revive spirits of dead heroes to combat the Spaniards. Bierhorst dismissed the pre-Hispanic authorship of the *cantares*, dating most of them from well into the colonial period. He questioned the tradition of ascribing poems to Nezahualcoyotl and other pre-Cortesian luminaries. He even doubted whether the use of *in xochitl in cuicatl* to mean “poetry” reaches any farther back than Garibay himself.23

While Bierhorst’s transcriptions of the *cantares* have been recognized as authoritative, his translations and ghost-song interpretation were immediately controversial. James Lockhart and León-Portilla both have condemned them, and they have found little general acceptance.24 Largely forgotten in the hubbub of interpretive particulars, however, has been the value of Bierhorst’s project as an ideological corrective to earlier views. Here at last is an attempt to understand the *cantares* as an indigenous colonial discourse, a discourse of resistance in which the Mexica tried to construct an

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efficacious vision of the strangers among them. In this interpretation Bierhorst seeks to understand the *cantares* as embodiments of other-than-European ideologies. Admittedly his effort imposes on the Mexica more recent discourses of resistance native to North America; in moving against the overlaying of European ideology on the *cantares* he substitutes another ideology not necessarily so much closer to the Mexica, with little evidence for doing so other than his willful reading of the texts themselves. But the importance of his gesture should not be underestimated.

The supplementary analysis of metaphor opens a space where we can see other alternatives than Bierhorst’s to the European captivity of the *cantares*. To come up against Rousseau’s aporia is to begin to sense the westernizing power of metaphor and to question the preeminence it has had in Western conceptions of Aztec figurative language. It is to scrutinize the relations of language to the world imposed by the discovery of metaphors in the speech of others. It is to wonder whether the dichotomy of literal and figurative all told is as transparent and universal as the preeminence of metaphor makes it seem. All of which issues a question of some importance to postcolonial historiography: *Has the history of European-American colonialism, with its enforcement of Western metaphysics, been a history also of the imposition of metaphorical views of language, psyche, and the world on different indigenous views?*15

Let us retrace another route toward the same question. The poststructuralist view of language as infinite sign-chain, with meaning produced in deferral from one sign to another, might also challenge the preeminence of metaphor in Western conceivings of others. In its tropological operation metaphor would seem to match better the leap from signifier to signified of Saussurean semiology than the slippage from signifier to signifier of grammatology. The very proximity of the signs between which meaning arises in grammatology suggests that another trope will be more broadly helpful in comprehending different language uses, a trope of displacement from one entity to other contiguous ones: metonymy. The pervasive metaphoricity of modern Western culture might well be a measure of our inability to perceive

15 One recent writer who would answer this question with a resounding “yes” is Eric Cheyfitz. In *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from “The Tempest” to “Tarzan”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) he opposes views broached in recent years that metaphor works as a figure of intercultural communication, and he traces some of the ways European perceptions of and actions toward indigenous Americans were driven by metaphorical conceptions of language. See chap. 6, esp. pp. 104–9.
propinquitites of the world apparent in many other cultural settings. Perceiving these contacts between things might be a matter of traversing the world linguistically in a different way than we customarily do, of linking signs with signs rather than separating them, indeed finally of collapsing together the realm of signs and the realm of things. A shift of emphasis from metaphor to metonymy might begin to enable some of these other shifts.

The Cantares Deferred

To pursue this shift to metonymy we might start from the Cantares mexicanos and summarize some of the effects of the most basic European technology at work in them: the technology of the alphabet. The transformation of spoken or sung Nahuatl into alphabetized words—performed utterance into fixed inscription—enforces various regimes of Western writing on the Nahuatl songs. At the local level these include a solidification of the distinction and individuality of single words that is alien to the plasticity and flexibility brought about in spoken Nahuatl by complex procedures of agglutination and compounding; a tendency to arrange words according to the dictates of Latinate syntax; a crystallization of the inscribed space so as to create a desired “poetic form”; and a coercive and distorting distinction of semantic elements from “meaningless” vocables.

