Copalli Kinship. Mesoamerican Metaphysics as a Foundation for Relationality with Other-than-Human Entities

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Accessibility
Copalli Kinship.
Mesoamerican Metaphysics as a Foundation for Relationality with Other-than-Human Entities

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An Autobiography of Copalli

Pan Veracruz, Mexico tlalli, na notoca iezzo cuahuitl. In Veracruz, Mexico my name is iezzo cuahuitl, blood of trees.\(^1\) I do in fact bleed from trees, emerging from slices in the bark of over 100 species, I coagulate at the surface and harden like a scab. For generations I have entered the world as a thick resin oozing and hardened onto trunks, leaves, and maguey spines. I have burned atop charcoal, ascended into sky, liquified into tea, molded onto teeth, patched over wounds, inhaled into lungs, mixed into maize, melted on altars, shaped into Xiuhtecutli and Tlaloqueh, glued together knives and stringed instruments, I have sunk into lakes and cenotes. Much of this I do alongside human relatives, Indigenous people, some of whom call themselves macehualmeh. We have co-evolved on these lands, with this air, in this network of multi-species relations. Many of these relations are made visible in our ritual encounters. Just as I am called blood, I am brains, I am heart, I am food. As one story goes, I emerged here (now called Mexico) in the Paleocene period (millions of years ago), my family (now called Burseraceae) branched into over a dozen genera and hundreds of species across the globe.\(^2\) My relatives in Northern Africa are well-known as Frankincense and Myrrh, in Puerto Rico the bleeding trees are named Tabono from a Taino word, in South America Palo Santo is burned, and in the Philippines we produce nuts called Pili. All the trees in our family flower with smooth bark that peels away to release aromas. Our seeds have moved with birds, bears, wind, and waves. Our stories are ancient, and our relations cannot be contained in any biogeography or botanical briefing. But

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\(^1\) This is a variant of Nahuatl from Veracruz. Nahuatl is an Indigenous language of Mexico, the language of the Mexica (Aztec) empire, which has been spoken since at least the 15th century CE.; Unless otherwise noted all Spanish and Nahuatl translations to English are my own.

instead of zooming wider into the history of the world and the theories of our movement across oceans and land bridges, we return to the place where it began—Mexico.

Incense pouches drawn by Thelma Sullivan (from Codex Borbonicus pages 20, 4, 22).³

There are many ways to follow my scent through time and space, yet being a solid that turns to smoke, I am not always easy to track without storytellers or technology. But I am a resilient material and I tend to leave behind residue. I do not disintegrate in water.⁴ I leave a trace on wood, stone, and ceramics. I have stayed buried in the soil of Tenochtitlan alongside skulls and shells, in balls and bars, shaped into effigies animal, human, and divine. My fragrance remains even after hundreds of years.⁵ Much earlier, before 400 CE in Etlatongo, Oaxaca there is evidence of my presence.⁶ In hearths from the Formative Period, near one of the earliest Mesoamerican ballcourts, wood from copal trees burns sweet.⁷ Teotihuacán’s residential precinct also shows signs of central altars for communal ceremonies—I was surely there too, in the city of the gods.⁸ In the northern Maya lowlands of the Yucatán Peninsula, the Cenote

³ Thelma Sullivan Nahua research papers, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C.
⁴ United States Forest Service, “Resins,” accessed May 2023. https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/ethnobotany/resins.shtml; the copal from the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá and other figurines from near Tenochtitlan have been preserved by water.
⁵ According to Leonardo López Luján, copal that has been excavated after five centuries buried beneath Mexico City still maintains its characteristic scent; Leonardo López Luján, Humo Aromático para los dioses: una ofrenda sahumeradores al pie del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan, (México, DF: Museo de Templo Mayor, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia: Abril-Agosto 2012).
⁶ Victor Salazar Chávez (George Washington University, Archaeology PhD candidate) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ David Carballo (Boston University Professor of Archaeology) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
Sagrado of Chichén Itzá once held ritual deposits of my resin, this blood preserved by the water, I rested there as early as the Post-Classic Period (1250) and stayed there until excavations in the 20th century. I am present in practically every ritual in the Post-Classic Period of the Mexica. In the archaeological record at the Templo Mayor I am one of the most frequently offered materials alongside shells. El Nevado de Toluca, Oaxaca, Cholula, I’ve been there too. Of course, one lasting remnant of our ritual relationships is the censer, the popoxcomitl, the tlemaitl. Theater style, carefully molded and with detailed decorations, handheld with a claw or talon.

Then there are the painted and carved stories that bridge the space between Pre-Columbian times and the colonial period. Painted incense bags and swirling volutes of smoke emerge from incense burners all throughout the Codex Cihuacoatl (Borbonicus). Maya glyphs show scattering incense (though the circles could be incense, blood, or seeds—they are drawn the same) from the Classic Period onward. During the height of the Mexica empire, every eight days the towns of Tepequacuilco and Tlachco harvested my trees to produce a tribute of 400 baskets of white copalli and 8,000 balls of my body ready to be refined.

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10 I primarily use the term Mexica, though Aztec and Nahua are also well-known and interchangeable terms.
12 Popoxcomitl refers to the sahumador or censer which is shaped like a goblet, it is likely a combination of the Nahuatl terms “popoa” (the verb to clean or limpiar) or “poqui” (the verb for smoke or fumar) combined with “comitl” (a ceramic pot or olla). The other type regularly used is the tlemaitl, which is often called a ladle in English for the long handle and the spoon-like censer at the end.; https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/
13 For example, in Sala 2 of the Templo Mayor museum in Mexico City there are examples of large theater style censers and also the handheld censers with talons, claws, or human appendages as the handle.; See: Templo Mayor, “Ritual y Sacrificio” accessed May 2023. templomayor.inah.gob.mx/salas-del-museo/sala-2-ritual-y-sacrificio
14 “John Montgomery Dictionary of Maya Hieroglyphs” accessed May 2023, research.famsi.org/montgomery_dictonary
15 Codex Mendoza, Fol 37 r., accessed May 2023, codicemendoza.inah.gob.mx
I was present when the Spanish arrived in the Yucatán in 1519, I filled the air and caught the attention of the chroniclers, burning sweet but strong in the hands of the Indigenous Priests. For a while, the Spanish allowed me to stay. They wrote my name in the Florentine Codex and Codex Chimalpopoca, incense bags are drawn in the Codex Tudela and Codex Azoyú. The Codex Borbonicus tells of my offerings, and I participate in trickery in the Popol Wuj. But little by little, as the colonial period intensified, was replaced with distant kin, Frankincense. This was the smoke they knew in European Catholic cathedrals. Eventually, with the Papal Bull of 1537, they worried that I reminded my human relatives of “demonic gods.”

But I never truly left. I have moved in ways tangible and intangible, as hardened resin and ethereal billows of smoke. I have been excavated and contained in museum storage. Today, in all these places, Etlatango, Chichén Itzá, Teotihuacán, Tenochtitlan, though perhaps by different names and in new ways, I am still swirling, relating, bleeding from trees.

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16 White copal incense in maguey and incense bag among other tribute materials from Codex Mendoza fol. 37r (MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1), courtesy of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford
17 See the chronicles of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Fray Diego Durán, Fray Diego de Landa.
18 See: Pope Paul III, “In the Name of the Holy... (Papal Bull of Pope Paul III)” (Publisher not identified: 1537). https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667590/
Introduction:

It is risky to write an autobiography in copal’s voice. Certainly, there is arrogance in attempting this type of historical account of such a powerful, prevalent entity. As I hoped to convey, copal is not only abundant but also deeply important for understanding Mesoamerica and Indigenous religious traditions of Mexico. There are copal farmers, ritual specialists, Indigenous and Mexican elders, and kin who could easily articulate an alternative and improved version of this story. Yet, I wrote from the only perspective I have, my own, one that is shared with copal primarily through a museum collection. While I too know copal from ceremonies both North and South of the Mexico-U.S. border, I aspire to deeper familiarity and kinship. As a Xicana (Mexican American woman), I consider copalli to be an ancestral guide and teacher. I look to copal as a medicinal entity who has, so far, been generous with me in my own ritual contexts. I have decided to open this paper with this first-person narrative as an imaginative

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19 Grupo Tlaloc Danzantes holding a popoxcomitl, Marble, Colorado June 2022. ©Sabrina Lakin, Threw My Lenz Photography
disruption to anthropocentrism and disembodied articulations of history. Because of my relationship with copal in the museum setting here at Harvard, I have sought to undermine the objectification of copal as a “dead” or “silent” artifact. I have not found copal to be particularly silent and to the degree that copal (or any Mesoamerican entity) dies, these substances are part of a regenerative world that is ever awakening and activated in cycles of ritual relationships.

Copal has traditionally been understood as blood of trees, a carrier of prayer, an intoxicating smell summoning rain, and as food for the gods.20 I do not seek to disprove any of these interpretations. Rather, I seek to expand each of these individual claims by exploring a broader relational ontology in which copal’s interaction with and as blood, smoke, and food are understood as more than mere ritual goods, organic materials, or bounded subjects. In order to do this, I explore the energetic forces known as teotl and ch’ulel (from Nahuatl/Mexica and K’iche’/Maya cosmovisions respectively) and consider their significance in interpreting copal specifically, and for understanding Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican religious traditions more broadly. In this thesis, my main goal is to center copal resin as an other-than-human entity worthy of close investigation and careful interpretation.21 By doing so, I believe that copal, through particularity and in a network of relations, can alter understanding of foundational cosmological realities.

