International Journal of Latin American Religions (2025) 9:393–423
https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-025-00306-8

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND HEALTH IN LATIN AMERICA

# Aztec Interpretations of the Sacred Tilma: A Nahua Iconographical Reading of Our Lady of Guadalupe

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Received: 21 May 2025 / Accepted: 19 July 2025 / Published online: 7 August 2025


## Abstract

This work analyzes epistemological frameworks (inculturation, hybridity, and syncretism) as ways of reading the indigenous iconography behind the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. By conjecturing glyphs through the lens of sixteenth-century central Mexica religious cosmology, I present an "Aztec" worldview of the said image. I employ iconographical and anthropological history to analyze the Image while also underscoring its theological context. In this work, we find that the Image has nuanced iconologies that vary according to specific frameworks. The image of Our Lady is a living, readable text whose Nahua traits are visible in her apparel (mantle, dress, broach), surroundings (clouds, angel's feathers, moon), and appearance (hair and countenance).

**Keywords** Guadalupe · Iconography · *Tilma* · *Ayate* · Cosmovision · Aztec · Syncretism · Inculturation

## Introduction

Our Lady of Guadalupe is a Marian apparition believed to have appeared in 1531 to the Nahua convert Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac, near present-day Mexico City. Venerated as the Virgin Mary, inculturated in Indigenous form, her image imprinted on Juan Diego's tilma, or cloak, became a central icon in American Catholicism. For the study of religion, Our Lady of Guadalupe marks a pivotal moment of spiritual encounter and theological adaptation, providing insight into how Christian symbols

*It is my understanding that the intention of this sovereign lady, was for those of her nation, for the Indians, whom she intended to move, affect, instruct, and favor in the faith of her son Christ; she felt this mantle* [was] *an effective instrument*—Miguel Sánchez, first author to publish about Our Lady of Guadalupe.

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were received, reinterpreted, and integrated into Indigenous worldviews, shaping identity, devotion, and resistance across centuries.

The Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe has molded the Americas as no other image. Much ink has been spilled in the annals regarding its historicity, but less work has been presented on the Indigenous interpretation of the Image's symbols. Early historians like Miguel Sanchez (Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 238) and Becerra Tanco (Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 326) admit that the apparition was aimed at the Indigenous people. This paper, albeit inconclusive, aims to close the aforementioned gap by presenting conjectures about iconographic Aztec readings, world-building embedment (denotations of the cosmovision in the Image), and the meanings of the Image.

This dialogue will be examined within the broader context of Indigenous-Christian art history, rather than the traditional artistic study of copies within Spanish domains. With this work, I aim to further contribute to the pre-Christian notions embedded in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which can be interpreted as syncretism, inculturation, or hybridity, depending on the underlying epistemic framework and holistic cultural analysis. In other words, the elements within the sacred Image can be hermeneutically examined under different epistemological frameworks.

To do this, I will review the historiography of the symbols within the *tilma*, surpassing explicitly the "arabesques" models to the elaborated concept of "codes" present within the Image. Although the Aztec (in particular, the Nahua in general) presence in the Image is common knowledge, authors have not systematically delved into this cosmovision and have only touched on its peripheries. Those who have done so, such as Chávez Sánchez (2012), recount a general anthropological tradition from Nahuatl scholars like Mario Rojas and José Luis Guerrero, and Arturo Rocha (2018), who followed this tradition more pedagogically while adding further Nahuatl sources, have taken initial steps in incorporating the Nahua cosmovision within the Image. Some authors have claimed that the Nahua people indeed interpreted the Image in their worldview, according to their codes and culture. This work asserts that, albeit impossible for the modern scholar to penetrate such personal knowledge, an intellectual exercise can confer glyphs, signs, and beliefs within the Image and compare them to the Nahua cosmovision. Additionally, this work will delve more into cultural analysis.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz tells us that "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the *Continent of Meaning* and mapping out its bodiless landscape." Italics mine (1973, 20). In this same vein, a semiotic approach to culture approximates us to the "conceptual world" (1973, 24) of a people through present evidence and cultural interpretation using the abductive method.

Furthermore, recent Nahua scholarship shows how a plethora of Indigenous sources, especially vice royal ones, were brushed by the Western hand and are de facto inevitably Christianized or at least Westernized (Classic) (Laird 2024). This makes discernment challenging, to say the least. Cultural analysis, therefore, presents a twofold challenge: conjecturing meanings and assessing the conjectures. On the other hand, Christianity was also *Indigenized* as anthropologist James Lockhart

asserted that the success of Christian conversion was contingent on "the acceptance and retention of indigenous elements and patterns which in many respects were strikingly close to those of Europe. Relatively few of the friars´ innovations were entirely new to the Mesoamericans" (1985, 467). How then should an image, like that of Our Lady of Guadalupe, be interpreted?

To analyze and then synthesize the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, it is essential to briefly review the Guadalupan iconologies that would substantiate authors' perspectives on this subject, grasp Nahua epistemologies, and analyze a proper framework (hybridity, inculturation-transculturation, or syncretism) that would define how the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe would be seen within the sixteenth-century Nahua cosmovision. The extension of this endeavor would not allow us to touch on important points such as the influence of or relation to European (Flemish and Italian especially) Marian images, but mainly focus on the pre-contact influence.

The intention of this work is not historical regarding the origins of the devotion or apparitions, but rather to present the Indigenous influence in the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Upon presenting this data, the reader is invited to "see" the phenomenon as an Indigenous Christianity that can be interpreted in different ways. The Image, as a narrative element pertaining to the Viceroyalty period, serves as an icono-textual source of the religious (Christian and Indigenous) beliefs of this period, which has been re-imagined and reinterpreted throughout the centuries while not losing its core message of hope.

## Art History and the Cloak's Composition

Iconographic studies of the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe date back to her first published writings. Miguel Sanchez's *Imagen de la Virgen María* (1648) in his section entitled "Pincel Cuidadoso de la Santa Imagen…" describes the image and even the material of Juan Diego's *ayate* or *tilma* as "maguey" and "*ixtle*" (Sánchez in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 199). The whole Image itself was analyzed in its parts and, albeit in a very baroque way, theological typologies, and biblical hermeneutics, like *mulier amicta sole*, were contrasted with tradition and *papeles* "*antiguos*" (Sánchez in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 158).

Regarding the Image's medium, Luis Lasso de la Vega, for example, in his *Huey Tlamahuiçoltica*, between the main parts of the work, the *Nican Mopohua* (whose authorship is contended between Lasso de la Vega and, a century earlier, Antonio Valeriano -et al.-) and *Nican Motecpana*, relates its materiality, in the subdivision beginning with "*In Tilmatzintli*" as "el ayate, ya se sabe, se hace de *ichtli*" "the ayate is known to have been composed of *ichtli*" and then proceeds to describe all the parts of the Image (Luis Lasso de la Vega in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 297). Luis Becerra Tanco's *Origen Milagroso* does not describe the image but says it is made of "hilo de palma, que llaman los naturales *yzotl*," "palm thread that the natives call yzotl" (1982, 328).

Francisco de Florencia in *Estrella del Norte*, as Becerra Tanco, says conservation is a testament to how it is miraculous, which would eventually become a common argument, especially after Fernandez de Uribe's sermon and dissertation (1777,

published in 1801, combating Teresa de Mier), where he placed a strong emphasis on tradition, a tread that would be assumed in the nineteenth century; Florencia would also argue how the fabric preservation is miraculous (1895, 38). Mateo de la Cruz, although he roots his account on Sanchez's, varies in the medium's detailed description.[1]

Other critical artistic analyses that focus on the medium or iconography are those elaborated by the "protomédicos" in the *1666 Juridical Proceedings* (Informaciones Jurídicas de 1666). This juridical writ presented testimonial evidence and scientific opinions to obtain Mass and the Divine Office for Our Lady of Guadalupe. Their study affirms that the Image should not have survived a century in such a corrosive environment, characterized by humidity and niter.

Another study was presented a century later, giving rise to a different approach: the painter's perspective on the sacred vestment. Seeking the unobtained cult honor of Mass and Office, Miguel Cabrera and other prominent painters[2] were summoned to give their "parecer," their opinion, on whether the Image was miraculously painted. The result of the 1751 query was *Maravilla Americana* (1756). After asserting the *tilma* had no priming and had four styles of painting, they contended it was not painted by a human hand. However, this had already been stated years before, like by Francisco de Florencia in 1686 (1895, 37). It had not, however, been done so by such prominent painters who offered their scientific judgment.

In 1787, Dr. Ignacio Bartolache and other qualified men, in conspicuous discord with Cabrera, asserted that the Image did have priming, it had "retoques" or retouches, done by "daring hands." However, when it came to what had not been retouched, it was not handmade. Bartolache experimented with the "iczotl" fiber by recreating tilmas and had one of them placed in the Pocito temple, a church part of the Guadalupe Tepeyac religious complex, to verify its durability. It was elaborated and left to stand the test of time in the Pocito in 1788 (José Ignacio Bartolache in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 644). "Ya se destruyó," it was already destroyed by 1792, when Fray José Ma. Tellez Girón wrote his "Impugnación al Manifiesto"(Tellez Girón in Torre Villar 1982, 655). This section has presented what is known in terms of its medium, or that which holds the piece, in this case, the *tilma* (cloak) itself.