Let me briefly pursue the last of these points, by way of exemplifying how a new kind of engagement with the cantares texts might challenge Western assumptions that have heretofore been unquestioningly applied to them. Table 1 gives the beginning of one of the cantares in two formats: in a transcription adapted from Bierhorst’s and in Bierhorst’s translation. In the transcription I have inserted underlining borrowed from an “analytical transcription” of the song Bierhorst published in a companion volume to the Cantares mexicanos. These underlines indicate what Bierhorst, in the introductory notes to his analytical transcription, calls “meaningless song syllables, or vocables”; as a glance through that transcription shows, they are found frequently in almost all the cantares. But they are omitted from his translation, as indeed they were omitted from Daniel Brinton’s

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26 Here this account will be brief. In forthcoming work I will enlarge on it through a closer reading of the cantares.

### Table 1

Beginning of Song 44 from John Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription with Underscored “Song Syllables”</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nican ompehua Teponacuicatl.</td>
<td>Here begin log-drum songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tico, tico, toco toto, aub ic ontlantiuh cuicatl Tiquiti</td>
<td>Tico tico toco toto. And when the song ends: tiquiti titito tititi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tollanaya huapacalli manca noçan in mahmani coataquetzalli ya</td>
<td>In Tollan stood a house of beams. Still standing are the serpent columns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. quiyacauhtehuac Nacxitl topiltzin on quiquihtzica ye choquililo in</td>
<td>Nacxitl Topiltzin left it when he went away. Now our princes are bewailed with conch horns. Now he goes to his destruction yonder in Tlapallan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. topiltzuan ahuan ye yahu in polihuiuh nechcan tlapallan ho ay.</td>
<td>Yonder you are passing through Cholollan. The land of Poyauhtecatl he traverses, and Acallan. Now our princes are bewailed with conch horns. Now be goes to his destruction yonder in Tlapallan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. and when the song ends: tiquiti titito tititi.</td>
<td>Gone is my lord Ihuital. Matlacxochitl has left me in bereavement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tollanaya huapacalli manca noçan in mahmani coataquetzalli ya</td>
<td>That the mountain collapses, I weep. That the sands have risen, I grieve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. quiyacauhtehuac Nacxitl topiltzin on quiquihtzica ye choquililo in</td>
<td>Gone is my lord Ihuital. Matlacxochitl has left me in bereavement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. topiltzuan ahuan ye yahu in polihuiuh nechcan tlapallan ho ay.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Nechcyan chollon oncan tonquiçay poyauhtecatilan in quiyapanahuiya y acallan on quiquihtzica ye choquililo et4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. and when the song ends: tiquiti titito tititi.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pioneering attempt to translate some of the cantares a century ago.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, the nonsemantic status of such syllables in the cantares has been accepted in all the commentaries on the songs I have seen.\textsuperscript{29}

But what does it mean to deny meaning to these syllables? How can we draw the line so confidently between significance and insignificance in Mexican song? The complications of doing so are not very apparent in the case of syllables added to the end of a “verse” (see, e.g., line 11). But they come into full view when the syllables are prefixed, infixed, or suffixed to sentence-words themselves. Such altered Nahuatl sentence-words inhabit a liminal space between Nahuatl sense and European nonsense that should undermine the confidence with which we demarcate either, even in ostensibly simpler cases.

Look at five instances in Table 1: in line 12 niyaychocaya is derived from nickoca, “I weep,” by the infixing of yay and the suffixing of ya; in line 10 nechyaicnocauhyan comes from teciochauyin, “he/she leaves someone in sorrow,” with the addition of ya and yan; in line 5 quiyacautebhuac builds on tecaubtehua, “he/she goes away or dies and leaves someone”; in lines 7–8 tonquiçaya and quiyapanahuia are both derived through the addition of ya from simpler sentence-words meaning something like “he/she passes through/ across” (quiza and panahuia respectively). In all five cases the added syllables seem to touch the sense of departure, passing, and bereavement that any attempt at translation, however problematic, would recognize in this song text. Far from being Bierhorst’s “meaningless song syllables,” in other words, they sit at or near the semantic heart of the song. They are extragrammatical, in this sense nonsyntactic, but profoundly meaningful. Moreover other syllables to which Bierhorst assigns meaning carry a much less distinct semantic charge than they do (the om- of ompehua in the heading of the song, for example, is a variant of the ubiquitous Nahuatl prefix on-, which carries a subtle suggestion of rhetorical or directional emphasis). Distinct Western categories of significance and insignificance are breached by such examples.

