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Nahua Studies, Past and Present

GALEN BROKAW AND PABLO GARCÍA LOAEZA

Nahuatl is a Uto-Aztecan language spoken mostly by communities in central Mexico with outliers in Durango in northern Mexico, Michoacán on the central Pacific coast, and Tabasco in southern Mexico. The Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas identifies what it calls thirty varieties of Nahuatl spoken by over 1 million people within Mexico. In addition, a variant of Nahuatl known as Pipil is spoken in El Salvador.

The extension of Nahuatl today results from its prominence and extension prior to the Spanish conquest. Jerónimo de Mendieta wrote that while different provinces had their own languages, Nahuatl functioned as a kind of lingua franca in Mexico like Latin in Europe (Mendieta 2017, 518 [libro 4, capítulo 44]; Wright 2007, 9). This may have been an exaggeration (see Wright and others), but Nahuatl was geographically more widespread than other Indigenous languages not only because it was the language of the dominant city-state of Tenochtitlan ruled by Moteuczoma at the time of the Spanish conquest but also because other Nahuatl-speaking groups had migrated to central Mexico and beyond prior to the rise of Tenochtitlan (Dakin, chapter 2 in this volume).

The prominence of Nahuatl in central Mexico, where the Spaniards established their administrative center by displacing the Indigenous one, inevitably required that the Spaniards engage with Nahuatl more than any of the other Indigenous languages spoken throughout Mexico. The Spanish administrators and priests who were charged with governing the Indians and converting them to Christianity

learned many Indigenous languages, but Nahuatl received the most attention. The colonial administration incorporated Indigenous languages into the archive, and more documents were produced in Nahuatl than all other Indigenous languages combined (Sell 1999, 20). Nahua scribes typically produced these documents, but many Spaniards also learned Nahuatl. Spaniards were forced to either learn the language or rely upon others who became bilingual, whether through the interactions of quotidian life or through more formal study.

We know less about the language acquisition that took place in quotidian life because it left relatively little documentation. We know that it occurred both because that is what happens inevitably in such contexts and because Spanish and Indigenous individuals who informally learned Nahuatl and Spanish respectively show up in other contexts. Numerous Spaniards married Indigenous women, and the children of these unions often would have been raised speaking both Spanish and Nahuatl. At the same time, both Spanish and Nahua children developed a level of bilingualism through their daily interactions. Mendieta explains that Spanish priests attempted to learn Nahuatl by spending time with Native children and that these children learned Spanish (Mendieta 2017, 204). Likewise, Spanish children who came to New Spain with their parents or who were born there grew up exposed to Nahuatl, and they often acquired proficiency in the language naturally. The Franciscan Alonso de Molina and the Dominican Diego Durán, for example, came to Mexico as children and apparently learned Nahuatl on the street so to speak. Both colonial administrators and religious authorities sought out people like Molina to serve as translators and interpreters (León-Portilla 2004, xxv). But the nature and level of language acquisition varied by individual and context. Even though Molina learned Nahuatl as a child, it was not the language of his home life, and he did not consider himself a Native speaker (Molina [1571] 2004, “Prólogo”).

Given the power dynamic, it was perhaps inevitable that more Nahuas would learn Spanish than Spaniards would learn Nahuatl, but from the very beginning the Spaniards exerted a consistent effort to learn and formally document the language. This formal study of Nahuatl is much easier to trace because it left a more direct documentary record.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Spaniards were motivated by a desire to convert the Indigenous population to Christianity, and whether to employ Spanish or the Indigenous languages was a topic of debate. The Franciscans believed that teaching and administering to the Native people in their own languages was the best way to convert them. In 1529, the Franciscan Pedro de Gante boasted that his missionary work had immersed him in the language so much that he spoke Nahuatl better than his Native Spanish (40). Franciscans such as Gante believed that Native terms and concepts could facilitate understanding and conversion, but

others argued that employing Indigenous languages like Nahuatl ran the risk of perpetuating idolatrous beliefs and practices in the guise of Christianity.