## Authorship and the Painting in the Tilma

Is this question beyond Jaime Cuadriello's "Atribución disputada: ¿Quién pintó a la Virgen de Guadalupe?"(Cuadriello in Roque 1995, 231 s), which surveys the artistic authorship expressions of how, for example, God the Father, the Trinity, or even the Virgin Mary herself is shown painting the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe?

[1] "Un texido muy basto y tosco, en que la tela y trama son muchos hilos juntos mal torcidos de Istle, que sacan y benefician los Indios del Maguey, planta muy útil en esta tierra: el nombre de esta Manta en su lengua es Ayate, de que se visten los Indios mas pobres" (Cruz 1781, 11).

[2] 2. José Ventura Arnáez, 3. José de Alcíbar, 4. Francisco Antonio Vallejo, 5. Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz, 6. Manuel de Osorio, 7. José de Ibarra.

Modern artistic research on Our Lady of Guadalupe includes iconology and, especially, the evolution of painting compositions. According to one of its pioneers, Elisa Vargaslugo, artwork precedes literary productions. Jeanette Favrot Peterson in *Visualizing Guadalupe* concurs in this exact point, showing how de Echave Orio (1605) and Stradanus (1615), namely, pictorial depictions, "already illustrate a belief in the miraculous origin of the sixteenth-century Mexican Guadalupe icon. The visual records precede the published edition of the Juan Diego legend, contradicting the assertion that the Guadalupe narrative was first publicly known in the mid-seventeenth century" (Peterson 2014, 4).

In Vargaslugo's seminal piece on this subject, "Algunas notas más sobre la iconografía guadalupana," (1989) she composes a new canon of dating in which engravings, such as those of Samuel Stradanus (*Indulgence for donation of alms towards the building of a Church to the Virgin of Guadalupe (modern facsimile impression)*, ca. 1615). These known engravings were not the oldest pictorial Guadalupan records; they were composed after the (then) recently discovered first dated paintings on Our Lady of Guadalupe: Baltasar de Echave Orio's 1606 Guadalupan image and Yuririapúndaro Convent Mural attributed to Fray Pedro Salguero (1621 and 1627). Before Lugo's study, said engravings and the painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Santuario del Desierto in San Luis Potosí, signed by Lorenzo Delapyedra in 1625, were thought to be the earliest known copies of the sacred *tilma*.

While also studying in Our Lady of Guadalupe, the "subjectivity of *seeing* and the paradox of *visualizing* the sacred in a material form," (Peterson 2014, 3) Jeanette Peterson draws a connection between Our Lady of Guadalupe and Cihuacoatl-Tonan, whose *veintena*, or Nahua month, is celebrated during the winter solstice. Our Lady of Guadalupe is said to have appeared on December 12 in the Julian Calendar, which, in the Gregorian Calendar, and astronomically, would correspond to this hibernal solstice.

Furthermore, Peterson addresses how the *Codex Teotenantzin* relates the mother of the Aztec gods within the Tepeyac, complementing Mateo de la Cruz's comment that "in their gentile time the Indians adored in this hill an idol, that they called in their tongue *Theotenantzini*" (1781, 2). This ancient veneration possibly led Sahagún to be suspicious of the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe because the indigenous came to see her despite there being temples to Mary closer by, "and they do not go to them, and they come from faraway lands to this *Tonantzin*, as they used to do" (*Florentine Codex*, Bk 11, fol. 234r.).

Peterson argues for indigenous authorship of the current Guadalupe image by Marcos Cipac, a native painter associated with the art production in San José de los Naturales, suggesting that another, Extremadura-inspired, image may have previously existed. Thus, Marcos Cipac is said to have copied the stylistic and compositional features of *tota pulchra*, *mulier amicta sole*, and the Immaculate Conception from European prints, a subject that other authors will later address. In this regard, art historian Thomas Cummins asserts that it was not unusual for the concepts in prints to be adapted, distorted, and assumed in both Europe and the Spanish Viceroyalties.

Most recently, Gisela Von Wobeser´s *Origenes del culto a nuestra señora de Guadalupe* (2020) asserts that the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe probably dates

from the days of the construction of the first hermitage, one she sets around the end of the second decade of the sixteenth century(Wobeser 2020, 37). This is contrary to what O'Gorman (and Rodrigo Martínez Baracs) claims: the Image, alluding to the Bustamante-Montúfar quarrel, was painted not long before 1556, and, O'Gorman says, it was plausible that in the primitive hermitage, there was an image of the Virgin Mary without any particular Marian dedication (2001, 14).[3]

Wobeser also believes that Marcos painted the Image between 1523 (the year of the Franciscan arrival) and 1556, but probably earlier, as she holds that it was implausible that Montúfar commissioned the Image to Marcos in an already popular hermitage (Wobeser 2015, 204).[4] She suggests that the prelate named the Image "Guadalupe" for monetary reasons and to make people forget that it was painted by an indigenous man (Wobeser 2020, 73). The monetary motivations behind the Guadalupan devotion in Montufar´s stint, his Marian promotion, and theories of the said act conveyed great repercussion to its spread and devotion, according to Lidia E. García and Eduardo Ángel Cruz (2019). Also see Lundberg (2002). Wobeser then surmises that Marcos painted the Image earlier than the prelate's arrival (1554) and continues Peterson's work by presenting European (Flemish) images that the indigenous painter "likely" used as a model to paint the sacred Image.

Wobeser does not address Bustamente's statement that the Image was painted "ayer," or recently, which is why O'Gorman presents both the story and the Image orchestrated by Montúfar before September 1556. Wobeser notes Marcos' *cultural adaptations* pulled away from the Flemish model he was said to have used, *La virgen en la gloria* (1420 ca), to make Our Lady of Guadalupe more Indigenous. In the European model, the Virgin Mary is not holding her Son, has sober hairstyle with a line in the middle, and is in thoughtful prayer. Wobeser, furthermore, fails to explain how such an Indigenous Image attracted so many Spaniards, as the *1556 Proceeding* or *Información de 1556* abundantly demonstrates. What "hidden" traits in the iconography made the Image European and so Indigenous at the same time?

Marcos, apart from his Franciscan collaborations in San José de los Naturales, has no other known work or any other connection to Our Lady of Guadalupe, except for a visceral and antagonistic ecclesiastical dispute between the mendicant Franciscan friars and the secular (Dominican-run) church. In 1556,

[3] Fray Francisco de Bustamante, Prior of the Franciscans in the New Spain in 1556, accused the second Archbishop of Mexico Alonso de Montúfar of promoting idolatry as he advocated for the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The prelate contested this accusation and raised a juridical writ against him, in which witnesses testified to the great devotion shown to the image and stated that the Prior had claimed the Image had been recently painted by an indigenous artist named Marcos. Another theory is that of De la Maza, who claimed that in a primitive hermitage, there was an Extremadura image that had eroded away, leaving only its name behind, and it was later subsumed by the one we know today.

[4] "La formación de un santuario entorno a una imagen ´milagrosa´ llevaba tiempo y es imposible que esto haya sucedido en el lapso de dos años, tres meses, que medió entre la llegada de Montúfar a la Nueva España y su querella con Francisco de Bustamante […] por otra parte, resulta ilógico pensar que Montúfar haya remplazado una imagen de gran prestigio, considerada milagrosa, que aportaba cuantiosas cantidades a la Iglesia por concepto de limosnas, por una nueva, pintada por un indio," (2020, 37). This contests not only O'Gorman, but recently Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe* (2014, 109). The *1556 Proceeding* has been published by Arturo Rocha, *Monumenta Guadalupensia Mexicana* (2010, 45).

the archbishop of Mexico, Alonso de Montúfar, was accused by the Franciscan Prior, Francisco de Bustamente, of promoting idolatry as the prelate openly advocated for the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, an image painted by the "Indian Marcos."

To this point, it is paramount to cite Pedro Ángeles' *Apeles y tlacuilos*, which extensively recounts historical sources by Motolina, Diaz del Castillo, and Mendieta, in which Indigenous people, according to these authors, became as great painters as those from Flanders and Italy. According to these sources, natives truly became versed when they abandoned their ancient ways of painting heinous pagan gods and assumed European aesthetic standards. Outstanding among these native painters was Marcos who "was a recognized artist who lived and painted in a world where something must have been known about the themes that those who wrote Renaissance treatise were familiar in, not to mention [a world in which] someone who, like Bernal Díaz del Castillo, could have seen how the ancient and modern worked great wonders in both Europe and Spain" (Ángeles-Jiménez 2011, 97).

We must note, furthermore, the most recent scholarship on the role the West played in the "construction of indigenous legacies"; Andrew Leird's *Aztec Latin: Renaissance Learning and Nahuatl Traditions in Early Colonial Mexico* (2024) speaks beyond the study of the Franciscan endeavors to provide Indigenous nobility humanist education; the natives translated Latin texts to Nahuatl, the students "produced accomplished writings of their own in both languages" (Laird 2024, 2). Additionally, the natives assumed Latin themes and genres and incorporated them, or rather, re-imagined their past. "Indian writers in the Andes and Mesoamerica would come to embellish their narratives of the pre-Columbian past with comparisons from Roman history" (Laird 2024, 3).