To achieve this, I have divided this paper into three parts. In the first section, I offer a theoretical framing for materiality and relationality that does not prioritize the human actor but pushes our scholarly focus towards interspecies kinship and alternative ontologies.

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21 I have decided to use the term other-than-human when writing about copal as an intentional intervention into anthropocentric approaches to religion. However, throughout this thesis I seek to write with and about copal as a subject, not an object, I avoid impersonal pronouns when possible and hope that my methods match the message of other-than-human importance if not animacy and agency in Mesoamerican metaphysics.
Contemporary scholars such as Marilyn Strathern and Tim Ingold have contributed to this turn and participated in the construction of an interdisciplinary field often called new materialism or new animism. However, their observations are not necessarily “new,” and these ideas can be found before and beyond a post-structuralism context and academic articulations. I acknowledge this intellectual history and its contemporary circumstance as an emerging and urgent dialogue. I aim to cite various sources who, through ethnography or archival research, articulate philosophies that I find rooted relationality or “animism” despite a long history of epistemicide. To this end, I incorporate congruent and complementary theories rooted in Indigenous worlds past and present and take them seriously both as particular, contextual sources of knowledge but also as providing broader insights regarding human and other-than-human relationships. Specifically, from South America I draw on the work of Eduardo Vivieros de Castro and his Amazonian teachers. And of course there is the theoretical framework from Mesoamerica, to which I am oriented primarily by Alfredo López Austin and James Maffie. Acknowledging the Mesoamerican cosmos as interconnected and composed of a singular energetic substance, I will then transition to section two.

In that portion of the paper, I follow the quadripartite structure of the famous *Codex Tezcatlipoca* frontispiece to map copal’s enmeshment with various human and other-than-human entities, many explicit connections and others reconstructed through imagination. Therefore, this second section is primarily focused on the Mexica cosmos, though this can provide possibilities for new comparative interpretations with the Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples. This

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22 Regarding New Materialism see: Jerry Lee Rosiek et al. regarding the necessity for Indigenous ontologies and Gamble et al. regarding various critiques and other “older” materialisms. Note that I am not engaging the most well-known authors in the realm of New Materialism.

23 Eduardo Kohn, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Rodolfo Kusch are important figures in this emerging discourse.
section seeks to identify and tease out “animist” ontologies through the visual and material evidence available.

Finally, in part three, I turn to an urgent contemporary case study of copal from the Maya Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá which is now stored at the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Peabody Museum). In an era of increased attention to museum practices and calls for decolonization, this collection is one of many that do not fall under the legal requirements of the United States according to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990. Ultimately, I aspire to see the museum from the perspective of copal rather than merely treat copal as a case study of the museum. Therefore, my goal is to continue the biography of copal by combining data from The Collections Online database, my own first-hand encounters with copal, and recent scholarship on museum stewardship to highlight the cosmological “choque” (clash) between Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and practices of Anthropology. While these collections were acquired over a century ago, the museum continues as a site of catastrophe, from the perspective of copal and Indigenous cosmovisions. This section grounds the theoretical discussion of materiality and the metaphysical conversation and presents a crisis with pressing ontological and ethical dimensions. My aspiration is to call our attention to a web of relations already present, with copal at the center, and how this applies to other museum collections made up of belongings and ancestors of Indigenous communities around the world. By cultivating consciousness of our interconnectedness, I believe we will become better scholars and better humans.

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24 This will be further articulated in section three. For now, suffice it to say that NAGPRA only applies to federally recognized tribes in the U.S.. Therefore, international artifacts and remains are under the discretion of individual museums and their administrators.
Acknowledgements:

I want to acknowledge the long lineage of human and other-than-human beings who have supported my formal and informal research and this MDiv thesis. I have been a guest here on the land of the Wampanoag and Massachusett peoples, I honor your peoples, your sovereignty, your past, present, and futures. I also acknowledge those who harvest copal trees and resin and the ecosystem that supports this aromatic incense and our relationships. I want to thank my ancestors, particularly the roots that have been silenced and yet welcome and guide me. This thesis was greatly supported in coursework and conversation by Professors Mayra Rivera, David Carrasco, Bill Fash, and Michael Puett. Your care and rigor has elevated my scholarship. Thanks to my various professors and colleagues at Harvard Divinity School for your encouragement and to James Maffie for feedback on various drafts, and Alejandro Santana as I connect my work to ceremony. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the Moses Mesoamerican Archive Research Project for supporting my research trip to Mexico City and to Dumbarton Oaks for providing the time and space for archival research and reading during my Summer Research Fellowship. The David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies has provided me with office space and financial support in the last two years. Harvard University Native American Program, Phil Deloria, and Meredith Vasta’s mentorship regarding the Harvard Peabody Museum has been absolutely lifechanging. I am indebted to the team at IDIEZ, specifically my Nahuatl tutor Sabina Cruz and teacher Abelardo de la Cruz. Finally, I would not be here if it were not for my parents Pablo and Kelly, my blood sisters Sara and Jessy, and my chosen family. Thank you, Michael, Amy, Quinn, Natalia, Rebeccah, Alexa, Samanta, Alfredo, Ron, and Scott. I offer this thesis with deep humility; all mistakes are my own. May this be a blood sacrifice that recycles the energy back into the cosmos. In deepest respect, tlazcamati, copalli.
PART I: Theoretical Foundations & Methodological Commitments

_Flesh is always becoming. Air, water, food, sunlight, and even societies of microorganisms enter our bodies to weave the delicate tissue of our flesh. Imperceptibly to the naked eye, cell by cell, day after day, the world constitutes your body and mine._

– Mayra Rivera, _Poetics of the Flesh_.

Theorizing with Copal

I first came to copal through ceremony and have stayed with copal in a relationship that is rooted in ritual. And still, as a researcher, I found myself following copal, or perhaps copal is following me or pulling me into anthropology, philosophy, and language courses. My own distrust of the coloniality of academia ironically pushed me deeper into libraries, archives, and museums to better understand the complexities of history, culture, and religion. As I became better acquainted with copal over the last few years, I struggled with how to tell these stories and how to think with and from an embodied and ethical place. I am grateful that I learned from my thesis advisor, Professor Mayra Rivera, the necessity of “thinking from both sides of the colonial divide,” referencing Mignolo’s concept of colonial difference, the role of the “contrapunto” to write in the forgotten “other,” as articulated by Said in _Culture and Imperialism_, and the value of imagination, especially when working with ruptured lineages, “latent histories,” and silent/violent gaps in our archives. In Rivera’s Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion she summarized:

Reframing our ways of knowing the world requires also moving beyond generalizations. If colonialism extricated nature from culture, Glissant argues, we must now attempt to reestablish those links. To do so, he invited readers to return to the point of entanglement,

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which I interpret here as returning to those moments in which we lost a sense of belonging to the earth and replaced it with flat ideas of territory and the human.\textsuperscript{27}

Adhering to her appeal for scholars of religion to courageously engage with entanglement and belonging, in this section I hope to offer an intellectual context that does not divorce itself from the stickiness of our fundamental, situated interrelatedness. Because I am ultimately asking questions about copal as enmeshed in a world of human and more-than-human entities, I have found myself in two larger overlapping scholarly conversations. The first would be the umbrella of animism and materialism and the second a translation or centering of Indigenous cosmovisions and philosophies as they relate to interspecies kinship. Most of these conversations, though not all, have taken place in anthropology.\textsuperscript{28} In this Venn diagram of scholarship, I see my work as a spatial and temporal bridge, allowing contemporary scholars to speak with Pre-Colonial Mesoamerica, and Pre-Colonial Mesoamerica to speak/push back, and inform our discipline and subdisciplines. Ultimately, I trust that Indigenous writing/speaking and relating/living will help us as scholars and “humans” to think and act in a good way. I begin with a brief introduction to the foundational theorists who inform this project: Marilyn Strathern, Tim Ingold, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Alfredo López Austin, and James Maffie.

Following Marilyn Strathern, I work with copal as “dividual” rather than an individual, meaning that copal cannot be reduced to a bounded entity but rather is a “composite” of relationships.\textsuperscript{29} In \textit{The Gender of the Gift}, Strathern helps to move the discipline of anthropology beyond capitalist categories of ownership while challenging Marcel Mauss’ conceptions of gifts

as merely representation. In other words, she argued that Mauss’ framework reflected the Marxist perspectives of his time and did not sufficiently confront alternative ways of relating. In response, Strathern’s investigation of the Melanesian world allows her to describe ontological possibilities in which substances are in endless exchange and rituals serve to support both human socialization and our visualization of interrelation. Strathern’s concept of the “dividual” (rather than an individual), rejects boundedness and advocates for beings as “composite” of relationships which are dynamic rather than static. Tim Ingold uses the term “meshwork,” to describe a similar reality as Rivera and Strathern: our condition is one of interwoven threads.\(^{30}\) He shares with Strathern the conclusion that entities are not bounded, but rather “unbounded entanglement(s)... in fluid space.”\(^{31}\) However, I also look to Ingold for his engagement with other-than-human entities like plants, animals, and materials. He offers an approach in which these “organisms” or “things” are enlived and active in their relating with their environment.\(^{32}\) Beyond plants and animals, Ingold also wrestles with categories of materiality and nature, including “artifacts” and museums—which I later return to in this paper.\(^{33}\) Ultimately, Ingold says he is “bringing things to life,” and while that is true in the Western academic context, there are other worlds in which “things” did not become dead.\(^{34}\)

Bringing these concepts into Abiayala (Indigenous Americas), and Abiayala into the “ontological turn” in anthropology, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro provides particularly compelling

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\(^{31}\) Ingold, *Being Alive*, 80.