In 1550, Carlos V sided with those who disapproved of the use of Native languages and ordered that the Indians learn Castilian as part of their indoctrination. The 1550 order explicitly identifies the purpose of the language instruction and alludes to the debate: “Haviendo hecho particular examen sobre si aun en la mas perfecta lengua de los indios se pueden explicar bien, y con propiedad los Misterios de nuestra Santa Fe Catolica, se ha reconocido, que no es posible sin cometer grandes disonancias, e imperfecciones, y aunque estan fundadas Catedras donde sean enseñados los sacerdotes, que huvieren de doctrinar a los Indios, no es remedio bastante, por ser mucha la variedad de lenguas” (Recopilación de leyes [1681] 1987, vol. 2, f. 190r [libro 6, título 1, ley 18]).¹ However, in 1565 Felipe II reversed his father’s order and required the priests to learn the language of the Indians with whom they worked. Then, in 1570, he declared Nahuatl the official language of the Indians in New Spain (Heath 1972, 52–53). However, the policy changes announced in these edicts did not necessarily correspond to changes in actual practice. The 1570 order essentially recognized the fact that Nahuatl already served as a kind of lingua franca in New Spain, and missionaries had already been using it extensively even between 1550 and 1565.

Priests like Gante who arrived in the early years after the conquest had to learn the language on their own, but they also began writing grammars and dictionaries to facilitate language acquisition for others. At least thirty Nahuatl grammars were produced during the colonial period (A. León-Portilla 1972). Most of this documentation took place in the valley of Mexico. The initial work by the Franciscans Francisco Jiménez and Alonso de Rangel from around 1524 has been lost (Mendieta 2017, 515), but Andrés de Olmos, also Franciscan, may have built on their work for his *Arte para aprender la lengua mexicana*, which he completed around 1547. This was followed by Alonso de Molina’s *Arte de la lengua mexicana y castellana* in 1571 (León-Portilla 2004), a companion to his monumental dictionary titled *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana* (1555, 1571 [Molina (1571) 2004]). By the end of the sixteenth century, the Jesuits had begun participating in this endeavor as well: Antonio del Rincón produced his *Arte mexicana* in 1595, and in 1645 Horacio Carochi composed the most detailed and sophisticated grammar of the colonial period: *Arte de la lengua mexicana* ([1645] 2001).

¹ “Having examined in particular whether even in the most perfect language of the Indians the Mysteries of our Holy Catholic Faith can be explained well and properly, it has been recognized that it is not possible without committing great inaccuracies and imperfections, and although classes have been created to teach the priests who will minister to the Indians, it is not a sufficient solution, because of the great variety of languages.” Our translation.

These grammars document what is now called “Classical Nahuatl.” It is commonplace to say that Classical Nahuatl was the form of the language spoken at the time of the conquest, but just like today numerous dialects were in use prior to the arrival of the Spaniards (Dakin, chapter 2 in this volume; Yáñez Rosales, chapter 4 in this volume). It is also important to keep in mind that the documentation of the language in the form of a grammar created the appearance of linguistic stability that did not necessarily characterize linguistic practice. Una Canger argues that Classical Nahuatl was a convergence of regional dialects spoken in the urban centers of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan (2011a).

Colonial grammarians who documented Indigenous languages often described their task as one of “taming” the language. This was not an infelicitous metaphor. The Spaniards felt like they had to “tame” Indigenous languages in two different ways. First, they had to alphabetize it to produce dictionaries and grammars in their own alphabetic script, and, second, they had to infer grammatical rules based on observed linguistic practices.

The Spaniards needed to subordinate Nahuatl to alphabetic script because they relied upon alphabetic writing to facilitate their own use of the language and to train Native scribes to help them in their evangelization efforts. It would be inaccurate to say that the Nahuas had no writing prior to the arrival of the Spaniards even if one defines writing narrowly as glottography, that is, the representation of linguistic elements (e.g., sounds, syllables, words). The Nahuas had an elaborate system of writing that incorporated both iconographic and glottographic practices (Whittaker 2021). However, these practices had not led to the kind of standardization that typically characterizes the writing of languages today. Even Spanish alphabetic literacy had not achieved such standardization in the sixteenth century, when Spanish priests began documenting Nahuatl. In principle, the use of alphabetic writing forces the writer to make decisions about how to represent individual sounds, something that Nahuatl glottography did not do, at least not in an extensively systematic way. When talking about sounds, modern linguists distinguish between phonemes, which are mental images of sounds, and allophones, which are the vocal articulation of phonemes. This distinction is necessary because one phoneme may be articulated differently depending on the context. For example, in English, in word final position the phoneme /s/ has two allophones, [s] and [z]. Plurality of nouns in English is signaled by use of the letter *s* which is a representation of the phoneme /s/, but it is pronounced as [z] when preceded by a voiced phoneme. Compare, for example, the difference between the words “cats” and “dogs.” English speakers consider these to be the same sound, but the first is pronounced as an [s] and the second is pronounced as a [z]. Spanish and Nahuatl share many of the same, or very similar, sounds, but the set of phonemes and allophones of any given

