

APPENDIX

How Scholars Study the Aztecs

FOR MANY YEARS, scholars accepted the idea that very limited sources were available for the study of ancient Native Americans. They examined the buildings and objects uncovered in archaeological digs,¹ as well as the words of Europeans who began to write about Indians almost as soon as they met them. Columbus, for instance, wrote in his log on the first day he met some Taino people in the Caribbean in October 1492, and Hernando Cortés in Mexico lost little time before he started sending letters home.² These sources weren't nearly enough, yet researchers made do because they thought they had no choice. These texts were what was available.

Over the years, two groups of scholars came closer than others to hearing what ancient Native Americans themselves had to say, at least in Mesoamerica. Mayanist epigraphers worked tirelessly, attempting to read the glyphs carved on ancient stelae and on buildings. Eventually they realized that certain elements were phonetic and that they would need to learn Mayan languages in order to make sense of the writing.³ What had once been thought to be the highly individualized spiritual expressions of artists and priests turned out to be political narratives about the births, marriages, and deaths of kings and queens. One long statement began, for instance, "At 29 days, 14 yaxkin [on July 7, 674], she was born, Lady Katun Ahau, noblewoman from the place called *Man*."⁴ Meanwhile, art historians and anthropologists carefully studied the sixteenth-century painted codices prepared by the Aztecs (and other Mesoamerican peoples), often at the request of curious Europeans and usually with accompanying written text in Spanish.⁵ These scholars, too, found political narratives of

kings and conquests and detailed delineations of past peregrinations, as well as images of clothing people wore or the objects they used before the Spaniards arrived. The texts also included answers to questions posed by the newcomers. “Whom did you sacrifice, and when did you do it?” the Spaniards would ask. And the Nahuas would respond, “This chapter tells of the feasts and blood sacrifices which they made on the first day of the first month,” or “This chapter tells of the honors paid, and the blood offerings made, in the second month.”⁶

Neither the ancient, highly controlled carvings nor the sixteenth-century codices prepared collaboratively with Spaniards gave vent to full, open-ended, or spontaneous language. They offered no meandering and revealing tales, and precious few poems, jokes, innermost fears, or flashes of anger. The texts largely told what Mayan kings wanted posterity to know about their lineages and what sixteenth-century Spaniards wished to believe about the people whom they had conquered. Nevertheless, there was copious material for talented scholars to work with. They combined their knowledge of the codices with studies of archaeology and of Spanish accounts, and produced impressive books about Mesoamerican peoples. Many of their works are highly recommended.⁷

The Aztecs, however, did write a great deal more in the sixteenth century after they learned the Roman alphabet from the Spaniards—and eventually, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, a number of scholars began to take those writings seriously.⁸ At first, scholars looked at the ways indigenous students used the phonetic alphabet to answer questions put to them by the Spaniards about their religion, or to help the friars invent Nahuatl phrases that could be used to teach the people about Christianity (referring to the Virgin Mary, for instance, as “forever an unmarried daughter”) or to write such things as Nahuatl-language confessional manuals and religious plays. It didn’t take many years for scholars to look beyond the religious works and to realize that native writers also helped their people with more mundane tasks such as recording the public ceremonies held at the time of land transfers, or writing down a dying man’s perorations as to how his land was to be divided among his children. Historians and anthropologists who learned the Nahuatl language could read these sources; in the 1980s and 1990s they began to produce insightful studies on how the indigenous people interacted with Christianity⁹ and with

the Spanish political system.¹⁰ It had previously been thought that the indigenous people were overwhelmed, even devastated, by these two aspects of Spanish culture; once scholars translated what the people actually said in the earliest generations' interactions with the newcomers, they learned that the indigenous took a rather pragmatic approach to change.

Yet even in the midst of all the revisionism, few asked what the Aztecs talked about in private—what they thought about their own history or dared to hope for when they considered their future. Who were they, in short, when there was no Spanish interlocutor? That project remained neglected. It wasn't for lack of sources, for there were documents in existence that revealed such things. The *xiuhpohualli*, or “yearly account,” went back many generations, and examples were eagerly recorded by some of the young Nahuas who learned to manipulate the Roman letters. Dozens of those *xiuhpohualli* transcriptions survived and ultimately became part of libraries' rare book collections, where they were gradually discovered in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. From the beginning, scholars referred to these texts as “historical annals” as they bore a resemblance to a medieval European genre of that name. They were difficult to understand, and not always directly relevant to questions of interest to outsiders, so investigators rarely worked with them. In the multicultural world of the late 1990s and early 2000s, one might have expected that such sources would be rapidly seized upon, read aloud, and translated, and thus made to speak their secrets to the wider world. But this could not happen immediately. First, a major breakthrough was needed in outsiders' understanding of the relationship between clauses in this far from well-known language.¹¹ Next, scholars had to learn to read Nahuatl easily enough to be able to translate unpredictable and wide-ranging statements (different from repetitive wills or Christian texts); those scholars then had to read enough of the histories—written without any regard for Western conventions—in order to be able to understand what they were getting at. It took quite some time to make real headway.¹²