\(^{32}\) Ingold, *Being Alive*, 21.

\(^{33}\) In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna J. Haraway calls herself a “compostist” rather than a “posthumanist,” nevertheless, posthumanism and Science and Technology Studies have also contributed to this conversation. Indigenous voices have often been in the role of the interlocutor, but Kim Tallbear has played a significant role in this space.

\(^{34}\) Ingold, *Being Alive*, 32.
contributions from Amazonia.\textsuperscript{35} Disrupting human-centric hierarchies he introduces a
metaphysics of cannibalism, perspectivism, and multinaturalism.\textsuperscript{36} Regarding cannibalism
Viveiros de Castro refers to ethnographic research with the Araweté and historical research of
the Tupinambá and the “ceremonial consumption.”\textsuperscript{37} This form of consumption is relevant to
copal because it reveals a way of relating to the “other,” whether a human enemy or an entity
from another nature. The other becomes \textit{incorporated} into the body. To avoid reducing the
“other” and to elevate the role of the ritual specialist, Viveiros de Castro argues that
perspectivism is “animism taken to its final conclusion”—rather than assigning animacy one by
one to the non-human world, here “the cosmos is saturated with humanity.”\textsuperscript{38} But this idea of the
human or humanity “becomes a wholly other thing.”\textsuperscript{39} In this framework, aligned with Strathern
and her Melesian interlocutors’ concept of the “dividual,” each body contains multiplicities and
each body has a perspective. While diverse types of bodies do not see the same \textit{things} in their
world, we see in the same \textit{way}. In his classic examples, Viveiros de Castro states that what a
human sees as a muddy puddle, is a “grand ceremonial house” for a tapir and what we see as
blood is beer for a jaguar.\textsuperscript{40} These perspectival differences constitute many natures, hence this
philosophy can be called multinaturalism (notably \textit{not} multiculturalism). This approach informed
the following sections as I sought to interpret copal through Indigenous ways of consuming,
seeing, and relating. Is copal human? How is copal a body through which many “souls” or
“forces” move? What does copal see? While I do not claim that Mesoamerican sources can be

\textsuperscript{35} Abiayala is a term that comes from the Guna people in what is now called Panama. See: Emil Keme and Adam
Coon, “For Abiayala to Live, the Americas Must Die: Toward a Transhemispheric Indigeneity,” \textit{Native American
\textsuperscript{36} Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics: for a Post-Structural Anthropology}. (Minneapolis,
\textsuperscript{37} Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}, 140
\textsuperscript{38} Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}. 194 and 70.
\textsuperscript{39} Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}, 63
\textsuperscript{40} Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}, 62
equated with Amazonian concepts, Amazonian insights can support our reading of Indigenous kinships across contemporary spatial borders and conceptions of time.

Mexican historian, Alfredo López Austin offers the analogue of “souls” which he calls essences. This is at the center of my inquiry and one of the many aspects of Mesoamerican cosmovision that remains open to various interpretations. For López Austin, while the world is made of various types of beings the gods can move through various bodies—their essences occupying plants, animals, and humans.\(^4\) The gods themselves are diverse and their substance can be divided and remixed in many complex ways.\(^5\) For example, this allows Quetzalcoatl to occupy various places at once, including but not limited to humans, painted images, sacrificial bodies, all at once in the motions of becoming, dying, and reconstituting. In the nearly thirty years since López Austin published these ideas in his book *Tamoanchan and Tlalocan*, cohorts of Mexican scholars of history, religion, anthropology, archaeology, and art history have followed in his footsteps, not least his own son, archaeologist and director of the Proyecto Templo Mayor, Leonardo López Luján. Working across the northern border with both López Austin and López Luján, Chicano scholar of religion David Carrasco has deepened our understanding of Mesoamerican cosmovision. Before turning to these voices and the material remains of copal, I want to offer one final, but foundational, theoretical voice from the discipline of philosophy—a space not frequently occupied by Mesoamerican or Indigenous Studies.

In the last few years my theoretical engagement with copal has been guided by James Maffie’s seminal book, *Aztec Philosophy*—an encyclopedic account of Mesoamerican materials and cosmological interpretations. Maffie centers his work on the concept of *teotl*, a “dynamic,
vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy.” This is the only “stuff” of the cosmos according to Maffie, and therefore the cosmos is one of “becoming,” in constant motion animating everything: plants, spirits, animals, gods, humans, and so-called objects. What Maffie calls an “ontological and constitutional monism” is a way of saying that there is only one kind of essence. Similar to the Amazonian acknowledgment that there is distinction across many “natures,” Maffie articulates how, for the Aztecs, the singular energy of teotl is “organized and arranged” in various ways without an ontological hierarchy between god, human, and other-than/more-than humans. This works with López Austin’s description of the essences but argues that they are not distinct substances, rather they are all expressions of teotl.

This idea of teotl, or a core energetic force, is not unique across Mesoamerica, the Americas, or even the world. As David Stuart describes, this form of metaphysics is articulated in the Maya word ch’ulel, which refers to an “animating life force.” The word is derived from the term for god/deity “k’uh, or its variant form ch’uh” that was also applied to “sacred entities or objects” ranging from “animate natural forces to localized patron figures and deified ancestors.” While these words have been translated as “soul” we can see how quickly we slide towards a slippery slope of Western ontologies of the individual. Relying on Maffie throughout this thesis, I look at the entirety of the Mesoamerican cosmos as very alive and empowered by teotl.

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44 Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy* 113.
Methods: Pursuing Pre-, De-, and Anti-Colonial Practices

In this project I weave together various methods. When and where I have access to clear evidence and reliable sources, I rely heavily on them. For Pre-Columbian contexts, this often materializes in archaeology, art history, and associated archives. Primary sources from both colonial and pre-contact context are complicated as a result of colonial violence, the (attempted and fairly successful) destruction of Indigenous knowledge, and religious hegemony of Christianity. Essentially, these sources must always be read critically in terms of our own cultural biases and those of the Spanish which became embedded in the process of preserving, destroying, and documenting Indigenous materials. Therefore, I seek to work within the archival gaps to activate latent histories and reconstruct the knowledge and practices of burned books and ruptured lineages and relationships. Before turning to these material and immaterial sources of knowledge, there are three methodological commitments I wish to clarify:

1. I am dedicated to decolonial ways of being and seeing.47 By this I mean that my research is accountable to Native and Indigenous communities and realities, this work cannot be divorced from material relationships that involve questions of land, power, and liberation. Therefore, I interrogate Western and colonial claims to knowledge and articulations of history and prioritize Indigenous philosophies and ways of being. As Brian Yazzie Burkhart writes:

   American Indian philosophy is concerned with the right road for humans to walk in relation to all that is around them...48 In American Indian philosophy we must maintain our connectedness, we must maintain our relations, and never abandon them in search of understanding, but rather find understanding through them.49

47 Despite the complexity of this word and all the conversations which rightfully seek to guide both researchers and activists, the seeds of this thesis were planted during a college course I took at the University of Oregon taught by Alejandro Vallega over a decade ago where I was introduced to decolonial theory.


This approach requires that, as a researcher and human, I encounter copal and the various other subjects, entities, and materials of this thesis with profound respect. Additionally, heeding the advice and call of Eve Tuck to “suspend damage-centered research,” and Macarena Gómez-Barris’ invitation to move beyond “coloniality and extinction,” my work attempts to support movement towards a decolonial and Indigenous future that centers survivance and builds alternative worlds beyond a colonial imaginary. Finally, this commitment is to reclamation and remembering. Though I am working with sources that are compromised and complicated by the Spanish chroniclers and the context of conquest, I pursue the knowledge that was so heavily demonized and yet moves through materials old and new whispering stories from precolonial times.

2. I am interested in offering historical data and weaving in stories of copal, however, I seek to avoid a “disenchanted” approach or the “historicism” of Europe that Dipesh Chakrabarty critiques for excluding “supernatural” entities—ancestors, ghosts, deities etc. One of my main critiques of Mesoamerican studies today is the ease with which we explain away or ignore the mysterious, “numinous,” or religious dimensions of the pre-contact world reducing them to politics, psychology, or sociology. As I have learned from David Carrasco, religion must not be undervalued. Taking seriously the codices, stories, and material remnants of the past means challenging our own assumptions and avoiding the impulses of multicultural studies, which Viveiros de Castro argues is the “great mistake of anthropology” that “relegat[es] the discourse

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of non-Western natives to the realm of belief (the irrational).”\textsuperscript{53} He insists that Indigenous lives cannot be treated as “anthropological concepts” which makes them into “fictions.”\textsuperscript{54} We can observe this happening over the course of the colonial era. In the codices, the Aztec deities slowly become more and more human in their depictions. Their lightning rods and masks become mere costumes of an exotic and demonic culture. This is a large issue that I will not fully be able to tackle (let alone avoid), however there are a few ways I seek to take seriously Mesoamerican cosmos. First, I write about these entities as real, I do not question veracity. Second, I attempt not to objectify in my language when possible—I do my best to avoid the pronoun of “it” when writing about copal and I work with Nahuatl and Mayan terms when I can do so respectfully. Finally, I intentionally do not attempt to resolve issues of ethics or morality in the Mesoamerican world. I allow for rituals of sacrifice to be uninterrogated and focus my critique on colonial collection practices in the museum.\textsuperscript{55}