On the one hand, Indigenous people were as "skillful" as European artists, creating art that was hard to tell apart from European aesthetic conventions. On the other hand, ideologically, indigenous history and myth were intertwined with Western Classic and Christian tradition. With such a strong European influence in artistic production, the question of authorship creeps in.

If Marcos were to have copied an image, there would be a greater proximity to the one Louise Burkhart asserts resembles: Fray Pedro de Gante's (fol. 128) image in *Doctrina cristiana en lengua mexicana* (Louis Burkhart in León Portilla and Gossen 1993, 222). Furthermore, Marcos's name is highly contested, as Peterson admits it could be either "Cipac," "de Aquino," or most recently "Griego" (2014, 115–117). Lastly, the fact that he was one of the leading artists behind the altarpiece for the Capilla de Indios in San José de los Naturales, part of a Franciscan-led cohort, makes his fame more relatable and recognizable to the enraged Franciscan Prior, Francisco de Bustamante, and probably harder for Dominican Montúfar to have patronized him to paint the Image (Reyes García 2001, nos. 169, 295; f. 22r., f. 44r.).

Who then painted the Image? The *Nican Mopohua* is a sixteenth-century source, as Miguel León-Portilla and Edmundo O'Gorman asserted. This religious account notes that on the way towards the bishop's palace, the neophyte Juan Diego, carrying the flowers in his tilma (cloak), reveals them to the prelate, and there the Image miraculously imprints itself. This tradition has lived in the collective imagination of the Mexican people and should be further explored, but it cannot provide a definitive

answer. The question of the Image painter strictly coincides with the origin of the apparition and devotion debate. This much can be answered.

We can, however, assert that the Image most likely belongs to the sixteenth century, which further enables us to connect it with the recently conquered peoples and see their influence in the Image. In addition to the presented modern art historical analyses made about the Image, it is important to point out additional artistic studies: González Moreno (1959),Vargaslugo in Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo (1987), Cuadriello (1999).

Having recounted some works of the Image's medium, its inconclusive authorship, and therefore not knowing for sure the dating, we can allude to Gisela Von Wobeser's *Origenes del culto a nuestra señora de Guadalupe* (2020) and Jeanette Favrot Peterson in *Visualizing Guadalupe* (2014) for theories about the European influence on the Image and its Immaculate Conception genealogy. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the Spanish advocation of Guadalupe from Extremadura and the potential iconographic similarities with the Teotenantzin, venerated in the vicinity of Tepeyac before the conquest, should be elaborated, yet this goes beyond the scope of this work.[5] It is paramount to briefly recount the history of the indigenous origins of the Image according to classic Guadalupe authors.

## Authors' Indigenous Presuppositions

> *La imagen es un jeroglífico mexicano de los que llaman compuestos, y contiene el símbolo de la fe; pero unidos los jeroglíficos a los frasismos del idioma con tanta sublimidad y delicadeza, que parecía no cabía en la rudeza de los indios, neófitos en tiempo de Santo Tomé, como reciente la conquista, cifrar así los artículos de la fe.* Fray Servando Teresa de Mier ("Cartas a Muñoz" in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 759).

Among the numerous explanations and interpretations of the symbols within the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, most have been situated within the Western Christian mindset, rendering scarce reflection to how sixteenth-century central Mexican indigenous people would have seen her in the light of their culture. Before delving into the iconographic readings, it is essential to examine the vestiges of this general intuition throughout the years.

Miguel Sanchez makes little connections between the Image-story and Aztec cosmovision or the natives' beliefs, as he mainly focuses on biblical typology. This reference to him is important only to express how subsequent authors (Lasso de Vega, Cruz, Becerra Tanco, Florencia, Clavijero) will follow the same pattern, surmising

[5] The Mexican and Spanish devotions to Our Lady of Guadalupe differ significantly in iconography, materials, and symbolism: in Mexico, she is depicted as the pregnant Immaculate Conception and is a painting, while in Spain, she is *Mater Dei* or *Theotokos* and is a sculpture carrying Jesus. However, historian Francisco de San José claimed that a 1499 image in the choir of Guadalupe, Extremadura—later modified to resemble the Mexican Guadalupe with added stars and a blue mantle—was so similar that it could have inspired the Mexican image as a "perfect copy." This matter and other require further studies.

the medium and then describing the Image, but presenting a scarce relationship with the Aztec worldview. Although there is indigenous faith recognition, no author suspects the Image could be read in the worldview of "pagans" as most of the understudied codes are not more than "arabesques."

Siguenza y Gongora is the first author to give an indigenous nuance to the Guadalupan story in the seventeenth century as he details in his "Primavera Indiana" poem the greatness of the Aztec capital: "the flight ends where the great Tenochtitlan lies haughty/on a golden throne,/jungle of copil feathers captive/of its royal grandeur is real fertilizer. To the hue hueipil, and quetzal of estimative…" (Siguenza y Gongora in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, stanza XXXVI). However, it fails to make an iconographic distinction or present more indigenous relations, as most of the poem's lyrics revolve around classic mythology and its respective cultural impact on New Spain. See "La Virgen heroica en el *Poeticum viridarium* de José López de Avilés" (Luna Quintana 2022).

It is worth mentioning that other authors, such as Boturini, were well aware of the relationship between the Aztec world and Our Lady of Guadalupe; further research is necessary to understand the development of this subject in his extant work. The relationship between the Aztec world and Our Lady of Guadalupe began to emerge as authors such as Cayetano de Cabrera y Quintero assured that the apparitions could be best proven by the testimony of the Image, considering the Nahua mindset.[6] This was more explicitly asserted a decade later by Juan José de Eguiara y Eguren, who considered Our Lady of Guadalupe a "hieroglyph" or a clear indigenous message that could be read in both Christian and Nahua eyes.[7] The hieroglyphic idea, however, is not entirely accurate, as will be further discussed.

Eccentric in his idea of the sacred *tilma* being the cape of the apostle Thomas, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier in his *Sermon* spills out "meanings" of the Image that not only relate to the first-century Syrian-Chaldean traits but also the Aztec culture; for example, when describing the brooch of the angel, it is a "little diamond of her breast incontrovertible in its firmness, and in Mexican *occhalchihuitl*, phrasism to signify that which is pure" (Servando Teresa de Mier in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 748).

[6] "Al mismo modo deben asegurase las otras apariciones al mensajero de María Sma. Juan Diego, y la que en comprobación de éstas hizo su moribundo tío Juan Bernardino, y miró al mismo fin que la primera, porque ésta, y aquéllas, una, y otras tienen la mejor prueba, el testimonio más auténtico, y escritura constante en la sagrada imagen y pintura milagrosa más cada día. Los indios, no en su gentilidad solamente, sino mucho después de cristianos, no escribían, sino que pintaban; no le valían de letras, sino imágenes, para entenderse con los ausentes, para significar, y perpetuar lo que en lugar, y tiempo era más digno de memoria…" (Quintero 1746, No. 616).

[7] "Acomodóse María, como tan sabia, prudente y amorosa, al estilo del país y de los mexicanos, en sus epístolas, libros y semejantes monumentos; y como ellos en vez de letras escribían con pinturas, símbolos y jeroglíficos, ella les escribió del mismo modo esta carta y este libro, pintando en su imagen prodigiosa el jeroglífico y símbolo más ajustado y más propio de la paz. Pintóse cercada de los rayos del sol, estribando sobre la luna, y sirviéndose de las estrellas para bordar y tachonar sus vestiduras. De suerte que en la imagen de Guadalupe brillan a un tiempo el sol, la luna y las estrellas. ¿Puede pensare símbolo más propio y jeroglífico más significativo de la paz?" (Juan José de Eguiara y Eguren in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 485–486).

In this same sermon, he is the first to provide explicit indigenous meanings, albeit reprimanding in nature, to the Image. He initiated a new tradition that would not be resumed until recent times. He asserts that her cincture, knotted, tlalpilli, indicates she is enceinte; she is shod with gilded sandals as a Mexica empress, and offers a baroque explanation of how her steps on the moon mock the indigenous people's drunkenness (750). He also expounds on her skin color, which blends Christian and Nahua traditions. How, then, should one proceed to analyze iconographic traits within the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to complement art historical research further and, more importantly, to decipher the meaning, hermeneutics, and significance of the Image? One step towards this effort is reading like the Nahua elders.

## Transposition of Orality

The Nahuas did not have a writing system homologous to European alphabetic letters, but hieroglyphs, glyphs, etc. which required the *tlamatini*, someone who knows or wise person, to interpret the pictographs in the logo-phonetic system; the construe varied according to who interpreted the glyphs, which seemed unscholarly to the Europeans who did not grasp the englobing *toltecayotl* tradition, memory, and wisdom imprinted in the red and black ink (León-Portilla 1980). The difference in writing and reading created a bifurcation where the natives of the Americas "lacked history"(Mignolo 1998, chap. 3) and communication rationale, as it, contrary to the European alphabet, was ephemeral, inconsistent, and primitive (Certeau 1988, chap. 5). These descriptions are far from accurate, as the Nahuas established a living system of epistemic transmission that was complex and efficient.