And there was another problem—namely, that even many academics seem to have thought that learning Nahuatl wasn't worth the trouble, that we already knew enough to render the work unnecessary. We had learned a great deal from looking at objects and images, and from listening to Spaniards or to Indians who were answering Spaniards' questions. We had in many ways already decided who the Aztecs were. Perhaps we didn't

need to eavesdrop on their private conversations. Or that, at least, is what people said in an implicit sense. What they said explicitly is that it would be disrespectful, even imperialistic, to work with the few surviving, crystallized moments from what was once a vibrant, oral tradition. But since people did not stop talking about the Aztecs, and continued to rely on the former sources, the real reason may perhaps have had more to do with an unwillingness to challenge all that we thought we knew.¹³

WHAT SHOULD NOW BE CLEAR is that scholars themselves sometimes disagree about the best way to proceed with a difficult set of issues. They prioritize different subjects for research and have different understandings of what is visible in the existing sources. The study of any history is fraught with multiple tensions. “The past is a foreign country,” the historian David Lowenthal titled his now-classic book.¹⁴ When we go back in time, just as when we travel to far distant places, we face multiple cultural barriers, some that we are looking for, and some that are unexpected and therefore hard to recognize. We are all products of the culture or cultures to which we were exposed as young people and have difficulty envisioning other modes of thought. But what exactly does “have difficulty” mean? This is an area where historians often disagree. Some argue that peoples foreign to us in space and time are, and must always be, unknowably remote. We can struggle to understand them on their own terms, but to some extent we will always be trapped within our own worldview and unable to grasp theirs. Other scholars would argue that although people’s cultures vary to an immense degree, we are all nevertheless human in the same ways; what makes us feel loved, for example, may vary, but the desire to be loved does not. Or what makes us feel afraid may differ, but the need to find some degree of security is a constant. In this book, I take it for granted that both schools of thought are absolutely right, and that good history explores the tension between them. The Aztecs I have come to know are both profoundly different from me and mine, and yet at the same time, deeply similar.¹⁵

Not only should historians explore the tension between these two different kinds of truth, but in their work they must decide what kind of reminders they themselves and their readers most need and then offer them

frequently. If I were writing about the Founding Fathers of the United States, it might behoove me to nudge us all to remember that they lived and thought within a framework utterly different from our own, far more so than we often care to consider when we invoke them. However, I am not writing about a topic we have rendered familiar but rather about Moctezuma and his people. We are accustomed to being afraid of the Aztecs, even to being repulsed by them, rather than identifying with them. So perhaps we need to remind ourselves from time to time that they loved a good laugh, just as we do.¹⁶

The *writing* of history is in some ways as complex as the study of history. There are numerous registers within which historians work. At the one extreme, in the written exchanges that unfold between scholars in their journals and monographs, historians talk to each other about their sources—where they found them, how they interpret them, and how past interpretations have been affected by prior assumptions that caused people to miss certain elements. Scholars include not only a discourse (which offers knowledge about a subject) but a great deal of metadiscourse (which gives an analysis of how it is they know whatever they know about that subject). At the opposite extreme, in the case of most textbooks and popular history books, historians tell a story directly and authoritatively, including absolutely no “metadiscourse” whatsoever, as if the present state of knowledge about a field has always existed. It is assumed in such cases that this is not the place for thinking aloud about how we know what we know. There is a value in both kinds of writing. In this book, I have tried—as do many historians—to strike a balance between the two extremes.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, I have found that people have less tolerance for a book without metadiscourse when they are reading about a topic they themselves know little about. We tend to like a seamless, authoritative discourse better when we are reading about topics we think we know quite well already and can determine whether to trust the author. On topics where we do not have enough expertise to judge the discourse on our own, we need signposts about the relative importance of different aspects and the larger reasons why certain elements must be tended to, or else we cannot follow the argument or know whether to trust the speaker. In writing this book, I have assumed that many of my readers know very little about the Aztecs, and that if I tell their story in a purely textbook style, I will be

ineffective. I have therefore tried to offer enough material about the sources we have and the ways in which I read them, so as to be believed.

Yet at the same time I have tried not to spend so much time on such matters as to overwhelm the reader. Those who wish to know exactly where the assertions of any particular paragraph come from can—and hopefully will—turn to the notes, where I engage directly with difficult issues. At the end of this essay is an annotated bibliography of the existing annals. These texts are not mysterious “ancient documents” that ordinary readers have no way of accessing. Each one is a real manuscript written in Nahuatl and stored in a particular library or archive, and almost every one of them has been translated into a European language and published at least once. Some of the translations are better than others, and some editions are simply more accessible than others; those are the ones I have listed.