3. Finally, I aspire to practice enmeshed relationality, almost as a participant-observer, or scholar-practitioner with the other-than-human world. Ingold encourages the researcher to practice “open-ended, dialogical process of mutual formation.”\textsuperscript{56} And this is what I have attempted with copal resin and incense. To be more specific on this third point, my research includes visits to copal incense that was extracted from a Maya sacred site and is now in museum

\begin{quotation}
Rolando Pérez, “Cannibal Metaphysics by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and The Relative Native by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro” Review of \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}, Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies 21. Viveiros de Castro, \textit{Cannibal Metaphysics}, 187. While I reference Mesoamerican gods/goddesses/deities, I seek to avoid western conceptions of religion/religiosity, particularly the monotheistic theologies which became the hegemonic, colonial powers of these lands. While this is not a primary topic in this thesis, I write with awareness of the looming “west and the rest” framework of religion (See” Mazusawa). For example, I do not consider entities like Tlaloc or Huitzilopochtli to be “gods,” yet, there is a fundamentally distinctive relationship here that requires a reframing of ontology and an appreciation and regard for the “god-likeness” of these figures. Ultimately, following Maffie, they are particularly powerful constellations of energy. This unravels human supremacy and monotheistic impulses in both a concrete and conceptual form—for we and they are part of the cosmos. While I also use gendered pronouns, I also acknowledge that these need to be rethought.
Ingold, \textit{Being Alive}, xv.
\end{quotation}
storage. This will be the subject of part three of this paper but is also integral to my relational commitments to copal as both an ancestral and present relative. As this paper attempts to argue, copal is so much more than a plant by-product and can be experienced and understood as a powerful entity in Mesoamerica. This is where allow the project to take ethical turn. Given my theoretical and methodological commitments, to encounter copal contained in the museum becomes an ethical crisis.

As someone without Maya ancestry and who is not from an Indigenous community, I do not presume any “rights” in my relationship with this collection. Rather, I practice a relationality as ritual, as-if/as-though these were my own ancestors. Kim Tallbear argues that identity is a poor substitute for relations and while acknowledging the importance of descendancy in Indigenous relationality I attempt good relations across known and unknown lineages. I cannot say to what degree all these materials are “alive” or “animate,” it is tempting to overcorrect to say that everything is alive without describing what that means. I have been warned by Indigenous friends and conversation partners that they do not necessarily see everything as alive. Did their ancestors? Who is to say? At present, I return to the concepts of life forces or energetic powers to attempt to understand the cosmos as in motion as a foundational principle. This does not assume an ethic but presents new questions and possibilities for relationality beyond anthropocentrism.

Part II: Copal Enmeshed in Relations

What remains to be seen in innovative strategies for new knowledge is whether the religious dimensions of human experiences can be included... in a truly meaningful and effective way.
– David Carrasco, “Bringing Up the Bodies.”

This section is based on various relational networks between copal and other entities (human, other-than-human, and more-than-human). As an organizing principle, I employ four cardinal directions, as expressed in one Mesoamerican codex, the Codex Tezcatlipoca, and interpreted by scholars of Mesoamerican art, culture, and religion. While I do not view this document as the singular or conclusive guide for understanding time and space in Mesoamerica, I allow it to offer a structural logic. While there is no pure or “authentic” emic approach to the questions I am raising, I hope these methods will favor the internal metaphysics of the Mesoamerican past while including Indigenous philosophies articulated in the present. As Maffie articulates in his talk “The Tonalamatl as ‘Talking Book’: Conversing with Time-Persons in the Key of Life,” the codices must be understood as more than inanimate objects or tools for historical or religious research. Maffie claims them to be alive: “they possess ixtli, or what Dehouve glosses as ‘organs of communication’ (i.e., eyes, nose, ears, mouth) and what’s more, they speak to humans.”

Maffie’s argument is that these books, the ink and the pages, are no different from other “teixiptlahuan” like sacrificial knives, mountains, cut-paper beings, mirrors etc. all of which are animate and agential subjects in the Mesoamerican cosmos. Following Maffie’s interpretation I look to these Mesoamerican materials such as the Codex Tezcatlipoca, copal, and the other entities, as the relational foundation for my larger analysis of the interconnected Mesoamerican cosmos.

62 Ibid.
Quadripartite Cosmos: Codex Tezcatlipoca (Codex Fejérváry-Mayer)

The *Codex Tezcatlipoca* is one of the few surviving Pre-Columbian documents from the Mexica and the first page is the “most often reproduced page of all the Mexican codices.” This well-known document has long been called by the name Fejérváry-Mayer after two Europeans, a Hungarian (Gabriel Fejérváry) and an Englishman (Joseph Mayer). In recent times, scholars have sought to rename these documents according to the contents rather than to maintain names of European collectors or “Western” elite who came to own these books. In this case, due to the prominence of Tezcatlipoca, “the Lord of the Smoking Mirror,” Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez recommend the name *Codex Tezcatlipoca*. I utilize this title as one step

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63 © The Trustees of the British Museum, page 44. Asset 568699001.
65 Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, “Renaming the Mexican Codices.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 15 (2) (2004), 270
66 Jansen and Pérez Jimenez, “Renaming the Mexican Codices,” 268; Mexican scholar Leon de Portilla suggested that this name be changed to *Tonalamatl de los Pochtecas*, however this has not found much support. Despite their encouragement for Indigenous people to participate in the renaming process, their new title is not without critique, given the publishing of their recommendations in the Netherlands and the prevalence of Tezcatlipoca in other documents.
towards better naming practices while remaining open to alternative titles from Indigenous communities and scholars.

The *Codex Tezcatlipoca* displays the shape of the Mexica cosmos, includes the divinatory calendar symbols, and shares structural similarities with the Maya Madrid Codex.\(^67\) As David Carrasco’s foundational scholarship has made clear, the Mexica society was designed according to the four cardinal directions with a ceremonial center. This cosmic pattern can be seen in the design of Tenochtitlan, a city divided into four parts with the Templo Mayor at the center, the Aztec Calendar Stone with the sun god at the center surrounded by the four previous suns, the repetition of the number four in the foundational myth of Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli, or in the four bundles of wood which commence the New Fire Ceremony every fifty-two years.\(^68\) In the *Codex Tezcatlipoca* we find a cosmogram filled with images that can elucidate aspects of the Mexica world and copal’s place within the cosmos. While I will refer primarily to the relationships represented and activated in this document, I also bring in archeological and art historical interpretations to articulate the complex networks in which copal is a primary and powerful participant.

Before exploring copal’s interrelatedness with these entities, allow me to summarize the frontispiece of the *Codex Tezcatlipoca* as interpreted by Elizabeth Hill Boone.

1. At the top of this map is the East: Here we see the color red, deities Iztli and Pilzintecuhtli, a sun disk platform at the base, and a flowering tree.\(^69\)

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\(^67\) According to Bricker in her chapter in *Astronomers, Scribes, Priests* it “may have been a prototype for the Maya version.” Victoria R. Bricker, “A Case for Scribal Interaction: Evidence from the Madrid and Borgia Group Codices,” *Astronomers, Scribes, Priests.* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010), 316.; It is also worth noting that the Madrid Codex page 75-76 has a central image against which the deities are seated resembles a large censer with fire or smoke emerging from the top.


\(^69\) Boone, *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate,* 116, table 9
2. To the left is the North with the color yellow, deities Tepeyollotl and Tlaloc, a bloodletting bowl and rubber ball, and a cypress tree.\textsuperscript{70}

3. At the bottom of the image is the West with the color blue, deities Tlazolteotl and Chalchiuhtlicue, a “moon monster,” platform, and thorn tree.\textsuperscript{71}

4. To the right is the South with the color green, deities Centeotl and Mictlantecuhtli, the mouth of the earth, and a cacao tree.\textsuperscript{72}

5. In the center we have Xiuhtecuhtli, one of the oldest figures in Mesoamerican religion.\textsuperscript{73}

The three main themes I want to note here are those of trees, ritual engagement, and deities. Trees are foundational not only in this account but in the Mexica cosmos at large. Trees are the fount from which copal flows. Returning to López Austin’s interpretations, one creation account begins with four cosmic posts which are at once trees and gods. Flowing through these posts are the “essences” of the deities. And these essences, congruent with Maffie’s articulation, are indeed fluid constellations of various life forces. Carrasco summarizes the importance of these four god-tree entities:

Various gods could be concentrated into one single god, and one god could be multiplied into various gods. Some of the chief gods such as Tlaloc, Ehecatl, and Xiuhtecuhtli were often converted into four gods in order to live in each of the cosmic trees.\textsuperscript{74}

While these are not copal trees, the power of tree bodies can be evidenced by the spirits that move through bark, branches, flowers, and roots. As Doris Heyden, a prominent scholar of Mesoamerica, concludes in her article “El arbol en el mito y el simbolo,” trees are ancestors and teachers who have their own lives, their own blood, and that copal is part of every precontact

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Boone, Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate, 114.
\textsuperscript{74} Carrasco, City of Sacrifice, 182.
ceremony as incense and smoke. Human relationships with trees, copal, and the gods are activated and energized by ritual.

Specifically, ritual is reflected in the *Codex Tezcatlipoca* through the paintings of bloodletting and the particular *trecenas*, or day signs assigned to each cardinal direction. These images of animals and plants are associated with the ritual calendar. As Boone writes, “the painter has used the regular passage of the 260-day ritual count and the continuity of the trecenas to recreate the physical space of the cosmos” this allows for a ritual specialist to “easily locate an individual *trecena* and see the forces governing its days according to its position within this directional world.” None of these images are painted randomly, the four quadrants display the interrelatedness of the cosmos and the ritual relationships at work in specific time-places. Although it could be argued that the east and west are the most prominent in the Mexica mind due to the movement of the sun, the north and south also open up significant dialogues and demonstrate relationships with copal.