To describe, for example, topographies or the names of the altepetl, pueblos, or towns, "a glyphic system that unites one or more particular elements that represent specific sounds in Nahuatl" (Noguez and Valle 1989, 13) was used. This was extended even to European neologisms such as "virrey," viceroy. By drawing, for example, an eye (*ixtli*), bean (*etl*), and a liver (*elli*) as a conglomerate, one could read, or sound off "*ixeel*" which would resonate the intended concept, in this case, "virrey." Some variations of these glyphs make this system complex, but many of them, especially those of office positions, are well recorded (Valle 2006) (Velásquez García and Davletshin 2024, 61).

Anthropologists Joaquín Galarza and Bárbara Torres assert that this system is more than a mnemotechnic image-to-syllable technique and it extends to produce, among other cases, "toponyms, anthroponyms, chronology markers, phonetic landscapes just like themes contained in the glyph" (1986, 36). The plasticity of a single glyph could present different meanings; for example, *acatl*, or reed; if the glyph is reduplicated, it signifies abundance and if the drawing of the glyph presents a repetition of it on different planes, an action is therefore being described (graphic transcription of a verb), i.e., *acapolco* whose glyph is a representation of hands *destroying* reeds.

The glyphs were painted in manuscripts known as codices, lienzo, tiras, paintings, almanacs, maps, screenfolds, calendars, and other formats. In the Aztec empire, these were elaborated according to regional styles. Among the noticeable variations,

we find the southeastern frontier style (Puebla-Oaxaca), which had Mixtec influence. The manuscript's medium is deer skin, bark paper, and cloth, although, after European contact, other materials were utilized. Codices recorded traditions (and much more, as we will later see) that were passed on throughout generations in the immersive collaboration of what could be understood as *living manuscripts*.

Among the various categories and types of codices, for example, we can classify the main ones according to their object, theme, or use. Art Historian Elizabeth Boone presents in "Manuscript Painting in Service of Imperial Ideology" those codices that deal with history as year-count annals (line-based following a sequence of annual events; this type of codex was mainly used by the Aztecs, like *Tira de Tepechpan*), cartographic histories (events narrated with geographic layout, maps), and *Res gestae* (these are an event basis narrative, like the Mixtec screenfolds) (Boone in Berdan et al. 1996, 193). It is paramount to consider that only 15 codices are considered pre-contact. However, hundreds of manuscripts composed in the Viceroyalty times were either copied from originals, contained a robust native tradition, or had some European influence.

The penetration or involvement of a reader surpassed mere knowledge of glyph hermeneutics, as the sages submerged themselves in the message in ways foreign to a Western reader. For example, these texts were set on the floor and read from different angles. The readers of the pictographs had a deictic reference based on experience. They were able to synthesize a conglomerate of signifiers, bringing them alive through song, chant, and testimony/experience. Art Historian Tom Cummins elaborates on the dissociation of Europeans as attested by the Nahuas' *living* writing-drawing system:

> Oral narrative, pictorial image, screen fold […] and narrator are intermingled as a single unified whole. For Olmos and many other chroniclers, the information extracted from this gathering of multisensorial forms and rendered into alphabetic text can be believed as being sufficiently or even efficiently reproduced because of the preface that details the author's physical experience of looking and listening. Within native communities, however, the need to supplement the pictorial arises because there is the ever-increasing disassociation of the image from the oral discourses that produced a synesthetic experience (Cummins 2015, 69–70).

The iconography of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe entails understanding the all-encompassing nature of Nahua glyphs, their presentation with proper intentionality, whose meaning is formed through an immersive relationship with the interlocutors who are not only interpreters but also part of the message itself, as their experiences are imprinted on living testimony. A Nahua text, then, could be said to be sterile if there are no readers who can grasp the entire conveyed message. This tradition has remained alive in communities and academia, where valuable efforts have been made to preserve it.

It is paramount also to mention other notes about the reading of written signs present in codex reading; signs are grouped in blocks whose glyphs are not strictly read in any particular order, although, as art historian Erik Velázquez García notes, there are some tendencies (down-up; right-left) (2019, 78). The composite glyphs

Velázquez refers to can serve as a general guide to glyph reading, but do not necessarily follow the same structure as the Image, as it does not contain hieroglyphs.

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is not a composition of hieroglyphs. This science has been more accurately reworked by Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo and revised into Nahuatl by Erik Velázquez and Albert Davletshin. One of the reasons is that the Image does not contain "The known repertoire of signs in Nahuatl writing [which] consists of slabogramas (phonetic signs), logograms (word signs), notation signs (numerograms, among others) and two punctuation marks (space and connecting line)." (Velásquez García and Davletshin 2024, 60).

Numerous signs of the Nahua world are present, like the *Nahui Ollin* or the flower-hills in her dress. Nevertheless, the objective Aztec relation lies within its iconography, not in the phonetic system as present in hieroglyphic codex reading. It was, however, vital to immerse oneself in that world to contextualize how the elderly read, as we attempt to do in the cultural analysis endeavor. In the next section, we will analyze epistemic frameworks that explain Nahua and European relations when dealing with colonial compositions to understand the Nahua iconography in the Image. In other words, what sort of lens can be assumed when interpreting the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe?

## A Proper Scheme: Hybridity, Inculturation-Transculturation, or Syncretism

> *A reexamination of the process of syncretic fusion between the Aztec ´great tradition´ and the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary indicates that the Guadalupe cult´s developmental process was much more complex than a merging of goddess and saint* (Louis Burkhart in León Portilla and Gossen 1993, 198).

These concepts all raise the question of whether certain aspects of Western culture, especially religion, were adopted by the Nahua people and to what degree or with what intent. Syncretism presupposes for the friars that the indigenous had a pretended, or at least not a full, conversion and deceived the Spaniards by taking Catholic images in their "accidents" or materiality while venerating a different "form" or essence, namely, their "ancient deities" through them. Transculturation is the assumption of the other's culture actively by adapting their ways in an endemic manner. Inculturation is the same phenomenon but studied as a Christian response or explanation of this merger.[8]

Hybridity remarks that visibility (how much something *looks*, say, "indigenous" and how it) can be deceiving as originality seems to depend on a past; it is not marked by pre-Hispanic characteristic traits instead by a surviving response to the *other* which takes "on meaning through material objects and daily practices

[8] The "Seeds of the Word," as Justin Martyr explains in his Second Apology, is the Logos that has left its trace and imprint in all cultures even on those that have not known the Gospel; these "Seeds" are harvested in human nature; those aspects of the Nahua worldview which are "true," "good" and "beautiful" what scholastic philosophy calls the transcendentals, were part of this divine tendency and in Our Lady of Guadalupe were directed to their ultimate purpose, telos.

in colonial contexts; and how interpreters living in the present choose to reckon with, and reconstruct, these contexts" (Dean and Leibsohn 2003, 6). Contemplating colonial Latin America with the eye of "purity," what comes from where, obscures subjects discriminately by not seeing their conscientious acts within a resistance scheme.

What paradigm can capture best the complex contour of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe without completely reducing the Image-message to an imposition (say, a Spanish invention elaborated to seduce the indigenous), manipulation (an indigenous outright replacement of a pre-Hispanic mother deity, like the mother goddess *Coatlicue*), a complex mythic internalization (the image, devotion, and story were a theatrical *redressive action*, as described by Victor Turner), an assimilation (European iconography with the associations made by Indigenous people), or a catechetical story event? In other words, these points can be debated regarding the interpretation of the Image, but what should not be granted is the simple solution of any one of them that could close itself off, exclusively, to all epistemic frameworks.

How can we read, like the *tlamatini*, and be part of the iconographic message without falling into the trap of *knowing* the Image and therefore possessing it as an object, instead of immersing ourselves in dialogue with the Image as a subject, such as how a child (like Juan Diego) talks to her mother? Can we subject ourselves to the mystery of a living text and co-operate in its message? To attempt any of this, it is paramount to *read* the iconography of the Image within its historical, artistic, theological, and anthropological sources. However, methodologically, we must first ask ourselves: how can phenomenology and Aztec cosmovision contribute to an epistemological framework that best describes the content within the Guadalupan iconography?

Eliade's term, "*hierophany*," explains the manifestation of the divine in which the transcendental breaks into materiality. This wholly "other" can range from a rock, which is not venerated as a rock itself, but as having had or being endowed with sacrality, to the incarnation, which is the manifestation of God-made man. Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* explains it thusly: "for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality […] the sacred is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*" (1987, 12). The relationship with the holy takes many dimensions; it is vital to understand how the divine leaves traces of interaction within the culture after a religious experience has been lived.