There is one scholarly argument regarding the Aztecs that must be addressed directly because I am taking a side on the matter on nearly every page. While studies of the Aztecs traditionally were based only on archaeology and European sources, the partial and ad hoc inclusion of partly misunderstood Nahuatl histories did become a part of some works, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus the use of Nahuatl-language annals has a history of its own. At first, scholars were delighted to be exposed to them and quoted large chunks of them as material to be taken quite literally, even if the annals were recounting events that had occurred several hundred years earlier or were telling obviously apocryphal stories. From there, the pendulum of scholarly opinion understandably swung away from taking such indigenous texts literally at all. In this view, they revealed cultural mindsets and propagandistic efforts but did not illuminate events.¹⁷ It began to be thought that we have no way of knowing what actually occurred during the reign of the Aztecs, except what can be gleaned from the study of archaeology.

Today, however, some historians would argue that the Nahuatl annals tell a great deal about the hundred years or so prior to the conquest.¹⁸ Ironically, while other scholars have sometimes discounted the Nahuatl annals as history, they have unselfconsciously continued to quote Spaniards (especially the friar Diego Durán) and Spanish-influenced texts (e.g., the *Florentine Codex*, the *Codex Mendoza*) with abandon. In fact, it is generally these Spanish-derived sources that are culturally dissonant and thus suspect. Yet we have drawn conclusions from them about the Nahuas’ prequest

political patterns or cultural beliefs for which there is little to no Nahuatl-language evidence.¹⁹ In the field of history, if we see contradictions between a source like Diego Durán and a set of Nahuatl annals, we often conclude that the sources confound us, and that there is no way to know what happened. But if we do not allow the Spanish sources to distract us and take notes only on what the sixteenth-century indigenous annals say, we find that they generally agree on the core points.

Sometimes the details do confound us. When the annals speak of Acamapichtli, the Aztecs' first ruler, for example, they tell of a woman in his life named Ilancueitl (ee-lan-CWEY-it, Elder Woman Skirt). Some said she was his mother, some his wife, some that she mothered his children, and some that she was barren. But we shouldn't get caught up in such minutiae: What all sources agree on was that she was from the area's most powerful town, the one that had to agree to allow the wandering Aztecs to establish their little settlement if it was to happen at all. Now we begin to understand something about the political process at play: an alliance was being established through a marriage. If we put this puzzle piece next to another comparable one, a comprehensible picture begins to emerge. Over the years, it has become abundantly clear to me that we can indeed recount a relatively accurate version of Aztec history from a few generations before the conquest, and I have done so here.

For very ancient times, I do not think we can tell the history, except from what we learn from archaeology and from a study of the cultural tendencies revealed by the annals. But I am convinced that careful study does bring forth a coherent narrative for approximately one hundred years prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. At each point, I have aligned all the indigenous annals that treat the era and were written within about eighty years after the conquest, and if I find consensus among them, I assume that we are learning something we can consider "real."²⁰ I do not take sides among them if one insists on the importance of a particular battle or marriage and others do not, but I may mention the matter if the difference of opinion is illuminating. For the preconquest period, I have carefully excluded Spanish sources, as they almost always introduce a different vision. For the years after the conquest, I often rely partly on Spanish sources but only where they are revelatory of events that occurred. For indigenous thoughts and perspectives, I continue to turn to Nahuatl-language sources from that era.

The payoff of many years of patient reading has been immense. Studying all the annals that still exist—or attempting to, as I undoubtedly missed some—has taught me much about the wider context of Aztec life, which can in turn sometimes help me make sense of the specifics mentioned in a particular set of annals. If we belittle these documents as sources, we will continue to miss a great deal. They are well worth examining. The following guide is intended to help readers launch their own investigations.

Annotated Bibliography of the Nahuatl Annals

Note: All major Nahuatl-language texts with substantial annals-like content are noted here, as well as a few early Spanish-language ones, which are in effect commentary on annals-like pictographic sources. The language is Nahuatl unless it is specifically noted as Spanish. Entries are listed alphabetically by author if the author is a well-known individual, otherwise by the title's first major term. (Ignore articles as well as the typical opening words that are part of the names of virtually all such texts—"history" or "historia," "book" or "libro," "annals" or "anales," and "codex" or "códice.") More information on all of these texts and on the attributions given here (several of which are based on new research) can be found in Camilla Townsend, *Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

~~*Anónimo mexicano*~~

~~This unsigned early eighteenth-century Nahuatl-language history describes waves of Nahua migrants arriving in central Mexico. It is written in European-style chapters rather than employing Nahuatl annals format. However, it draws its information from a number of Nahuatl sources, including the annals of don Juan Buenaventura Zapata y Mendoza. Despite its title, research has recently demonstrated that it is likely the work of don Manuel de los Santos Salazar, a man from an indigenous noble family of Tlaxcala who attended university and became a priest. It is housed in the~~