Finally, the pattern of deities associated with each direction invites further consideration of how energetic forces and cosmic powers move through both time and space. Articulated in López Austin’s description of the creation mythology, the gods “died in order to exist permanently” and their permanence is expressed as “souls” of stones, trees, humans, stars, etc. The gods being *enclosed* in nature means that they too are not bounded individuals or fixed subjects, much like the Amazonian “human” articulated by Viveiros de Castro or the “dividuals” of Strathern, they take on various bodies. Everything is animate, nothing, not even excrement is

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77 Interestingly, Maffie notes that the north and south do not have a direct translation in Nahuatl, at least not in the way east and west do. He writes: “Indeed, it appears our geometrical directional concepts of North and South have no equivalents in Nahuatl.” Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 221.
too mundane or profane to become a conduit for the essences of deities.\textsuperscript{79} I present copal as interrelated across the cardinal directions in unique ways in order to illustrate the implications of an animate cosmos with activated networks.

![Teocalli from Tenochtitlan featuring priests with incense bags with a central sun glyph.\textsuperscript{80}](image)

**From the East: Copal as Offering to Sun and Huitzilopochtli**

It is unavoidable that the Mexica world is oriented to the sun, and not merely the sun in the sky as we see it. Rather, for the Mexica there are four suns, or creations, before this one. In this particular creation, the sun rises in the east, making it a particularly powerful orientation. Maffie writes that the Mexica called the East *tonaliquizayampa*, meaning “where-when the sun habitually emerges.”\textsuperscript{81} Copal incense is enmeshed within a network of easterly relations which are oriented to solar patterns and the sun god, Huitzilopochtli. In the first chapter of *Primeros Memoriales* Fray Bernadino de Sahagún and the unnamed Nahua scribes recorded that every day before daybreak Nahua mothers and fathers would awaken their children (both boys and girls) to

\textsuperscript{79} López Austin, *Tamoanchan Tlalocan*, 29.

\textsuperscript{80} Image provided by Harvard University Fine Arts Library, repository: Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Mexico.

\textsuperscript{81} Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 78, 498.
make copal offerings in incense ladles made of clay. These offerings of fire and copal were presented to the four directions. Copal was offered alongside human blood as “nourishment” (tlazcaltiliztli) to the fire and to the sun, specifically: “each day when the sun came out, quail were sacrificed and incense was offered. And when the quail was sacrificed, they cut off their heads [and] held them up in offering to the sun.” In these acts towards the beginning of the day, and rising sun in the east display copal as a regenerative offering.

It is well established that human sacrifice and blood can be understood as a “debt payment.” Drawing on Book Two of the Florentine Codex, Carrasco describes this concept of “debt payment” (or nextlaoalli) as part of rejuvenating the cosmos. With particular focus on Huitzilopochtli, the sun god of war, the Aztecs saw these acts of bleeding and death as part of “creation and creative acts” with and by the gods. I would add that copal and other non-human forms of bleeding and sacrificing also fit into this model. Copal is given like a blood sacrifice and acts like blood when offered in fires. Historian Inga Clendinnen writes a visceral comparison:

human blood jets vivid and wet, then darkens… human skin, darkened by the sun, also darkens in the fire, and then bubbles and boils like water… [similarly] Copal resin sweats and bubbles and then transforms to a heavy sweet smoke.

In Maffie’s article, “The Nature of Mexica Ethics,” he reminds the reader that humans (and their blood) are not the default subject of the cosmos, but rather, “are born into and defined

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83 Ibid.
84 Sahagún, Primeros Memoriales, 79.
85 Sahagún, Primeros Memoriales, (Ch 1, paragraph 11), 124.
87 Ibid.
in terms of a world that is always already interwoven with normative actions and relationships.”\textsuperscript{89} In other words, human beings exist within a preexistent networks of relationships in which blood flows, rain falls, lightning strikes, and energetic transfers are eternal and endless. This upends the traditional way in which blood offerings and human sacrifices have been exotified in the study of the Mexica. Human blood and bodily substances can be understood as part of a gift/exchange model within Mesoamerican process metaphysics. Therefore, the ritual process of recycling energy through food, blood, or incense is the eternal becoming of the cosmos. This is tied back to the center of the page through the image of Xiuhtecuhtli, the hearth, the fire, the movement. The sun and the sacrifices associated with Huitzilopochtli connect this direction to the center and to the next direction, the north, through “olin,” or rubber.\textsuperscript{90}

\textbf{Rubber balls in copal from the Sacred Cenote.}\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{90} Maffie, \textit{Aztec Philosophy}, 194.
\textsuperscript{91} Peabody Museum Expedition, E. H. Thompson, Director, 1904-1907. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 07-7-20/C4626.
Northern Networks: Copal, Rubber, and Ancestors

At the base of the Cyprus tree in the northern quadrant is a bloodletting bowl and a ball of rubber. Rubber is a medicinal sap-like latex, much like copal, which bleeds from trees. While widely known for its role in the Mesoamerican ballgame, rubber was also a precious offering often given alongside and mixed with copal resin. Specifically, Eduard Seler notes the recurring offering combination in the Codex Borgia consisting of “a dish with an animal's leg, the sacrificial-blood dish, a rubber ball, and the incense-burner.” Additionally, in Primeros Memoriales Sahagún and Nahua scribes list the offerings given in various rituals, repeatedly copal and rubber are listed, alongside marigolds and paper. While there are various pictorial forms of evidence of copal and rubber in relationship, I have also seen their connection in person. An example of the intimate relationship between copal and rubber can be seen in the Harvard Peabody Museum collection from Maya Sacred Cenote. In the image above, we see balls of rubber inside a copal offering. In my preliminary research, rubber was visible in approximately 10% of the copal samples and is likely sealed inside the resin of many others.

What can we make of this consistent interaction between rubber and copal? Let us consider Nahuatl linguistics in order to further unpack this northern node of relationships. The two key words here are olin and olli. These words sound almost identical, they share a root, and they translate to movement/earthquake and rubber/rubber ball accordingly. While they are

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94 Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, 82-83.
95 I have yet to publish research report and data from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Find selected preliminary results in the appendix.
represented by distinct glyphs, Maffie follows Miguel León-Portilla’s articulation of the connection between them. Specifically, Maffie argues that *olin* (movement) is one of the foundational patterns of becoming and change in Aztec metaphysics by looking at the Nahuatl terms which are linguistically related. Olin shares the root of “yol” which means “to live” and from that we have the core animating energies of *teyolia, tonalli,* and *ihiyotl.* Copal is deeply related to each of these “*olin*” concepts, when burned into smoke copal moves like breath and can be depicted like speech and smoke scrolls. Copal can also be formed into the shape of a heart. Both copal and rubber are dynamic materials that are powerful in Mexica life.

The cardinal direction of the north was associated with the underworld or the afterlife for both Mexica and Maya peoples and these places are also connected to copal. For the K’iche’ Maya, the Popol Wuj tells a story of a red tree resin which serves as a substitute for a maiden whose heart is to be sacrificed.97 She gathers the red incense into a bowl and with the help of owl messengers, she tricks the Xibalban Lords (lords of the “underworld,”) who dry the resin over fire and found the fragrance delicious as blood, allowing the maiden to escape.98 In Nahuatl the north was *Mictlampa* or *Mictlan*—the direction of the ancestors.99 Of course, many of the early chronicles translated this as “the underworld,” “the place of the dead,” and therefore as “hell.”100 But, for the Mexica this was not a fiery place of torture but a place at the middle of the earth, like caves and springs, that were portals for life-force and power. These were places that required long journeys. Related to their ancestors, the Mexica also saw the north as the direction from

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97 According to Vincent Stanzione (Maya translator and scholar) this is likely not copal pom but another type of incense that is very similar, May, 2023.
99 Wood, “Mictlampa,” [https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/mictlampa](https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/mictlampa) and “Mictlan” [https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/mictlan](https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/mictlan); Still today Aztec Danza communities call the north *Mictlampa* and many teachers reference this as the direction of the ancestors for rituals such as Días de Muertos.
100 *Ibid.*; Wood references Alonso de Molina and Sahagún.
which they had migrated, the direction of their place of origin, Chicomoztoc. For the Maya, the sacred cenotes (sinkholes with potable water) were sites of ceremony across the Yucatán Peninsula. Just north of the city of Chichén Itzá was the Sacred Cenote, a place where many layers of the cosmos come together, where copal smoke stretched up into the sky and sunk into the water below. Whether the north is a site of *ollí* or *ollín* (rubber or movement), copal interacts in this network consistently. But of course, it cannot be contained, which brings us to the West.

![Tripod bowl containing copal and greenstone beads.](101)

**The Watery West: Copal, Greenstone, and Fertility Deities**

The west holds intense meaning and energy as the place where the sun leaves the sky.

Maffie summarizes the meaning embedded in the Nahuatl naming of this direction:

In keeping with Mesoamerican naming practices, the Aztecs’ name for West, *tonatiuh iaquian*, doubles as its essence: “the time-place or where-when (-yan) of the sun’s (tonatiuh) customary entering into a hole (aqui).” West was also called *tonalpolihuiyampa* (“where-when the sun habitually perishes”). The name for westerly wind, *tonatiuh iaquampa ehecatl*, likewise doubles as its essence: “the wind from the where-when of the sun’s customary entering into a hole.”