The Image's codes and signs, for example, as Art Historian Jaime Cuadriello asserts, are still in a potential state as it has not lost its holy state; the Image lives on a "culture of prodigies" that even now maintains "unsuspected secrets that lay between mystery and revelation and have been long cemented in a symbolic discourse between myth and prophecy" (Cuadriello 2017, 165). To summarize these lived experiences portrayed in the iconographic elements, let us consider, within this ambit, the Nahua conception of space and body. Still today, dimensionality is referenced through body parts; *nacaz* means "ear," while nacaztla means "to the side." In contemporary Huasteca dialect, the butt is *tzinno*, while in older Nahuatl, it is *tzintli*, and the latter also means the place where something begins. Needless to say, the ear is on the side and the butt is where something begins. The body-space is

the manifestation of a lived experience that takes on more transcendental relations within an image.

This body cosmovision is paramount to keep in mind, especially when considering that the first Nahua world-creation is that of Cipactli's divided body; in another version of this story, it was *Tlaltecuhtli* whose nose was the mountains, and other orifices were the caves. The human is a microcosm; in this regard, Eliade affirms that "life is homologized to cosmic life; as a divine work, the cosmos becomes the paradigmatic image of human existence" (Eliade and Trask 1987, 165). The world has "charisma," as David Carrasco notes, in the sense that the world has a divine tone to it. The macrocosm, the world created by the gods, is typified in the human being and his constructions, like the cities, *altepemeh*.

In this body-land-sacred connection, it is curious how hill-shaped flowers cover Our Lady of Guadalupe's brown body dress. Could it be possible that this Image maps out the sacred mountains through her main flowers, suggesting that her mauve-pink dress is a territory of the sacred precinct mountains? As it is true that the *map is not territory*, the lived experience must be accounted for by the *tlamatini*, as the relationship one has is intersubjective.

Furthermore, this same relation exists in the central flower located in her belly, the **Nahui Ollin** (Fig. 1), or the four-movement, which not only alludes to the Fifth Sun era and its existential culmination, but also to the harmony of the divine cosmic forces that undertook ritual oblation for the continuation of life. This is the "belly or the center of the universe, the moving sun" (León-Portilla 2017, 165). Signs and codes can also be studied in the Nahua mindset to understand how the divine was perceived.

Since world-creation was not only a product of, but sustained by the divine, how the Aztecs conceived the deific has an intrinsic relation to how they, even after the conquest, would relate to saints and God. *Teotl*, Terraciano argues, after analyzing the contemporary studies of Hvidtfeldt, (1958), Maffie (2014), and Bassett (2015) can range from a "sense of the fearsome and transformative to the venerable and

**Fig. 1** The *Nahui Ollin*. Only one four-petal flower located in the womb of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City. This symbol can be interpreted less enthusiastically as simply meaning *xochitl*, flower

divine" (2019, 54). The divine can manifest itself through many aspects of the natural world, dwelling in particular objects.

The most noticeable case of the divine manifesting itself in the world was through divine surrogates or *ixiptla*. During the month of *Ochpaniztli*, war harvesting began, and grandmother goddess *Toci* was commemorated by the capturing of a woman who was prepared in a highly elaborated ritual to be offered and flayed. She embodied "teteo inan" (mother of all the gods) and was surrounded by flowers to prevent her from crying, which would deteriorate the execution killing. When the ritualized killing was at hand, the female victim was taken to *her* temple (Clendinnen 2014, 285), was undressed, executed, and afterward flayed. Her skin was worn by a naked priest who then embodied the mother deity (Bernardino et al. 1975, Bk. II, ch. 30). For a more detailed analysis of image representation of the divine, see Bassett's *The Fate of Earthly Things* (2015).

Whether it be the understanding of the divine irrupting ordinality, the relationship of how the sacred assumes space, how there is embodiment and image-representatives, or the process by which the natural forces demand gift exchange, the body-human microcosm's relation with the divine macrocosm, or the hierophantic exposures that consecrate materiality, understanding the sacred Image as an inculturation-transculturation, hybridity, or syncretism will endow the Image reading with nuances and shades or light and depth (Fig. 6).

## Guadalupan Iconography

To understand the iconography of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we must grasp the concept of *difrasismo*, or couplet which involves the formation of a new concept from two or more terms placed together. Mesoamericanist Mercedes Montes de Oca Vega defines it as "a linguistic structure that by means of the juxtaposition of two (or more) terms constructs a different meaning from the one portrayed by the lexemes that integrate it" (Montes de Oca Vega 2024, 55). The classic example is the combination of *in tlilli in tlapalli*, black and red ink, which means *wisdom*, as those were the dyes used in codices that transmitted knowledge. These couplets synthesize concepts rooted in a general world-building cosmovision. We will use diphrasisms or couplets to analyze the iconography of the Guadalupan image in some of its elemental parts.

"*Mitzhuallixtlapalitztica/Mitzhualnacazitztica* (They are looking sidelong at thee/they are looking at thee out/of the corner of the eye) This saying is said of the great ruler or the great priest who rules, like the great cypress, the great silk cotton tree, because there can be confidence in him" (Bernardino et al. 1975, bk. VI, ch. 43, 244). This couplet, "mirada de soslayo," the side view, the corner of the eye, means that rulers imitate how the divine gazes upon humanity, not in front, but on the side; this is also seen in mother-to-daughter admonitions in the *Huehuehtlahtolli* (León Portilla and Silva Galeana 1991, 92).

It is important, however, to note that when the **"corner of the eye"** is not used in a couplet, fathers use this phrase to admonish their children, describing them as imbeciles or commoners when they misbehave (Bernardino et al. 1975 bk. VI, ch.

22). Yet when read as a nobility trait, it has further relation with Our Lady of Guadalupe as she could additionally represent a ruler in her turquoise mantle, as sumptuary laws probably applied to women concerning their husband's status (Anawalt 1980, 37).

*Codex Tovar* portrays almost all the *tlatoani* wearing **turquoise-color cloaks** (like the color of one covering Our Lady of Guadalupe) and further examples are found in the *Codex Azoyu 2*, and *Florentine Codex* (Bk. XII, fol. 18r). The attire was also a vehicle of transformation in which, for example, the newly enthroned *tlatoani* would acquire Tezcatlipoca's *tonalli* (life force) by the usage of obsidian sandals; Justyna Olko notes that "The quintessence of the rite of transformation into the royal person consisted of adorning the elect with the turquoise insignia […]. All these phases required appropriate attire and attributes that not only expressed the profound transformations of the elect, but were the proper means of metamorphosis (Olko 2006, 69).

It could be said, therefore, that Our Lady of Guadalupe's mantle has imperial colors, which, although they do not contain tessellation patterns, do reflect high nobility in the restricted-for-nobility quetzal color. This, of course, does not exclude the Western iconographic description of the Virgin Mary wearing blue. The green–blue mantle has been related to the constellations in studies that go as far as describing the Anahuac skyline during the winter solstice. The blue-green color has given way to thinking it could be, more than celestial, the maritime or the Texcoco lake that outwardly surrounds the land, thereby recreating *Anahuac*.

Another couplet that could shed light on the reading of the Guadalupan image is "*Mixtitlan, Ayauhtitlan* (In the clouds, in the mist)." This saying was said of the highly esteemed, the very great; of those never before seen, of those never before known, nor anywhere seen in times of yore (Bernardino et al. 1975, bk. VI, ch. 22, 122). For the Nahuas, coming from among *clouds and mists* meant coming from a place unknown and to some extent sacred; this was placed in the lips of the Nahua priests when they described the first Franciscan missionaries in the *Coloquios y doctrina* (Bernardino de Sahagún and Miguel León-Portilla 1986). Moctezuma, additionally, describes Cortez's provenance: "I have gazed at the unknown place whence thou hast come—from among the clouds, from among the mists"(Bernardino et al. 1975, bk. XII, ch. 16). Andrew Laird points out how this couplet is ideologically manipulated in the Spanish translation (Laird 2024, p. 291).

The mists and clouds, as well as the 46 stars in the mantle, could be further complemented by the classical definition of Mexico, which is located in the belly or center of the moon (*metztli*, *xictli*, and *co*). This area is eclipsed and connotes apocalyptic imagery as well.

Regarding the **moon**, eccentric Mexican founding father, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, in correspondence with Spanish historian Juan Bautista Muñoz, asserted that what has been said about the satellite being black due to having been covered by silver is not true; he instead presents a witticism that he asserts assumes Indigenous mythology:

> The Indians painted the Black Moon, according to their mythological Genesis, which Boturini refers to as the sun and the moon. The former was born

> from the penitent Yoappan, having thrown himself into a bonfire; a bulbous one wanted to imitate him when the fire was almost extinguished, and there was nothing left but coals; and he was transformed into a moon, which consequently came out black. Is it possible that the Mother of God, miraculously painting Herself in this way, wanted to confirm the mythological Genesis of the Indians contrary to the true Genesis of the Sacred Scriptures? (Teresa de Mier en Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 831).

Who is this figure that has several divine attributes in her gaze, attire, and providence? How could the Aztecs see her in any human aspect? Juan Diego refers to her, among many other names, as "ichpochtli," or **young woman**. Alfredo López Austin in *The Human Body and Ideology* explains Nahua concepts and, upon expounding on the *Primeros Memoriales*, a young woman ought to be "an upright woman, an honorable woman. She is clean, elegant, wise, the daughter of somebody worthy, the damsel of someone worthy, serious […] of a good heart is precious, valuable, modest, chaste, sensible, of upright life, clean of heart…" (López Austin 1988, 272).

