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**Flower Worlds: Religion, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest edited by Michael D. Mathiowetz and Andrew D. Turner**

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*Flower Worlds* is the fruit of an Advanced Seminar hosted by the Amerind Foundation in late 2019, itself a follow-up to a symposium held earlier that year at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, both of which were organized by editors Michael Mathiowetz and Andrew Turner. Through thirteen case studies, the contributors survey the depth, breadth, variable expression, significance, and meaning of the Flower World Complex, a cosmological structure first explicitly recognized and defined by linguist Jane Hill (1992, 117) as a “ritual system of reference to flowers” among the broader Uto-Aztecan speech community and its immediate neighbors in Mesoamerica, West Mexico, and the southwestern region of North America (i.e., Southwest). The shift from singular to plural—Flower World vis-à-vis Flower Worlds—underscores the collective great stride made over the past three decades (and showcased in this work) in explicating the rich particularity to which different communities materialized, and continue to engage with, what Hill and Hays-Gilpin (1999, 16) once described as a “part ideology.”

The volume initiates with the editors’ synthesis of prior Flower Worlds research that nicely frames the subsequent case studies that are organized into two parts. The first, “Contemporary Flower Worlds,” consists of four ethnographic narratives on the sundry ways in which Flower World concepts permeate the cultural and spiritual lives of select modern Uto-Aztecan speech communities. In reference to the Nahua of Mexico’s southern Huasteca region, Alan Sandstrom explains that flowers feature so prominently in ritual affairs because they manifest *totiotzin*, a vital spiritual energy that, according to Nahua monistic ontology, flows through all things, beings, and processes*.* Johannes Neurath details how peyotism incarnates Flower World concepts among the Wixárika. Through personal accounts, Felipe Molina and David Delgado Shorter reveal how the *sea ania*, the “flower world” of the Yoeme people, is but one of several multidimensional, overlapping, agentic realms. Dorothy Washburn summarizes Hopi song content that illustrates a perfect, flowery world of the past around which Hopi morality and spirituality revolve.

Though the first part of *Flower Worlds* accounts for less than a third of its length (in terms of number of pages as well as chapters), the ethnographic detail is foundational because it establishes a baseline awareness of the nuance, subtlety, and nearly complete immateriality of the Flower World Complex. This is essential for the contributions in the volume’s second part, “Historical Flower Worlds,” which rely almost entirely on the materiality of the Flower World Complex to make their points. Seven Mesoamerican cases cover Flower World expressions among the Maya, Olmec, and Nahua (including Aztec/Mexica), as shared by James Cordova, David Domenici, Ángel González López, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, Cameron McNeil, John Pohl, Andrew Turner, and Lorena Vázquez Vallín. Southwest cases are much fewer but include Karl Taube’s assessment of the interplay between the cicada, Flower Mountain, and emergence narratives in multiple cosmologies, as well as Mathiowetz’s coverage of the Casas Grandes Flower World and his argument for a historical connection to the Aztatlán tradition of West Mexico.

Out of necessity, most of the historical and archaeological studies in *Flower Worlds* depend upon very careful and detailed iconographic and epigraphic analyses of a remarkable array of visual media—stelae, reliefs, sculptures, censers and other forms of ritual vessels, painted pottery, murals, codices, and even stone ball game paraphernalia and oil paintings. Each contribution is descriptively thick, some almost to the point of exhaustion, but this is generally helpful because it often takes an experienced eye and trained pen to explain the imagery to an audience unfamiliar with specific styles and formats. Oddly, aside from Taube’s chapter, the materialization of Flower World concepts in petroglyphs and pictographs is missing among the case studies, despite the editors’ citations to multiple Southwest research programs committed to that aim. This shortcoming is offset by the inclusion of several creative approaches, notably McNeil’s analysis of pollen from ritual contexts in order to paint a Maya Flower World “scentscape” and Domenici’s assay of flower-based pigments that imbued codices with “chromatic richness and brilliance” so that they embody their “own oral enunciation.”

In comparing the volume’s first and second parts, and remembering Hill’s earlier insistence that Flower Worlds are principally expressed linguistically and only surface sporadically (and unpredictably?) in material culture, it is difficult to reconcile the seeming ubiquity of Flower World iconography in the historical contexts with its dearth among the contemporary ones. While open to the arguments, I’m left wondering if archaeological Flower World studies have gone too far in what constitutes an expression of this cosmological and ontological phenomenon. It’s as though almost anything colorful, iridescent, or of Mesoamerican origin—maize and cloud symbolism, cacao, cotton, copper bells, cicadas, etc.—can be explained as a mode of Flower World expression. If this is so, how can it be limited to Uto-Aztecan speech communities and their neighbors, or is it? This volume certainly excels at description, but does so at the expense of explanation. Now that *Flower Worlds* has shown just how productive such deep iconographic study can be, it seems prudent to refine the method and theory undergirding such research. I point to Kelly Hays-Gilpin’s conclusion in the volume’s epilogue that Flower World research does not end on the final pages of this book. The articulation of language, ontology, and material culture needs attention, and I see hope in that regard with so-far-uninvoked theoretical approaches, such as conceptual metaphor analysis of cognitive linguistics (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980) or possibly semiotics (e.g., Preucel 2006).

In reflecting on the historical context from which this volume rises, archaeologists and similarly inclined researchers have tended to measure and evaluate connectivity among the Indigenous societies of Mesoamerica and the Southwest in terms of the presence of trade goods (often considered “exotica”) and the existence of shared cultural “traits,” or lack thereof. Linguistics have certainly factored into the equation, but material culture has always been the principal line of evidence, especially for any era prior to European contact. Likewise, any recognized or hypothesized connectivity across this vast spatial expanse has all too often been framed around standard and somewhat antiquated culture-historical themes of migration, diffusion, and interaction. *Flower Worlds* charts a different course. In focusing specifically on matters of belief and expression, by approaching the subject through emic and etic perspectives, by breaking through the wall between Southwest and Mesoamerican scholarship, and by eschewing materialism in favor of materiality, the volume offers a refreshing deviation from the normative mode of historiography. While a rudimentary familiarity with Mesoamerican archaeology is a prerequisite, students of Indigenous iconography and religion in the Americas at nearly all levels of proficiency will be rewarded by a thorough read of this illustrative book.

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