At the broadest level the alphabetization of the cantares works to fix these songs on a Western grid of relations between language and the

\textsuperscript{28} Daniel G. Brinton, trans. and ed., \textit{Ancient Nahuatl Poetry, Containing the Nahuatl Text of XXVII Ancient Mexican Songs} (Philadelphia, 1890; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1969); for the present \textit{cantar} see 104–5.

world. It connects the songs to a network of our assumptions about reading including the dual nature of language, spoken (or sung) and written, and the primacy, within the written, of alphabetic technology. It encourages the comprehension of these songs as literature—written poetry the loss of whose sung medium affects its meaning in no essential way. And it embeds the songs in a system of graphemes that, despite their own materiality, give themselves over as representing reality rather than participating materially in it.

But, as I have stressed, the relations of other writing systems to the world might well be different, and this difference might involve altered degrees of material participation in the world. In the indigenous Mexican context, while there clearly existed distinctions of speech (tlabtoll), and song (cuicatl), of speech and painting (tlabcuiloll), it is not clear that anything like our distinction of speech and writing existed. Or that it could have existed, given the differing valences of pictographs and alphabet. The relations between spoken or sung enunciation and the pictographic codices might be conceived better in other terms: as relations of speech/song and pictures of material things, or speech/song and color, or speech/song and counting, or speech/song and embodied memory-of-the-people. Moreover, while our dichotomy of speech and alphabetic writing tends to divorce language from the material world, in all these other dichotomies pictographic inscription pulls vocal enunciation toward a material immersion in the world: toward pictures of things sacred and palpable, toward the differently colored realms and associations of Aztec cosmogony, toward counting objects as opposed to manipulating abstract numbers (Nahuatl numeration builds object-names into the words for numbers in order to suggest the kind of object being counted in a given circumstance), and toward the geographical history of the migration and self-definition of the Mexica. In the most general terms, as John Monaghan has recently emphasized in regard to Mixtec codices, the relations of utterance and painting might need to be rethought as connections of bodily gesture, of a whole system of linguistic, pictographic, and danced choreography with an elaborate semantics of its own.

30 On this topic see, in general, Gruziński, La Colonisation de l'imaginaire, chap. 1 and, for persistent cultural differences in the later colonial period, chap. 7.
31 See Monaghan, “The Text in the Body,” esp. 87–91. Monaghan argues from linguistic evidence that dance, in Mixtec understanding, was a kind of embodied singing related to prayer; in thus merging dance with song Monaghan suggests that our customary notion of dance is a Western category in need of a critique similar to mine above of poetry, song, and so on. He does not, however, allow for any separation
In the light of these other affiliations we might reevaluate the westernization of Mexican song by means of metaphor. Where there is less space between language and the world than we habitually presume, there might be all told less room for a figurative distance between words and things. Language might function through its material participation in the world instead of across the abyss between it and the world.\textsuperscript{32} In this situation metaphor, a trope of overleapt distance, might find little congenial soil and give way, once more, to metonymy, a trope of contact and participation: not a metonymy that figuratively betokens a world that is in reality different, but one that is the cipher of the propinquities of the world and language, spoken, sung, or painted—a metonymy that reveals the volumetric presence by which all these forms of language participate in the world.