Among the most notable Nahua symbol representations in the Guadalupan image, we find the **angel's plumes**. Their significance does not only lie in the meaning of the plumes themselves, but in the fact that the angel's wings traditionally represent eagle wings. "The symbolic character of each bird was assigned or attributed also to its feathers. So, for example, to the Aztecs, the feathers of the eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) referred to the Sun, the sky, or the fire" (Filloy 2019, 21).

More than an additional axiological sun trait, the eagle itself is mythologically juxtaposed to the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Leonardo López Luján emphasizes what the eagle meant to the Mexica not only in their tribal conception but also in human terms, as he points out that in Teotihuacan, where the Fifth Sun was born, the eagle throws itself first into the bonfire before the jaguar. Within the foundational story of the Mexica, the god Huitzilopochtli transforms himself into an eagle to incite them to leave Aztlan and guide them to their promised land until the point where the sign marked where they should settle (López Luján 2019, 29–30).

How is the eagle, metonymically represented by its feathers, contrasted with the *ichpocatl* figure in their foundational stories? As the eagle-Huitzilopochtli founded the Aztec people in Copil's heart, and a temple was built in that cactus's precinct, so did Our Lady of Guadalupe ask Juan Diego to build her new civilization in the plain of Tepeyac. Guadalupan biblical typologies were henceforth created, with the earliest being Miguel Sánchez's Moses-Juan Diego relation (as they both received commandments from atop mountains and led their peoples to a new promised land, a new relationship with the divine), to more recent, *mutatis mutandis*, Jacques Lafaye's Saint Thomas-Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe-Coatlicue (1987).

The symbol analysis can be further deepened if the angel's feathers are analyzed in the colors in themselves (including the moon's black) as the classic interpretation has connected them to the national flag or the colors of the four directions of the universe; the directions or corners of the world are generally characterized as black, corresponding to the region of the death and it is north; blue is the life-giving state, and it is the south; the orient or the east is red, and the west is white or yellow. These corners are respectively identified with Black

Tezcatlipoca, Blue Huitzilopochtli, Red Tezcatlipoca, and Yellow-White Quetzalcoatl (León-Portilla 2017, 141) yet the symbolic study can be extended to the plumes themselves and their value to the Aztecs.

Feathers in Mesoamerica, in general, were used in war vestments, religious paraphernalia, and as honorary distinctions. Featherwork and plumes were employed in or were the basis of "earplugs, lip plugs, bracelets, collars […] mosquito fans" among other artifacts, like those used for currency like staffs, chimalli (shield), flags, banners, and on clothes like capes, huipiles, mantles, and tlahuiztli (warrior clothes) (Filloy 2019, 20). Featherwork was valuable, to say the least. Tributes were paid from all around the empire as the *Codex Mendoza* (Fig. 2) shows. "2,480 bundles of quetzal feathers; 800 yellow feathers (perhaps from Montezuma oriole); 8,800 bunches respectively, of scarlet macaw feathers, of blue cotinga…" (Berdan 2019, 38).

Those feather crafters (*amanteca*) held a special societal position; tribute was exempted due to the value of their work, and other courtesies were also extended to them. The *amanteca* were very selective, as there were around 1500 species of birds at their disposal, and they, as Pascal Mongne synthesized Sahagún's inventory, used only around 25 bird species (Mongne 2019, 42–44). Among the most recurring colors were red, blue, and green, and then white/yellow. These colors relate to the corners of the world (a notable exception is black) and are the most present colors in the angel's feathers. Arturo Rocha refers to the similarity to the green-white-red bird *tzinitzcan* (*trogon mexicanus*) (2018, 51).

Frances Berdan remarks that among the most valuable and rarest feathers in the empire were those of the "scarlet macaw, blue cotinga, roseate spoonbill, blue honeyeater, various kinds of parrot and, above all, the very precious quetzal, were much more esteemed and were only at great distances from Tenochtitlan" (Berdan 2019, 38). She later affirms that the rulers commissioned merchants (*pochtecas*) (Fig. 3) to deal luxury items, among which were "roseate spoonbill, New World

**Fig. 2** Codex Mendoza (Ms. Arch. Selden A. 1, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford), fol. 47r

**Fig. 3** Merchants selling feathers, *Florentine Codex*, Book IX, Fol. ii verso

orioles and yellow parrot feathers" (Berdan 2019, 39). Three of the four most used feather colors are present in the angel's wings underneath the black moon.

What could be a reading of the angel and his wings? For a Western Christian mind, the angel carries a message and is a sign of the divine; this is especially noticeable as cherubs, to embellish her, were painted along the rays and eventually faded off (Florencia 1895, 38). Furthermore, the base angel has been typologically connected to Archangel Michael, relating it to Apocalypse 12 and 21 by Miguel Sanchez; for the Aztec cosmovision, the eagle-*ixiptla* guides, as Huizilopochtli once did for the Mexica people, the eagle is part of a creative history; some have even gone as far as characterizing the angel as an eagle warrior.

Theologian Virgilio Elizondo reckons the angel can be both a *tameme* carrying the Virgin, as those who transported the tlatoani "en andas" (royal stretcher), or he could be a year-carrier in which the divine, as in yore, "would bring in a new era" (1980, 84). Furthermore, feather paraphernalia, especially considering yellow, red, and blue feather colors, are among the most precious plumes, those proper to nobility. How extensively could a *tlamatini* read into the Image's plumes, and under which epistemic paradigm could a contemporary reader elucidate the Image's glyphs? This exercise is contingent upon hermeneutical analysis or hyperbolic interpretation.

There are copies of Our Lady of Guadalupe done with feathers, such as the anonymous one held in the Museo de América, Madrid (Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo 1987, Cat. 79, Fig. 163, 161). Featherwork has the notable characteristic of being holographic or somewhat iridescent, which is notably present in said pieces, and some have attributed it to the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe itself, in the blue-green mantle, as it is said to acquire different tones depending on the viewer's

**Fig. 4** Brooch in the neck of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City

angle.[9] As interpretations vary from *tlamatini* to *tlamatini*, it is important to remember that there is no written tradition on the iconographic hermeneutics of the Image or known testimony that would allow us to know what the Nahuas believed when seeing the Image. However, there are more common traits that are part of a general interpretive tradition.

Another hermeneutical analysis could be the **brooch** around the neck of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Fig. 4). Inside the circular brooch, a black cross is visible.[10]

[9] Probably the first author to express this was Mariano Fernandez de Echeverría y Veytia: "el manto es azul, aunque no es siempre igual, porque unas veces es más vivo y otras más apegado, y con la frecuencia de visitar yo este santuario todos los sábados, hice particular reflejo en esta varición del color del manto, que según las luces sube o baja, unas veces parece muy obscuro, otras claro, y las más está el color tan bajo, que más parece verde mar, que azul." (Fernandez de Echeverría y Veytia in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, 550).

[10] Florencia has said: "En medio de su gargantilla de oro, tiene lugar una Santa Cruz: que no hay piedra más preciosa ni diamante de más estima para MARIA, que la Snta Cruz. De ella pende una perla, que por lo raro y grande, denota que es la peregrina de las criaturas ya que viste gala de tanto adorno" (Anonimous author cited by Florencia 1895, 41).

The Nahua connection is the precious stone of obsidian, which has had a plethora of religious meanings, not to mention the practical uses it has had all over Mesoamerica. Here, it is helpful to cite archaeologist Nicholas Saunders to understand the weight of this stone and its relation to the Nahua religious cosmovision: "Aztecs believed that, as Master of Fate, Tezcatlipoca observed the world reflected in his magical obsidian mirror from his shrine known as the ´House of Mirrors´ […] Such was the semantic proximity of material and deity that the term *itztli* (obsidian) was considered a manifestation of Tezcatlipoca" (Saunders 2001, 222).

Could this brooch be considered a gateway for the divine to make itself present, gazing, interacting in the world? How can this concept be Christianized, especially when one of the most iconic uses for this stone was ritual killing? More clarification can be obtained through the use the Nahua made of obsidian on the effigies of their deities, a practice missionaries assumed without necessarily knowing the complete symbolism. Art Historian Elizabeth Weismann tells us that.

> Only one sort of "pagan symbolism" appears among the sixteenth-century crosses. It is not sculpture, nor representational at all, but consists of a disk of obsidian inset at the crossing […] Aztec idols often have such a disk of semi-precious stone, like obsidian or jadeite, set into the torso: this disk represents the godhead, the soul, giving life to the graven image. Once again the cross is being identified with the divinity, just as it seemed to be in the anthropomorphic cross of Atzacoalco (Weismann 2014, 13).

The obsidian disk is not only found on the torso of Aztec deities, but sometimes also in the chest-neck area (Fig. 5). Mendieta refers to this: "And so they placed in the breasts of idols fine stones that they said were their hearts, as if they were to give those stones some life to the dead and the statues" (Mendieta 1993, Bk. II, Chpt. XL, 162).