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101 Peabody Museum Expedition, E. H. Thompson, Director, 1904-1907. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 07-7-20/C4561
102 Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 498.
Opposing the power of the east, the west signals a time of uncertainty as the moon rises. As Boone pointed out, this direction on the codex also includes the moon monster. The moon is also associated with flow—menstruation, tides, calendars, and rhythms. However, the moon is not the only powerful figure worth noting in this direction, especially in relationship to copal incense.

The Mexica’s Templo Mayor consisted of two halves: on the right side is the temple of the sun god Huitzilopochtli, on the left is Tlaloc, the god of rain, fertility, storms, and water. Notably, atop this sacred pyramid Tlaloc always held “leather bag full of copal in its left hand.” In addition to this powerful patron god’s grasp on copal, Cecelia Klein and Noali Victoria Lona also write about figurines excavated from what would have been Lake Texcoco, the water surrounding Tenochtitlan. Alongside clay figurines there are also copal figurines, and because of their placement and some of their features, they can be interpreted as Tlaloque (Tlaloc’s “divine assistants” or priests). There are also massive theater-style Tlaloc censers in the precinct, one can easily imagine that the large amounts of copal accounted for in the Codex Mendoza burned here alongside various other offerings.

Like water itself, the deities flow across the cardinal directions on The Codex Tezcatlipoca cosmogram. For example, Tlaloc in the North quadrant, but Chalchiuhtlicue is present in the West. Chalchiuhtlicue is an important goddess who in many ways can be thought of as a feminine or female counterpart to Tlaloc. Her name refers to her jade skirt and the west in this codex and elsewhere is often associated with green and blue colors. Copal is connected to

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104 Klein and Victoria Lona, “Sex in the City,” 360.

105 In the Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures Guilhem Olivier references her as a wife of Tlaloc, though I see her and Tlaloc as equal manifestations of a constellation of energies (in Maffie’s framing of Mesoamerican metaphysics); Guilhem Olivier, trans. Susan Romanosky, “Chalchiuhtlicue,” Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures (Published Online: Oxford University Press, 2006).
these powerful figures visually; the white and yellow incense is found intimately connected with greenstones.

In the Harvard Peabody Museum collection, over 15% of the sample included some type of greenstone or jadeite element. In six out of 15 of these offerings, a greenstone was placed on the surface at the center of the copal, in others they were scattered alongside shells, ear spoons, beads, rubber, among others.\(^{106}\) While these samples are from the Maya Sacred Cenote, there are many studies that make clear connections between Chaak and Tlaloc, both of whom are the rain and water deities in Mesoamerica.\(^{107}\) This data requires further analysis beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is likely that these materials were part of a divination or calendrical ritual, many of which are related to rain, agriculture, and fertility. Regardless of their specific meanings or functions, there are clearly a multitude of dynamic relationships. Copal and greenstone are both profoundly connected to water and the water deities, and their combinations make powerful energetic constellations when burned and/or thrown into the cenote. The west merges with the south when it comes to blue-green colors and themes of fertility, consumption, and rebirth.

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\(^{106}\) See appendix.

South: Copal and Consumption, Rebirth and the Mouth of the Earth

As the fourth cardinal direction, placed to the right in the teixiptla of the Codex Tezcatlipoca we find the southern space, huitzlampa, the “place of thorns.” This quadrant contains prominent connections with maize, rabbits, cacao, and the “mouth of the earth.”

Alongside a common understanding of copal as blood offering (in the eastern direction) or as a smoky carrier of prayers (which I will articulate in the next section), copal has also been categorized as a food substance. This is not entirely an abstraction or solely a spiritual metaphor. In fact, copal is digestible in many forms. Copal and pom bark or resin can be consumed as a tea, and a tincture can be made to treat mouth sores or missing teeth. Beyond these human medicinal uses, the gods are said to be fond of copal as food. Namely, there are documented cases of copal mixed with yellow corn and thrown into ceremonial fires both past and present. Notably, 20th century Lacandón Maya believe that when pom incense is burned “it transformed into tortillas, which the gods consume.”

Furthermore, Carrasco argues in his article “Cosmic Jaws: We Eat the Gods and the Gods Eat Us,” that the Mexica were “obsessed with the problems and possibilities of eating.” Carrasco claims that this amounts to “Eating as Religion” (emphasis in the original) and that for the Mexica, the sky is a devouring mouth, and the earth is a gaping jaw. In the southern quadrant we see corresponding images for this theme of consumption: the god images of Centeotl and

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108 Maffie, Aztec Philosophy, 221.
111 Ibid.
112 Quoted in Case et al., 194.
114 Ibid.
Mictlantecuhtli, the mouth of the earth, and a cacao tree. Carrasco draws our attention to the crocodilian monster, the skull of Mictlantecuhtli, and the blooming tree. While the first two are seemingly agents of death, once again we see the overlap of life and death. Just as copal is burned or “consumed” in fire, it becomes a new substance and offers healing and life. Consumption in Mesoamerican cosmovision intertwines life and death.

**Stone Huehueteteotl censer with copal nose-ornament from Teotihuacan.**

**Central Umbilical Cord of Fire and Smoke: Xiuhctecuhtli and Copal**

While the corners of the frontispiece of *Codex Tezcatlipoca* contain the dismembered body parts of Tezcatlipoca, it is the fire god of Xiuhctecuhtli who occupies the middle. According to López Luján, Xiuhctecuhtli (Mexica God of Fire) was understood to exist on the *axis mundi*, dwelling “in the center of the universe, in the navel of the world.”

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115 Photo by author from the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Catalogue Number 09.0-02569.

116 López Luján, *Offerings of the Templo Mayor*, 145.
too, as it was “cast into the flames of Xiuhtecuhtli” to determine the right moment for divination.\textsuperscript{117} This is a sort of fifth space as the four directions of the Mexica always have a referential center.\textsuperscript{118} To conclude section two, I acknowledge the central role of fire and the shapeshifting or \textit{becoming} of copal when heated, melted, and transformed to smoke.

Smoke has been interpreted in many ways, and the ephemerality is hard to capture, even with words, and yet, Nahua \textit{tlacuiloque} (scribes and painters) repeatedly included smoke in the codices. A popular way to represent smoke is through the volute shape, a glyph also used for speech, song, breath, divine incantations, and conveying rulership.\textsuperscript{119} I read these paintings of smoke as a materialization of \textit{teotl}, as representatives or agents of the cosmos, a spiral of “ceaseless becoming and transforming.”\textsuperscript{120} This is partly inspired by Patrick Hajovsky who offers a careful reading of the volutes as speech scrolls. Hajovsky notes that speech and breath are “related to the human creative force of naming” and that often associated with songs and “orations in ritual engagements.”\textsuperscript{121} I find that Hajovsky’s association of sacred life forces with and through the volute shaped speech glyph can be extended to smoke glyphs. Regardless of the specific action portrayed, they are “ephemeral forms… tied to ideas of transience,” connected to \textit{teotl} through \textit{tonalli}.\textsuperscript{122} Since for the Mexica “everything in the world… things, animals, people, transitory phenomena had the capacity to manifest some aspect of the sacred.”\textsuperscript{123} Certainly, since \textit{teotl} is infused in everything, ontological boundaries are blurred, and relationships can be

\textsuperscript{117} Cited in Carrasco, \textit{City of Sacrifice}, 182.
\textsuperscript{118} While many Indigenous communities honor the four directions, some say seven to include the center, the above, and the below.
\textsuperscript{120} Maffie, \textit{Aztec Philosophy}, 355.
\textsuperscript{121} Hajovsky, \textit{On the Lips of Others}, 72, 11.
\textsuperscript{122} Hajovsky, \textit{On the Lips of Others}, 66.
assumed. Yet, these examples of smoke and the shape of the volute found in linguistics and art of the Mexica to tell us something extraordinary. Certainly, capturing smoke and speech was worthwhile for Indigenous scribes and painters. Perhaps, as Hajovsky proposes, “like speech in prayer, smoke… appeals to the gods precisely because it disappears.”¹²⁴ This seems to suggest that copal can be a portal to the cosmos through the smoke at the center.

The four core cardinal directions plus the center, reveal the interconnectedness of the cosmos broadly and also the specific ways that copal is enmeshed with many other entities both human and other-than-human. By highlighting this multitude of relationships, I hope to not only show the prevalence of copal in the Mesoamerican world, but also to disrupt a narrative of rigid ontological categories. Copal smoke escapes the grasp of Western philosophy requires a process metaphysics. As such, I humbly hold open the possibility that smoke and copal are not meant to be fully defined, not by data or by documents including this one. Copal bleeds, burns, and transforms across times and spaces, through many representations, in every direction.

**Part III: Copal in the Museum, Implications and Possibilities**

*To what end does one open the casket and look into the face of death?… Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?… It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.*


Taking seriously copal’s network of relations, which I first described theoretically and then articulated through the cardinal directions in the *Codex Tezcatlipoca*, there is one more space that this investigation must address. Specifically, a site in which copal is currently trapped between ethical and ontological worlds, where the past, present, and future connect. Here, in the

basement of the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Peabody Museum), is a well-known collection of approximately 3,250 archaeological objects from the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá. The materials documented in the Online Database include, but are not limited to, 1,008 greenstones, 156 wood, 153 ceramic, 74 fiber textiles, 127 gold, 98 bones, and 94 copal.126 For over 41,000 days these bodies have been “preserved” by toxic chemicals and plastic bags, carefully labeled in wooden trays on metal shelves, in a temperature controlled, humidity-regulated room. But copal, along with these other entities, had a life long before they were transformed into artifacts, property of the museum, and as I will propose, they can have life after the museum as well. Once again, I ask, how can we view the museum from the vantage point of copal, rather than reducing this to a simple case study?