Such a metonymic conception might help us look anew at another mode of inscribing Mexican song, one closer to indigenous technologies than the alphabet of the \textit{cantares}: the song glyph. Figure 1 reproduces a famous example of a song glyph from the Codex Borbonicus, painted in the valley of Mexico around the time of the Spanish invasion; the glyph in question is the decorated volute or scroll extending from the mouth of the smaller deity pictured. Such elaborate volutes can be found in Mesoamerican pictography at least as far back as the murals of Teotihuacan, dating from the seventh or eighth century C.E.\textsuperscript{33} They are not all specifically song glyphs; in their degree of elaboration they seem, in some uses at least, to convey a gradation of utterance from plain speech through heightened speech to song.

of song and speech within Derrida’s analysis of logocentrism: “But if we are now coming to the realization that these [Mixtec] texts cannot be understood apart from their performance, the focus on song and chant betrays our logocentrism. Were these texts only put into words? Is that the way they were ‘read?’” (p. 89). In this he misses the supplementary role of song in regard to speech I have endorsed above. (For further ramifications of such failure to pry song apart from speech in Derrida’s analysis, see n. 42 below.) A rethinking along Monaghan’s lines for the Nahua culture-areas would start from Alfredo López Austin’s magisterial \textit{The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahua}, trans. Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988); for a study of similar issues in Inca culture with suggestive remarks on sound and song, see Constance Classen, \textit{Inca Cosmology and the Human Body} (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), esp. 68–73.

\textsuperscript{32} The relation between these thoughts and my earlier work on Renaissance occult traditions is clear. In \textit{Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) I discuss views of language that set it clearly apart from the world it describes as emergent early-modern alternatives to linguistic views basic to magical thought.

But I am increasingly convinced that they convey something else more distant than this from our notions of speech writing or music writing. They depict the palpable, worldly volume of indigenous utterance. Their effectiveness as music writing—let us for the moment think of the glyph in Figure 1 as “music notation”—does not reside in their answering to Western requirements of such writing. They do not enable us—and were not intended, I think, to enable those who first viewed them—to re-create more or less precisely some specific
speech-act (or, better, song-act). But to demand that they do so is only to constrain once again the Mexican inscription of song in logocentric bonds; it is to demand that inscription aspire teleologically to the form of a representation of speech from which speech might be exactly reconstructed. I think the glyph in the Borbonicus answers to different affiliations than these and embodies other powers of writing. It conveys through the tangible medium of paint, itself laden with cultural values and meanings we are only beginning to understand, a meeting of sung language and the world in their coextensive material substance. It is not properly music notation but music substantiation.\textsuperscript{34}

In the manuscript of the Cantares mexicanos there appears a music writing closer than this to European expectations. It takes the form of percussion cadences, indicated by the four syllables \textit{ti}, \textit{to}, \textit{qui}, and \textit{co}, between the headings of some of the songs and the song texts themselves (as for instance in Table 1 above). We do not know much about the origins of this syllabic notation. It was clearly dispersed more widely than in this and the related manuscript, the \textit{Romances}, where it appears—widely enough so that by the middle of the seventeenth century a whole genre of colonial Mexican song, the \textit{tocotín}, could be named after it.\textsuperscript{35} It may well reflect pre-Hispanic oral mnemonic practices for teaching, disseminating, and preserving percussion cadences.

But even if it does look back on these nonalphabetic origins, the syllabic system is subtly transformed by its alphabetization. In its alphabetized form in the \textit{cantares} manuscript it comes to be perceived as the product of an absence created by the alphabetization of the song texts themselves. Only their inscription, after all, pries their words apart from their sung medium, which comes then to require a writing of its own. Their writing presses the demand for a music notation answering, however imperfectly, to the European requirement of song-act reconstructibility. In their phonetic writing they prescribe a role for music writing. Music notation in the West is fundamentally defined by this bond to and alienation from alphabetic “word notation”; it is the product of a gap (and hence a felt lacuna) introduced by the alphabet.\textsuperscript{36} On the other hand, in the music notation of the Codex

\textsuperscript{34} I develop this point at greater length in “Unlearning the Aztec Cantares.”

\textsuperscript{35} For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of tocotines, see Bierhorst, \textit{Cantares mexicanos}, 88–90; and Stevenson, \textit{Music in Aztec and Inca Territory}, 165–66.