It could be said that obsidian, like other precious stones, animates materiality and may be a *nepantla* state between the divine world and this one, as the image-*ixiptla* could mediate this relation with the transcendental. How can this be reconciled with Catholicism, other than by understanding the Virgin as a mediator and intercessor before God, as her "obsidian" brooch now bears the cross to assume this divine connection bond?

Furthermore, it must be noted that within the Aztec tradition, metaphors describe human activity with images of everyday life. Art Historian Jaime Lara describes a particular Nahua metaphor that resonates in this particular instance: "to indoctrinate by way of paradigm or exemplar was to ´see in a mirror´" (Lara 2008, 5). If this brooch is a mirror, the teaching by example would be a via *crucis* while still assimilating the Aztec spirit of seeking through an obsidian mirror image. The jewel-wearing signs nobility as was the case with her gaze, and blue-green mantle.

Researchers Arturo A. Rocha and David Sánchez Sánchez in "El collar y el prendedor de la Virgen de Guadalupe de México" have studied other relational points of the brooch within the Nahua cosmovision. The couplet *in cozcatl in quetzalli* (cozcatl quetzalli. | Nahuatl Dictionary n.d.) means "jewelry, feathers," yet metaphorically signifies "sons and daughters." The Nahuatl couplet also refers to

**Fig. 5** Coatlicue (left) and Xiuhtecuhtli, Mexica Room, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City

the preciousness of this jewel, whose applied meaning is *emerging life*, especially considering how parents called their children dear as jewels and quetzal feathers.

The small *cozcatl* (necklace) or *pepeyoctli* (pendant) is carried over with more weight as an image when the researchers describe how Sahagún's informants described the concept of *the emerging life*, dealing with *tonalli*, as a drop of life force, as a gift from up high. The brooch as a Guadalupan assimilation (whether inculturation-transculturation, syncretism, or hybridity) therefore has many meanings. In a Christian view, Jesus, as present in the brooch, is known to be that preciousness by whose cross life emerges (Rocha and Sánchez 2021, 39 s). Additionally, in *Codex Tudela*, "yndia mexicana" making chocolate is portrayed with an emblem on her upper chest. These samples should be used in further studies to relate the Nahua traits in Guadalupan iconography. The following section will continue the synthesis of hermeneutical points in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe by discerning special ambits of Nahua oral tradition as recorded in various sources (Fig. 6).

## *Nepapan iximachoca*, Diverse Knowledge

*Huehuehtlatolli*, the ancient word, is a compendium of admonitions, advice, and general wisdom transmitted from generation to generation, typically from father to son, mother to daughter, elders to youngsters, and parents to newlyweds. We have

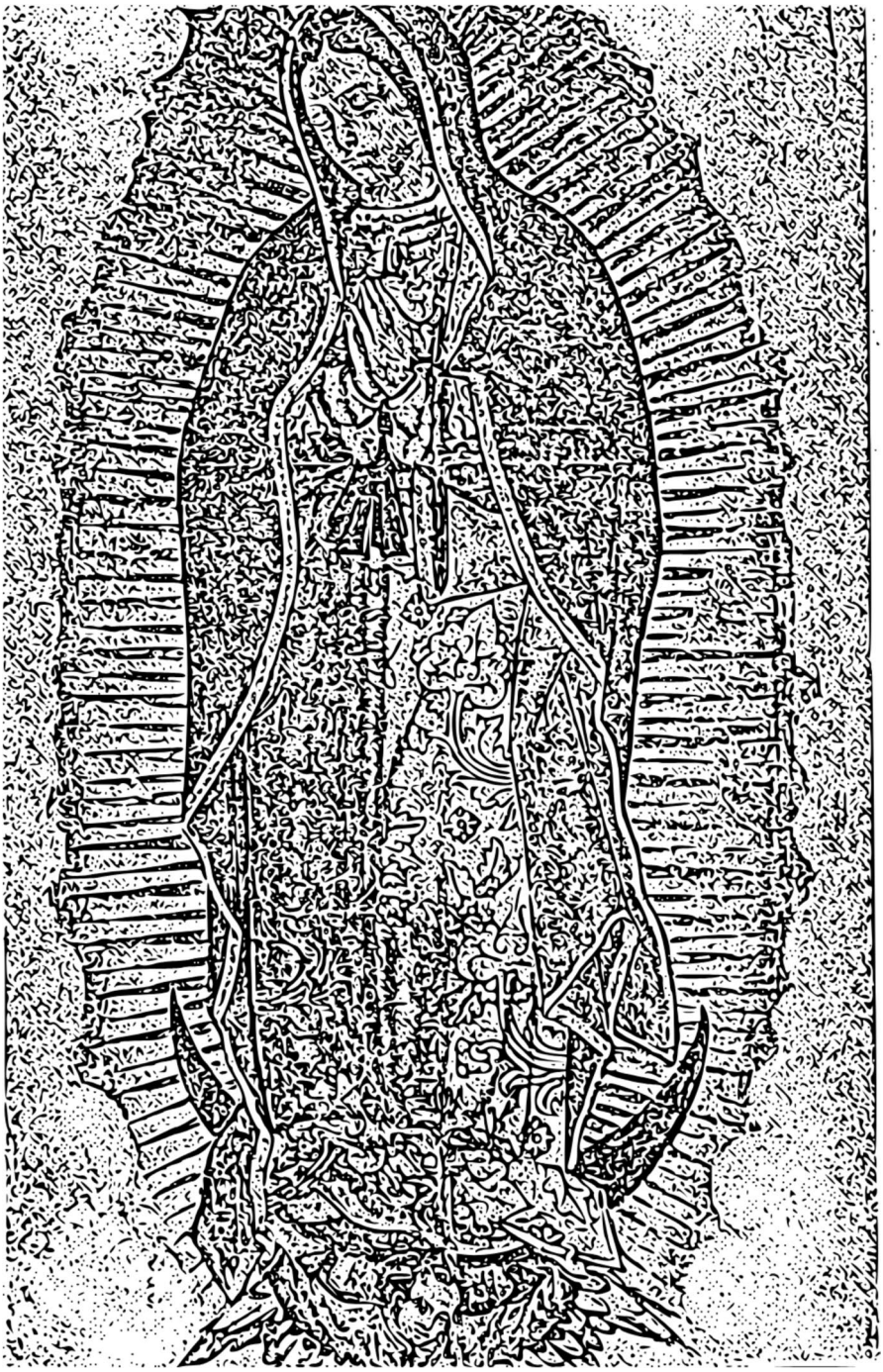

**Fig. 6** Computer-generated outline of Our Lady of Guadalupe

this ancient wisdom from the Nahua people's effort to treasure their culture through missionary assistance, especially that of Sahagún's assistance in Book VI of the *Florentine Codex* and Andrés de Olmos through fray Juan Bautista Viseo. Much advice and mentorship of yore is reflected in Juan Diego's humble and meek behavior; this wisdom is present, for example, when he describes himself as his elders have described themselves: "utensilio para cargar," a medium to carry a heavy burden (León Portilla and Silva Galeana 1991, 167) cf. *Nican Mopohua* v. 55.

The *Huehuehtlatolli* will guide us in some gesture embodiments that could be interpreted as present in the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The first sage advice is that given to the daughter by the mother about respect: "And bow down, bow your head before people, be respectful with people, be fearful of them […] serenely, calmly, live, love people, beg them, be kind to them" (León Portilla and Silva Galeana 1991, 94). The mother explicitly tells her daughter to bow her head, to tilt it down as a sign of respect; this gesture is very much present in Our Lady of Guadalupe's **head inclination** or **tilt**.

This same advice is also given by those who are mothers and fathers, the rulers. The guidance is given to their people, their sons and daughters, who ought not to be prideful or vain, despite being of great lineage; they must avoid this: "It is very necessary that you bow your head, that you bow with humility, that you have affection for each other…" (León Portilla and Silva Galeana 1991, 173). This notion is still believed through oral tradition in many pueblos of Mexico, especially those where there has been little Western interaction until recently.

Another image commonly seen in the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is the **sun** and its relation to *Tonatiuh* or *Huitzilopochtli*. It is commonly assumed that she eclipses the ancient gods and presents the fulfillment of humans' desire for cosmic order in her Son, Jesus. A Nahua reading, however, must include a complete analysis of the sun metaphor in this image. We will say that the stages of the sun have been understood to mark the very life of humans; a more expansive explanation of the plethora of sun metaphors can be found in Emily Umberger's "Events Commemorated by Date Plaques at the Templo Mayo" (Boone et al. 1987, 411). The **stars** in the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe have also led various researchers to investigate the celestial relation between the Anahuac sky and her blue-green mantle. The first researchers to come up with this relation were Dr. Homero Hernandez Illescas and theologian Mario Rojas (1951). These studies have led to conjectures that date her last apparition to the winter solstice of 1531 (and this same line of studies presents the figure containing the golden ratio), and they go as far as to affirm that music can be abstracted from the star positions(Ojeda Llanes 2005, 2010, 2012). We do not agree or endorse such research.