Various copal offerings from the Peabody Museum collection.127

126 Peabody Museum, “Collections: EMuseum,” https://collections.peabody.harvard.edu/collections; Coggins mentions a total of 160 copal offerings (117 which are considered “essentially intact”). This discrepancy is likely due to how fragments are counted and cataloged. The number 93 refers to the online collection listings, some of which contain more than one fragment. I count 94 for my analysis likely due to challenges with advanced searches online; Clemency Coggins, Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichén Itzá, Yucatan: Textiles, Basketry, Stone, Bone, Shell, Ceramics, Wood, Copal, Rubber, Other Organic Materials, and Mammalian Remains, *Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University Press, 1992), 345.

127 Peabody Museum Expedition, E. H. Thompson, Director, 1904-1907. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 07-7-20/C4579, 07-7-20/C4594, 07-7-20/C4602, 07-7-20/C4626, 07-7-20/C4654.
Contextualizing the Collection: Stories of the Cenote

Chichén Itzá, in the northern Maya lowlands of the Yucatán Peninsula is a powerful site and one of the major ceremonial centers of Mesoamerica. These lands contain archaeological evidence suggesting human occupation from approximately 300 BCE through the sixteenth century CE. A short distance north of the city, lies the Sacred Cenote a dedicated ceremonial site and one of the largest sinkholes in the Yucatán measuring 200 feet in diameter and 90 feet down to the water table. The word cenote comes from the Mayan tz’onot meaning “natural well of water,” and this particular sinkhole was called Chen K’u during the 19th century. In geological terms, cenotes are “complex and highly dynamic hydraulic systems” characterized by an opening of an aquifer in which “the surface of the water is exposed.” Because of the lack of rivers and lakes in the peninsula, cenotes were one of the primary sources for potable water but many of them also functioned as a religious portal, a place for ritual. Clemency Chase Coggins argues that there were two phases in which the Sacred Cenote was active for the Maya, from 800-1150 CE and 1250-1539. Over the course of generations a wide range of offerings were deposited: precious stones, human bones, pendants, earspools, bells, figurines, weapons, musical instruments, and of course, copal. The copal was from the later phase of ritual, in the Late Post-Classic Period, Coggins argues, based on evidence from the pigment and shapes of the associated

129 Coggins et al., Cenote of Sacrifice, 27.
132 Coggins et al., Cenote of Sacrifice, 15.
133 Coggins et al., Cenote of Sacrifice, 27.
ceramics. While this second phase was after the “decline” of Chichén Itzá, the Cenote remained a site for pilgrimage and ceremony.

Copal and the other offerings were deep in the cenote, a watery underworld, for hundreds of years, intertwined with tree roots, stone offerings, some preserved by the water while wood and textile entities began to release their energies into all the nearby bodies. Decomposing human, animal, deities, metals, and ceramics on the muddy Cenote floor. Turquoise-browed Motmot birds build their nest in the walls of cenotes, their tails swing back and forth hinting to their Spanish name *pajaro reloj* (clock bird) moving rhythmically like grandfather clocks off tree branches and vines. Their voices echo across a rich tropical soundscape, bouncing off the limestone bedrock which collapsed to open this portal. The relationships I described in section two from Central Mexico can apply to this copal as well: connections to the cardinal directions, fire, trees, smoke, blood, and powerful forces. While these relationships and rituals are dynamic and fluid across time and space, there was a profound rupture at the arrival of the Spanish.

The first Spanish to arrive in the Yucatán were Juan Diaz de Solis and Vicente Yanez Pinzon in 1506. Indigenous resistance and rebellion to Spanish presence was strong for decades and has remained to this day. Yet, the Yucatán eventually became heavily controlled by the Spanish. It wasn’t until after the 1542 conquest by Francisco de Montejo and the 1544 arrival of Bartolomé de las Casas and friars of the order of Santo Domingo, that the conquest of Northern Yucatán was considered to be “completed.”

During the following years, Franciscan Fray Diego de Landa became a prominent figure in destroying the northern Maya world— cruelly

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torturing the people and burning their records in the name of the church— and known for documenting the peoples and practices.135

Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* eventually sparked renewed interest in the Cenote after a French-translation was published in New York in 1864 revealing the fact that the cenote had been a “receptacle of rich offerings,” thus began the 19th and 20th century hunt for these so-called treasures.136 The first recorded attempt to excavate was in 1882, when French explorer Désiré Charnay lowered a bucket from the rim of the cenote into the water.137 However, due to the height of the walls, the depth of the water, the stones, and the density of trees and roots below he was unsuccessful. Then, in March of 1904, Edward Herbert Thompson, then-U.S. consul in Mérida, Yucatán, purchased the Hacienda Chichén Itzá and began his own excavation attempts, the results of which constitute the Peabody Museum collection.

Thompson first lowered an “orange peel” bucket from the rim into the cenote which confirmed the presence of Maya offerings. However, the orange peel faced similar challenges as Charnay’s model—the metal machine brought up what he called “brown muck” and vegetation while risking the fragile objects.138 However, copal came up in the muck in 1905 after months of relatively unsuccessful dredging. This was mentioned in the field diary of Leon J. Cole: “[Thompson] found two yellow-white balls that, when burned, proved to be incense.”139 Unfortunately, this was the encouragement Thompson needed to continue the project. Thompson experimented with multiple methods, including rafting with a bucket, suctioning the bottom of the cenote, and airlifting objects.140 However, these attempts also resulted in many

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135 While Indigenous lifeways and rituals were criminalized, threatened, and marginalized in the official records they did not disappear.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
inconsistencies and damage to the offerings. In 1909, Thompson hired divers and was trained in deep-sea diving to remove the objects by hand. In the archive today, populated by letters, diaries, and field notes, Indigenous and Mexican people are rendered invisible. However, in the photographic records of Dumbarton Oaks and the Peabody, the shadows and margins reveal the laborers and guides for Thompson’s expeditions.141

Sixty Balls of incense referenced in a letter from Thompson to Bowditch, March 7, 1905.142

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141 Dumbarton Oaks Bliss photographic archive; future research will benefit from continued archival work to see if these people are accounted for in any other places (letters, budgets, etc.).
142 Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 2019.1.17.4.12.1.
From the beginning of his work in Yucatán, Thompson was connected to The Peabody Museum. In 1891 Thompson was “enlisted” by the director Fredric W. Putman, in his “grand enterprise… to introduce the American public to the wonders of ancient Maya civilization,” Thompson was also financially supported by Charles Pickering Bowditch, a major donor in the founding years of the museum. As a result of these relationships and sponsorships, Thompson sent the final dredged collections to the Peabody in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This took place during a period of unrest and tension in Mexico, just as the Revolution was beginning. Hence, Thompson’s hacienda and excavation was not a primary priority of the government even though he was exporting objects of “archaeological patrimony,” which was blatantly illegal according to a 1897 law stating “archaeological monuments existing in the National Territory are the property of the Nation.” This Mexican antiquities law was one of the earliest of the kind, attempting to protect cultural heritage from American and European archaeological extraction, and yet, Thompson’s team smuggled their “treasures” in suitcases—with bribes and in the dark of night they brought thousands of ritual offerings to Cambridge, Massachusetts. By 1910 the Peabody ceased sponsorship of the Cenote work. But the damage had been done.

143 Coggins, *Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichén Itzá*, 10
144 Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 47-52-00/1.1.8.2
146 Excavations of the cenote eventually continued in the 1920s under Sylvanus Morley and the Carnegie Institution of Washington (Coggins, *Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichén Itzá*, 26). Later, in the early 1960s by the Mexican government and from 1967 onward under the leadership of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) alongside the Mexican Aquatic Exploration and Sports Club (CEDAM). But this specific collection at the Peabody Museum was extracted by Thompson and donated to Harvard between 1904-1909.
The Story of Containment: Sacred Materials in Museum Storage

Copal arrives at the museum and enters what Pamela Klassen calls a “museumification” process, essentially an experience of objectification and desacralization. Although I have yet to find any clear details regarding how the collection moved into and through the spaces, we can infer that the materials were sorted and cataloged, numbers scrawled on their flesh with permanent markers, and notes were jotted down regarding the provenance. Currently the Online Database includes the following: “Collector: Edward Herbert Thompson (1904-1907); Expedition: Peabody Museum Expedition (1904-1907 - 1907).” They become property of the

147 Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 47-52-00/1.1.8.2
museum. As was common in the early 20th century, these materials were likely treated with some sort of pesticide, such as arsenic, to ensure they would be “preserved” from insects and other “pests.” These materials were stored away in the museum storage, studied by anthropologists as the subject of academic volumes, and rarely put on display. Relationships were not only ruptured in the extraction of these materials, but in the process of “preservation” and protection against a rightful return to their lands of origin.