\textsuperscript{36} Leo Treidler adumbrates this view in stressing that the earliest music notation of Gregorian chant aimed not to define a sequence of pitches but instead to write the melodic inflections of individual syllables of sung words; \textit{The Early History of Music Writing in the West,} this \textit{Journal} 35 (1982): 237–79, esp. 244. These
Borbonicus, the song-volute, there is no such absence. There song is rendered complete, in its full indigenous materiality, but without response to any Western demand for precise reconstitution.

Writing down the syllabic percussive cadences, however, brought them within the gravitational control of European inscriptive technology. In doing so it pervaded them with a European verdict of their inadequacy. The Western expectation that word- and music-writing would aspire to the telos of more-or-less exact speech-act reconstructibility was cleanly mapped onto a system responsive instead to indigenous contexts of ritual preservation and oral/pictographic dissemination. This mapping resulted in the transformation of a Mexican music enunciation (the orally transmitted syllabic cadences) into a European music notation, and carried with it the corollary judgment—almost inevitable, it would seem—that the one is really only a failed version of the other. The sense of this failure suffuses the many scholarly attempts that have been made over the years to “decipher” the syllabic notation of the Cantares mexicanos, to find out “what it really means” so as to reconstruct “how they really played.”

The European control exercised by the writing of the percussive syllables in the Cantares mexicanos might be dramatized by comparison with an even more explicit irruption of European music notation concerning another American locale, this one also linked to an attempt to alphabetize indigenous song. This is the account of Tupi singing from Jean de Léry’s Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil, first published in 1578 and reprinted frequently thereafter. Recently Léry’s book has been a carte de visite of sorts for fascinating meditations on European encounters of Americans by Michel de Certeau, Frank Lestringant, Stephen Greenblatt, and others. De Certeau in particular places the passages recording Léry’s ravishment by Tupi song at the heart of his essay “Ethno-Graphy.” He argues that these moments in Léry’s experience of the Tupi betray in paradigmatic fashion a presence of others’ voices that transgresses ethnographic and historiographic attempts to capture and discipline them through writing. As de Certeau puts it, we cannot fully “replace with a text what only a voice that is other could reveal.” The bodied voices of

inflections were absent, of course, from the alphabetic writing of the chanted words and syllables—an absence recuperated, then, by music notation.

37 See for examples Garibay, Historia 1:80–81; Samuel Martí, Canto, danza y música precortesianas (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1961), 140–48; Stevenson, Music in Aztec and Inca Territory, 46–53; and Bierhorst, Cantares mexicanos, 72–78.
others will always escape full domestication in our writing.38

De Certeau’s conception intersects in numerous ways (if at times obliquely) with Derrida’s critique in Of Grammatology. He shares with Derrida the broad notion that a set of relations between writing and speech has formed Western categories for construing and controlling others. Moreover, the escape he describes of others’ voices from our writing, the surplus by which they always exceed writing, might be understood as the neat converse of writing’s supplementary trumping of speech in Derrida’s account—a grammatology of speech, if you will. But unlike Derrida, in making his dichotomy of speech and writing de Certeau leaves little room for a dichotomy of speech and song. This leads him to elide the two and effectively to deny any supplementary status of song in relation to speech. While he subtly examines the problems of the West’s attempt to form its relations with others through writing, he sees no qualitative difference in the difficulties speech (on the one hand) and song (on the other) pose to alphabetism as it makes this attempt to bring “primitive reality” into Western discourse.39

Léry himself, instead, registers the supplementarity of song, the excess by which it transgresses speech, in the form of his writing: not so much in the earliest editions of his travelogue, where the brief Tupi song texts are set apart only in being italicized, but in later editions, from 1585 on, where Léry introduced music examples in European notation for the five Tupi songs. Here we see, as it were, a step-by-step realization of the lacuna opened up by phonetic writing, a move from a distinction of song within alphabetization (by means of italics for the sung words) to an attempt to close (with music notation) the absence made palpable by alphabetization. But if, in the Cantares mexicanos, an indigenous system is constructed as inadequate by alphabetization, here, as de Certeau makes clear, it is European notation that fails in the face of the other. Léry’s readers gain little hint even from his extraordinary notational recourse of how the Tupi


singing could have awakened in him the strong emotions he describes: fear, wonder, transporting delight. His notational technology cannot keep Tupi song from escaping European control.