Another trait associated with the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is her **skin color**. She is usually referred to as *La Morenita*, meaning that she is mestiza, her countenance is not theirs or mine, but ours, of both peoples, as it is traditionally understood. She tells Juan Diego she is the mother of those who live in these lands and of all other lands, of all peoples; she is the mother of those who seek her, those who come weeping for her aid; there, in her sacred little house, she will remedy our pains. Let us recall that like the Aztecs' foundational *teocalli*, Our Lady of Guadalupe seeks to make this sacred precinct the center of a new civilization, one that

excludes no one. It is furthermore known that her mestizo countenance welcomes the downtrodden. This last idea, of course, is more interpretative.

Historian Mariano Cuevas published Fray Juan de Zumarraga's letter to Philip II, which portrayed how mestizo kids were perceived in the first years after the Conquest of Mexico, and it is not the image of the "Raza Cósmica," a national pride that has prevailed in the last centuries. The prelate asserts that there were "orphaned children, children of Spaniards and Indian women, who were lost in the fields, without law or faith, eating raw meat" (Cuevas 1928, vol. 1, 392). Social trauma has forgotten that mestizos were not loved; they reminded the Indigenous people about how their women were raped, but Our Lady of Guadalupe, henceforth, assumes this marginalized countenance, re-signifying it.

The hands of Our Lady of Guadalupe are commonly seen as prayerful through the Western gesture, and, considering epistemic reinterpretation, what Lockhart calls "double mistaken identity," a sign is interpreted under its respective cosmovision, which social sciences refer to as cognitive maps. Thus, her hands can also be seen in ritual Indigenous dancing as well. This is complemented by her right foot appearing from within her brown dress, and her left knee bent as revealed in the folds of her dress. Apart from these features, it has commonly been believed that the **dark ribbon** in her belly, above the *Nahui Ollin*, is a multicultural sign of pregnancy present in many civilizations.[11]

Another feature, this one held by tradition, rather than conferred from Nahua cosmovision, is the contentious crown. The conventional iconography has described the Immaculate Conception thusly: *Et signum magnum apparuit in cælo: mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus ejus, et in capite ejus corona stellarum duodecim* (Apocalypsis 12:1 Vulg). What we know about the crown is that Baltazar de Echave's 1606 painting featured the crown, whereas the Image itself was altered before the Pontifical Coronation in 1895, sparking debate over its originality. A concise history of this matter is provided by Arturo Rocha's article "Los"N"resplandores de la Virgen de Guadalupe" where he argues that she possessed it until 1887 (Rocha 2022).

A trait that can be contrasted with the Nahua culture is the **hairstyle** and **head tilt** Our Lady of Guadalupe assumes.[12] Our Lady of Guadalupe represents the ideals present in the good noblewomen (*Florentine Codex*, Bk. X, fol. 35r). She opposes the lewd woman who "paints her cheeks, she darkens her teeth, she puts cochineal on her teeth, her hair hangs loose *half-combed* she forms horns with her hair. She struts, she walks shamefully, she walks with *her head raised*, she walks moving her

[11] A similar case in a different culture is present the Vasija de mujer embarazada de kaminal jujutsu (Rocha 2018, p. 33). This trace complements itself with the four-petal flower in her belly signaling her divine maternity.

[12] Javier Clavijero asserts: "Sus cabellos negros están arreglados con sencillez al modo mexicano" (Clavijero in Torre Villar and Navarro de Anda 1982, p. 586). Furthermore, albeit not Aztec, a similar phenomenon was present among Maya people; Fray Diego de Landa, describing the indigenous women of Yucatan in chapter XXXI of his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* says "Traían cabellos muy largos y hacían y hacen de ellos muy galán tocado partido en dos partes y trenzábanselos para otro modo de tocado. A las mozas por casar, suelen las madres curiosas curárselos con tanto cuidado que he visto muchas indias de tan curiosos cabellos como curiosas españolas. A las muchachas hasta que son grandecitas se los trenzan en cuatro cuernos y en dos, que les parecen muy bien.".

head contemptuously" (López Austin 1988, 278; Clendinnen 2014, 70, 274). Additionally, she is modest as she is well covered in clothes (*Florentine Codex*, Bk. X, fol. 135v).

*Codex Mendoza* in fol. 60r, and especially in fol. 61r, represents an Aztec marriage (also seen in the Florentine Codex, Bk. VI, chapter 23; Bk. II, chapter 19), illustrating the differentiation between married women and maidens. In Bk. VIII, chapter 15, Sahagún's informants tell us that some women, whom we suspect are married, "the young girls´ lock of hair, or the hair [twisted with a black cord and] wound about the head." From this, we can conjecture that women who were not married had straight hair (as marginalized *ahuiani*); hairstyle could attest to a change in social status (Schroeder and Poole 2007, 69; Szo 2011, 163).

## A Christian Overview

What could be interpreted as a reading of the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in an amorous sense is that we see a woman who emerges from mists and clouds, a heavenly state, eclipsing and overshadowing the one who nourishes, the sun. This woman is stepping on an eclipsed moon (Apocalypse 12); she is standing in the middle of the cosmos, in the center of the universe. She is accompanied, perhaps protected, by an eagle-angel, whose valuable feathers bear the colors of the four corners of the world. This woman is inclining her head in a sign of reverence and respect, and her hair shows she is a maiden.

This maiden is covered by her blue-green mantle, whose celestial spheres guide harvests and establish time, and the dress maps space, the sacred mounts, and the valley itself is contoured around precious flowers and divine truth. She wears a brooch, reflecting the divine within herself, as was customary in this land when stones were placed in the statues of the deities to be seen through them. She is in prayer, as is with child, as the ribbon shows, but she is a maiden; how can this be?

This woman shows there is someone greater than herself. The four-petal flower is the center of her message, of her being. This child is why she asks a lowly indigenous to intercede for her, to build her Son a sacred little temple, to commence a new civilization, a new era in this four-movement, in this *Nahui Ollin*, perhaps a new time–space of a different type of oblation. All the other ages ended in tragic disasters; this new one begins with a promise, with more than an alliance, a covenant. This is what the divine established amidst significant (still-lived) turbulence, promising paradise, redemption, and therefore appeasement from earthly woes.

## A Nahua Overview

This woman is dancing, worshiping with great reverence, coming from a place unknown, from a place of great promise. Nevertheless, as a mother, she has not known a man and wishes to start a new people, just as *Coatlicue* did with her son in *Coatepec*, recreating the cosmic battle in search of life maintenance. This woman wears the sun, our subsistence, where the women who have died at childbirth, *cihuateteo*, dwell, where those great life warriors thrive.

This maiden stands in *Mexico*, guarded by an eagle warrior whose feathers are precious and whose colors flank the cosmos itself. Her dress bears the Anahuac valley, the shore of the waters, and she mantles the stars, which mold the calendars. We see ourselves in her, but she instructs us of her might, which does not reside in her, but in her sacred womb, one that symbolizes a new era, a new set of rituals, a new future that may be as hard as the other eras, but marked with a sign of hope in her countenance, one that belongs to us and to the newcomers, those who have acted like devils while preaching like angels. In her mestizo face, we see hope in this new mysterious creed that has come from a brave old world.

## Conclusion

The complex nature of an Image, whose interpretations have varied due to historical and social factors, has given rise to different perspectives on seeing Our Lady of Guadalupe as a criolla banner, Marian apparition, syncretic resistance force, catechesis/pastoral adaptation, or an indigenous artistic commission. Epistemic frameworks such as hybridity, inculturation-transculturation, or syncretism correspond to how these interpretations are assumed, coupled with how historical data is hermeneutically analyzed. This scientific endeavor has not sided with any one hermeneutical approach but has placed them all before the scholar and believer, allowing them to seek the *root*, the *truth* of who the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is.

This iconographic study of the Nahua cosmovision showcases and presents at least one image from a Christian and Nahua religious perspective. It is thus necessary to understand the complexity of the iconographic reading in its signs, symbols, glyphs, and other elements to penetrate the lived experience of the interpreter who has immersed themselves in the red and black ink, the wisdom of the topographic, temporal, historical, religious, and ritualistic elements, whose interrelations may convey a synesthetic message.

This Image reading-abstraction, for us today, would have to be situated within a proper epistemic system that would not reduce to cultural or societal conditions or ineffable consonants the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We have presented inculturation-transculturation, syncretism, and hybridity as pathways for the contemporary reader's discernment of this Image reading, especially on the eve of the 500th anniversary of the apparition. We have not, however, pretended to know what the Image meant to Indigenous people of the sixteenth century but have conjectured meanings based on Aztec evidence found in extant Indigenous sources that themselves have Christian influence.

The dialogue between how a personal encounter with the divine as described by Eliade with the social-religious dynamism that creates an *edifice of symbols* (as Victor Turner says) can further shed light on how Our Lady of Guadalupe could have been perceived within the Nahua peoples when considering aspects such as the flower-mountains, *Nahui Ollin*, the sun, the moon, blue-green mantle, mauve-pink dress, the angel, its colorful feathers, the clouds-mists, her corporal posture, hair, dark ribbon, and finally her mestizo countenance that has made believers and non-believers identify with her motherly, comforting message of hope.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank Arturo Rocha, Eduardo Ángel Cruz, Louise Burkhart, Ben Leeming, and Timothy Matovina for their support.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The author declares no competing interests.



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