Maffie, James (2014) *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, University Press of Colorado (Boulder, CO), xi + 512 pp. $80.00 hbk.

Many stories ago, when the very first gods, the ones who gave birth to the world were still roaming the night, they say there were two gods who came
from one, Ik’al and Votán. When one turned, the other could be seen, when
the other turned, the one could be seen […] So that is how the true men
and women learned that questions help to walk, and not to stand still. ‘The

I begin by stating that I will only do violence to the complexity of this monumental tome.
In Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion, James Maffie has painstakingly
produced what many of us have long awaited: a comprehensive and beautifully argued
account of Aztec (Mexico-Nahua) metaphysics. At 527 pages with over 1800 footnotes,
it exercises a dazzling methodological and empirical precision and constitutes one of
the most important treatises on Mesoamerican philosophy to date. It engages with and
revises what have heretofore been the predominant interpretations of Nahua philosophy
by the most important scholars in anthropology, linguistics, ethno-history and literature.
To this effect, Maffie acknowledges the debt he has to Miguel León Portilla who wrote
La filosofía náhuatl in 1956, but respectfully unbinds Leon Portilla’s interpretation of
Mexico thought from what Maffie considers to be the trappings of Western discourses
implicit and explicit in his interpretation. The irony lies in that, while Maffie is trained
as a Western philosopher, he uses the ‘master’s tools’ to begin to dismantle the ‘masters
house’. Given the detail and importance of this impressive volume, however, I would
have preferred for the title to remain more precise, particularly because he draws from
scholarship not only about the ‘ancient’ Aztec (Mexico) but also from contemporary
Nahua, Maya and Uto-Aztecan communities. This caveat aside, Maffie’s book is an
exemplary exercise in interdisciplinary scholarship and will be invaluable to scholars
from diverse fields.

The first three chapters lay out the guiding principles that constitute the architecture
for the rest of the book: the concept of teotl as an imminent, vital energy that vivifies the
cosmos, the argument for pantheism as opposed to polytheism and, lastly, his theory of
‘agonist inamic unity’ – a transculturating move where he pairs the western notion of
agon with the Nahua word inamic to describe how the Aztec world functions through
conflict, revision, movement, generation and degeneration. This constitutes one of the
unique interventions on Maffie’s part, as it is precisely here where he departs from pre-
vailing notions of Mesoamerican polytheism. As opposed to Zoroastrian dualism, the
Aztec world is ontologically monistic and processive. He explains that competing gods
and goddesses of the Aztec pantheon are not discrete deities, but rather, all manifesta-
tions of teotl and a product of the inevitable conflict, movement, rupture and regener-
ation that is constitutive of teotl: a dynamic, sacred energy. The word ‘inamic’, accord-
ing to Maffie, is the Nahua term that explains the necessarily agonistic relationship
between opposites such as day and night or life and death. The temporary and alternat-
ing dominance of one over the other does not speak to a radical dualism but, rather, what
Maffie maintains is an ‘agonistic inamic unity’. Thus, Maffie describes the Aztec cosmos
as non-hierarchical, immanent world in motion, a world of ‘continual nepantla-defined
becoming and transformation’ (p. 523). From here, the rest of the book illustrates with
almost overwhelming detail his argument that the fundamental motion of the universe
is regulated by three different types of movement-energy: Olin (bouncing/pulsing move-
ment); Malinalli (‘twisting energy’); and Nepantla (‘weaving-the-universe’). These three
chapters lead seamlessly into the final chapters where he explains the master trope of
Aztec metaphysics: ‘The cosmos is a grand weaving-in-progress’ and ‘Teotl is the weaver,
the weaving, and the woven’ (p. 14).
The second important departure from previous scholarship grapples with notions of Aztec time and cosmogony. According to Maffie’s claim of ontological monism, and in contrast to western eschatology, teotl always already exists. Teotl is in a constant state of becoming, thus dispelling the idea of a primordial ‘peace’ or chaos from which subsequent worlds emerge. The struggle, then, is to walk ‘in balance’, to move ‘middlingly’ because ‘[b]alancing is an overarching macroprocess consisting of a rhythmic series of mutually interdependent and reciprocally influencing imbalancing microprocesses’ (p. 168). The ‘evidential avenues’ (linguistic, literary and graphic) for defending his claims about Aztec philosophy are tripartite and akin to the methodology employed by many important scholars. In sum, this book is both a continuation and radical departure from previous scholarship on Nahua philosophy, culture, and thought. The simultaneous clarity and poetic repetition make his argument not only convincing but stellar.

B. Christine Arce
University of Miami