So, also in the 1585 edition, another European technology intrudes, this time a conceptual one. Hard on the heels of his description of one of the songs, where he had in earlier editions suspected that the singers were possessed by Satan, Léry now breaks off to introduce learned material on witchcraft and the witches' sabbath from Jean Bodin’s *De la démonomanie des sorciers*.40 Where the Tupi before had been merely *enragées* they now become *Démoniaques*, as if the deployment of a technical, even clinical, vocabulary (note the capital D) could redress the limitations of a notational technique. The performative presence of song that escaped constraint by notation is disciplined instead through an abominated European diabolism. The analytic categories of this evil, more and more fully developed in Europe through the sixteenth century, are made to compensate for the inability of alphabetic writing and its attendant music writing to capture performed utterance and justify affective response.

Léry’s gesture is the most common conceptual mechanism by which Europeans sought to bring an indigenous American imaginary under the aegis of a Christian supernatural. It has been analyzed by several writers, most notably Serge Gruzinski for central Mexico and Sabine MacCormack for Inca Peru.41 Its connection to song has seldom been remarked, but I believe it runs deep; the automatic and repeated European association of American song with things diabolical may tap the unsettling and finally uncanny transgression inherent in others’ singing.42 Here I wish only to point out that the whole

40 On Léry’s use of Bodin and for an interpretation along other lines of its significance, see Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 15–19.


42 One writer who has begun to analyze this association for Inca territories is Juan Carlos Estenssoro Fuchs, “Los bailes de los indios y el proyecto colonial,” *Revista andina* 10 (1992): 353–80; I thank Nancy Farriss for bringing this important essay to my attention. The transgression of others’ songs is felt not only across wide intercultural distances; it occurs in more narrowly European contexts as well. Its intrusion in familiar repertoires has, for instance, repeatedly animated Carolyn Abbate’s brilliant musings on nineteenth-century opera. There the transgression has the force to thwart the monologic aspirations of a unilateral compositional authority, to breach conventional narrative strategies, to “destroy language” and with it the presence of enacted character, and even to undo the structures of power associated with visually identified gender; see her *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and “Opera; Or,
complex is related also to European regimes of writing. The excess of song could be brought home especially forcefully by an absence at the heart of alphabetism. At the moment of generating a musical notation—moments like those in the Middle Ages, of capital importance for European music history, or like the one marked in successive editions of Léry’s *Histoire*—alphabetic writing declares this absence. By this generation it moves to capture in its own inscriptive terms an aspect of sung utterance that will always escape it. The escape is uncanny, then, in part because of what it tells us about our speech and our writing: it gives the lie, perhaps more forcefully than any other kind of enunciation, to the illusion by which phonetic writing could align itself with a Western metaphysics of presence in spoken speech. Song contains a dimension of phonos, therefore an intimacy with speech/logos, but this phonos remains always farther alienated from alphabetic writing than the phonos of speech. Because of this distance singing, chanting, and intonation in general mark experiences of Europeans in America that cannot be reduced and domesticated, but only exposed and exacerbated, by the exegetical technology the Europeans brought. They are traces that undermine the place of phoneticism in the metaphysics of Western language and thereby open out a space for other disruptions and other arrangements of our connections of language and the world.