After the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government began to work towards recovering these stolen materials. In the Peabody Paper Archives, we find newspaper articles as early as the 1920s reporting of the theft, one from La Revista de Yucatán in June of 1926 is titled, “Los Robos en el Cenote Sagrado de Chichen Itza” (The Stolen Goods from the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá) which mentions the valuable objects at Harvard.\footnote{149} By 1940 this was hitting national news, in January of that year Excelsior El Periodico de la Vida Nacional published an article titled “México Reclamará Diez Millones por Joyas Mayas Robadas en 1911” (Mexico will Reclaim Ten Million for Stolen Maya Treasures in 1911).\footnote{150} One year later, January 10, 1941, Alfred Tozzer wrote in a letter to a colleague: “The Mexican government has asked us to give them a complete inventory of the Chichen Cenote [sic]. I fear there is no way out of it.”\footnote{151} Regarding the gold, he requested an estimate of the average content among various “specimens” and instructed, “I want to make it as low as will cover the truth.”\footnote{152} He concludes his letter, “I am completely disgusted with this request as you can imagine.”\footnote{153} A criminal case

\footnote{149} Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 47-52-00/1.1.1.8.2
\footnote{150} Ibid.
\footnote{151} Ibid.
\footnote{152} Ibid.
\footnote{153} Ibid.
against Edward Thompson was dismissed when he died in 1935. A civil suit with Thompson’s heirs continued until 1944, as one researcher summarized:

The Mexican Supreme Court declared Thompson not guilty, on a technicality. But the affair left the Peabody’s reputation bruised. An internal Peabody memorandum from the late 1940s acknowledged that the court’s decision still “leaves [the Peabody] as the ultimate recipient of objects exported illegally.”

Ultimately, the Supreme Court of Mexico decided the case on behalf of Thompson’s heirs, even while admitting that the export was not legal. Somehow, the Peabody was still the owner of the collection, and though they maintained their possession they were in bad relations with Mexico. Over a decade later, a 1957 letter from the director of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico inquired regarding the willingness of the Peabody to part with some of the “recovered objects” which are “not really useful for display purposes” but could be of interest to the National Museum.

According to Coggins’ 1992 catalog titled *Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice*, there were no “formal publications” on the collection until after the settlement with Mexico. Later, the Peabody began to publish on various subsets: in 1952 *Metals from the Cenote of Sacrifice* by Samuel K. Lothrop was published; in 1957, Tozzer’s two-volume series on Chichén Itzá and the Cenote in 1957; in 1974, a study on the Jades by Tatiana Proskouriakoff; and ceramic materials studied for George C. Valliant’s dissertation (1927) was included in a 1958 publication and investigated again by Robert E. Smith in 1971. From 1984-1987 these materials were on display for the first (and only) time in a traveling exhibition by the Peabody and The Science Museum of Minnesota. In 1959 a set of “metals” were returned to Mexico and in 1976 that the

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154 Burke, “Envoy.”
156 Coggins, *Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice. Chichén Itzá*, 28
Peabody traded 246 greenstone materials ("conservatively" valued at $200,000) for a "Spanish Colonial study collection."\(^{159}\)

The collection of over 3,000 materials from the Cenote remains stored in the Peabody Museum basement. These collections have not been on display since the 1980s, largely due to the legal status and complexity of the collection.\(^{160}\) Only recently, in the Fall of 2022, one textile included in an exhibit titled *Precipitation for an Arid Landscape* by Harvard Radcliffe Institute fellow and interdisciplinary artist Gala Porras-Kim.\(^{161}\) This exhibit asked the Peabody Museum to reconsider their ownership of the collection. Nevertheless, there are currently no explicit plans for returning this collection to Mexico as a nation state nor to the *pueblos Indígenas y originarios*—which would be two different types of repatriations, as I will return to in the conclusion. This complicated, colonial history of collection and conservation at the Peabody Museum raises several ethical questions that apply not only to the copal and the Mesoamerican but to a vast number of materials from across the world and stored in museums.

**Concluding Questions and Future Research**

This study of copal barely scratches the surface of copal’s stories. As I have humbly attempted to capture, copal has moved through time and space in a myriad of ways and in diverse shapes. Copal is a body through which deities and their essences move. The resin is at once blood and food—consumed by fire and water. Copal is held in the hand of Tlaloc, bound to

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\(^{159}\) *Ibid.*; The accession files (47-52A) of the Peabody require more careful investigation, particularly the letters between various museum directors and administrators, in order to better understand the nature of these returns or exchanges.

\(^{160}\) Jane Pickering, (Director of Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology) in discussion with the author, October 2022; In conversation with Pickering and with museum steering committee members, it is clear that the PMAE hopes to move towards international repatriation in the coming years, however, from 2023-2026 the main priority will be NAGPRA related repatriation.

rubber and greenstones, mixed with maize, and the glue for flint knives and musical instruments. With their strong scent and durability, *copalli* and *pom* survived in tangible and intangible forms, alongside humans, animals, insects, spirits, and even stored in museum basements with material belongings, ancestral remains, and entities from around the globe.

“Life,” Soni López-Chávez. ¹⁶²

Although this project has focused on Pre-Contact Mesoamerica, the story is not over. I am convinced that copal will live beyond the museum, beyond this current era. In future research, I hope to explore questions about the nature of the museum that arise from the material particularities of copal from Mesoamerica. The epistemologies and ontologies that have driven and continue to enact objectification and violence on Indigenous communities must be dissected in order to deconstruct and decolonize these spaces. Despite the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 museums across the U.S. still fail to meet the minimum requirements as required by law. Many Native American nations and individuals have worked tirelessly to bring their ancestors home and some museums are better than others in

¹⁶² Artwork shared with permission from Soni López-Chávez; @soni-artist on Instagram.
supporting this healing and justice process. To be clear, there are no laws that require repatriation internationally, and therefore these returns are rare and unincentivized beyond the ethical dimensions and public pressure. Furthermore, international repatriation often takes place between nation states which overlooks and undermines Indigenous sovereignty and relational networks. These returns regularly move the materials from one museum to another without consideration for relational repair or the original lands or the descendants of the people with whom those materials were in relations. I do not mean to assume that there is an easy alternative. The structure of settler colonialism in the United States and elsewhere, Mexico in this case, has created conditions that exclude and erase Indigenous knowledge and power—not unlike the museum. Therefore, despite Indigenous kinship protocols and ethics the question of ownership remains—the political context requires careful and consistent navigation. Ultimately, I believe that the navigation and advocacy required for return can be grounded in the religious dimension put forth in this project. Indigenous cosmovisions and relational networks are part of the path forward as museums respond to public pressure and look for ethical foundations. For example, the Peabody Museum has shown promising signs of changing, their current webpage on NAGPRA reads:

In January 2021 Peabody Director Jane Pickering made a specific and formal apology for the practices that led to the Peabody’s large collection of Native American human remains and funerary objects, and pledged to prioritize the urgent work of understanding and illuminating our history to begin to make amends.¹⁶³

Statements such as these are due to the ongoing work of Indigenous peoples, faculty, and staff including Professor Phil Deloria (Dakota Nation) and Collections Steward Meredith Vasta (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians). Non-Native folks are necessary for the repair of

relationships and there is much work to be done both domestically and internationally.\textsuperscript{164} As Vine Deloria so eloquently wrote reminds us, there is a vibrant future that awaits us:

> Who will find peace with the lands? The future of humankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things. Who will listen to the trees, the animals and birds, the voices of the places of the land? As the long-forgotten peoples of the respective continents rise and begin to reclaim their ancient heritage, they will discover the meaning of the lands of their ancestors.\textsuperscript{165}

To conclude, each of copal’s relational networks continues to actively unfold, regardless of the ways the museum or the academy attempt to freeze these lives and deaths in time. Copal is still being excavated from Templo Mayor caches and censers are catalogued from Copán to Teotihuacán. Communities north and south of the Mexico-U.S. border burn copal incense in ceremonies while scientists test the positive effects of copal on rats in their laboratories. Copal pops up in New Age shops on Etsy and in tourist towns and sets smokey scenes in reality-television shows. What is the future for this powerful presence in the neoliberal market? What are the effects of the Tren Maya on the ecosystem in the Yucatán, specifically copal trees, archaeological remains, and the Indigenous peoples and places? What are the possibilities and limitations regarding international repatriation of the copal currently contained in the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology? The degree to which we engage each of these questions well depends on our willingness to honor Mesoamerican metaphysics despite the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being which rule over so much of our contemporary existence. Many issues remain unresolved, and suffering colonial structures continues beyond these years of research during my time at Harvard Divinity School and this thesis. Yet, I am convinced that forging relationships with other-than-humans, ancestral materials, and

\textsuperscript{164} For more information on the state of repatriation in the U.S. see: https://www.propublica.org/series/the-repatriation-project and https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm.

\textsuperscript{165} Vine Deloria Jr., \textit{God is Red}, (Golden Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 296.
complicated spaces like the museum with leadership by impacted Indigenous and descendant communities will continue to guide us toward decolonial futures. *Tlazcamati miac, nimitztlazohtla copalli.*
Appendix:

Summary of Copal Data

Color of Copal (n94)

- Brown/Other: 2.1%
- White: 23.7%
- Yellow: 69.1%

Copal Shape (n. 94)

- vessel: 47.9%
- spherical: 20.2%
- irregular: 4.3%
- fragments: 4.3%
- effigy: 5.5%
- block: 3.2%
- disc: 10.6%
- basket: 3.2%

Molding (n94)

- unknown: 0.0%
- kernels: 25.5%
- balls/kernels (undet): 3.3%
- balls: 8.5%
- NA: 53.2%
Preliminary Data from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (2021):

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<th>Shells</th>
<th>Rubber</th>
<th>Other Inclusions</th>
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<th>Impressions in the copal</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>07-7-20/C4569</td>
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<td>Yellow</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
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