the Envoicing of Women," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 225–58. Abbate’s “unsung voices,” which she analyzes from a Barthian and narratological perspective and which repeatedly escape the cultural forms that seem to give rise to and constrain them, could also be richly viewed in the light of Derridean categories such as supplement and remainder, as I have suggested here in rereading Derrida’s treatment of Rousseau. Abbate’s own reservations concerning the usefulness of poststructuralist thought for her project ( *Unsung Voices*, pp. 12–19) spring from her sense that such thought (1) “evaporates” subjectivity and (2) insists on analogies between music and language, thus submerging music’s own, unique phenomenological attributes in the play of literary theory; her instance of the second tendency is Paul de Man’s analysis of Derrida’s reading of Rousseau (cited in n. 4 above). But poststructuralism exists in many guises. Its most rewarding versions do not dissolve subjectivity so much as they posit its continual reformulation in changing intersubjective and dialogic situations (and, as Foucault taught, in shifting metasubjective environments). And I hope to have described above how Derrida at least, if not de Man, builds the implication of a productive slippage between speech and song into his analysis of *the Essay on the Origin of Language*. Thus he allows for (if he does not develop at length) a surplus or remainder of song over speech that is not dependent on the nineteenth-century musical formalism and transcendentalism that Abbate rightly senses in de Man. He allows, in other words, a distinction of singing and speaking that might intersect in provocative ways with Abbate’s phenomenology of voice.
The Powers of Mexican Song

So where would we be left, were we to pursue along the lines sketched here an understanding of the cantares and, more broadly, of all the diverse traces of Mexican song that have come to us? Not, certainly, with an alternative view of the Aztecs “the way they really were” that could make the same claims to truth as the views it displaced. Not with a reconstituting of “authentic” Mexican voices. We need to acknowledge, again with de Certeau, that our texts do not replace what only others’ voices might reveal; indeed, let us complete de Certeau’s thought: our texts do not replace what only others’ voices can reveal about the place where we write. In Of Grammatology Derrida insists (an insistence not always heeded by his acolytes) that deconstructive reading does not provide us with a vantage point outside the metaphysics it undoes; it only provisionally erases effects of that metaphysics, in the process providing glimpses, but no more, of others pressing at its horizons. It is not in our ken ever to know fully what others might tell us about where we are, in the same way that we cannot ever see undimmed our situation from theirs. Instead it can be our privilege to reach tentatively toward the horizons of our situation, sensing the otherness that lives there in its own situations. Instead History and Ethnography—spell them finally with capital letters to betoken the particular visions of storytelling about self and other, present and past, that must be seen as two great Western projects—can be reshaped to bring us to other sorts of claims than the claim to know the truth about others. In revised form, after they have unlearned enough, they can shed their capital letters and offer ways of reading the traces of others that have been more or less systematically excluded till now by ideologies like logocentrism. In the process they can make available hypotheses that have been inaccessible, bringing us to the juncture where both the hypotheses themselves and the conditions of their inaccessibility emerge. But the hypotheses remain hypothetical. They are sustained by a flux of dialogue that never hardens into unilateral conclusion; they are produced by a thinking from within our own situation that will be provisionally erased by, but that will not allow the absolute construction of, other situations.

The Western (perhaps peculiarly Western) self-denying materiality of the alphabetic graphemes in which the Cantares mexicanos are written packs an extraordinary power, a power to deploy an ideological regime where specific relations of speech, writing, and song to one another and the world are fixed. The hypotheses that begin to emerge from a reconsideration of these regimes, stimulated by both poststruc-
turalist critique and the new perspectives on Mexican traces it has abetted, bring into view other possibilities and different relations. They suggest—this much I can hazard now, by way of a conclusion promising further study—that the powers of Mexican song unfolded as its uttered materiality came into contact with other materials. These probably included the paint of the codices, the materials of sacral and mythic reality they encoded, the medicinal and talismanic substances of therapeutic practice, the landscape of a migratory past, nexus of Mexican historicity, and the “water and hill” itself of civic space, locus of societal order. In imagining such material contiguities we might discover unsuspected ways of approaching ancient Mexican expression, subjectivity, and cosmogony.

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ABSTRACT

Attempts to understand the place of song in indigenous New World societies have been stymied by powerful European ideologies of music and its uses. This is particularly evident in the case of the Mexica or, as they are commonly known, Aztecs of central Mexico. The crystallization of European conceptions can be followed through five centuries of accounts of Aztec singing. The nature, limitations, and contradictions of these conceptions can be analyzed through a re-reading of paradigmatic European texts such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, a re-reading that takes us to the heart of early poststructuralist thought. From all this emerges not only a broadened conceptual range for our understanding of Aztec song itself but also a defamiliarizing approach to the singing of others in any number of contexts.