language generally do not coincide completely with those of any other. Carochi, for example, explains that Nahuatl “lacked” some of the letters of the Castilian alphabet such as *b, d, f, g, r, j*, and *ñ* ([1645] 2001, 18). His admirable description of the sound system of Nahuatl does not distinguish between sounds and the letters used to represent them, because he does not have recourse to the concepts of phoneme and allophone. But even more problematic than the lack of certain sounds was the fact that Nahuatl has sounds that Castilian does not. For the Spaniards, it was easy to transliterate sounds that were common to both languages (e.g., [k], [m], [n], [s], [t], etc.), but Nahuatl had at least two sounds that caused the Spaniards significant trouble: long vowels and a consonantal glottal stop.

In the case of the short-long vowel contrast, the word *chichi* with two short vowels, for example, means “dog” while *chīchi* with a long [ī] in the first syllable means “to suckle.” This same contrast occurs with [a], [e], and [o] as well. Spanish has vowel phonemes with the same qualities, but the quantity of these vowels has no phonemic significance. Thus, the Spaniards would have had a hard time even perceiving the difference between short and long vowels. Nahuatl does not have a [u] probably because this sound is very similar to the long [ō]. In some cases, this similarity led the Spaniards to use the *u* to represent the long [ō] in Nahuatl, but they generally simply ignored vowel length.

The glottal stop, which colonial grammarians called *saltillo*, would have been easier to perceive because Spanish had no consonant similar enough that it might have interfered with its perception as a distinct sound. But this sound presented other difficulties. The glottal stop is not just a different sound; it is a different type of sound. It is produced by closing the airway with the glottis, and in Nahuatl it only occurs in syllable-final position. In Classical Nahuatl, the *saltillo* only appears within a word when the following syllable begins with another consonant. However, it also occurs at the end of words ending with a vowel, but in these cases, it has no phonemic value. No letter of the Spanish alphabet leant itself readily to representing this sound. Rincón ([1595] 1885, 63v) and Carochi ([1645] 2001, 22) actually describe the glottal stop as a feature of the vowel that precedes it. In most modern dialects, the “Classical” *saltillo* corresponds to an aspiration [h] represented by the letter *h*, but Rincón described aspirated versions of the *saltillo* in the sixteenth century as well (64r). Grammarians like Rincón and Carochi were sophisticated enough to understand the significance of the *saltillo*/aspiration, and they devised orthographic conventions to represent it. But their conventions were not widespread. Most colonial documents simply ignore glottal stops. As with the case of long vowels, the context usually disambiguated any confusion that this omission might have caused.

In addition to the alphabetization of the Indigenous languages, the Spaniards also had to create grammatical rules for them. This grammatical “taming” did not

imply that these languages had no rules prior to this point. The Spaniards clearly based their work on what they perceived to be the normative linguistic practices of Native speakers. But they were employing grammatical concepts developed originally for Latin that were often ill suited to the nature of Indigenous American languages. We tend to universalize grammatical categories such as “noun,” “verb,” “adjective,” and so forth. The functions that these categories serve may be universal, but all the categories themselves are not. Different languages perform some of these functions in different ways. The adjectival function, for example, works very differently in Spanish than it does in Nahuatl: Spanish has an independent class of words that function as adjectives, whereas Nahuatl performs this same adjectival function using stative verbs. This and other disparities made it difficult to make the reality of Nahuatl linguistic practice fit the preestablished paradigm of Latin grammar, and this difficulty contributed to the sense referred to by colonial grammarians that they were taming the language.

Furthermore, the formulation of grammatical categories and rules and the imposition of those rules through formal instruction are not simply a matter of reflecting the reality of language. The formal schooling that we receive from a young age makes it easy to pass over the fact that categories and rules have no real existence: they are abstractions induced by linguistic practices. There are at least two different ways to explain what gives rise to these abstractions: according to one theory, they are genetically programmed into our brains; according to another theory, they derive from the way in which we are embedded in our environment. Both theories posit certain universals, but the location of these universals and how they operate differ. Furthermore, whatever is universal regarding language does not manifest itself in a consistent way in actual practice. For example, even if one believes that on some deep level all humans think using a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) syntax, in practice there are languages that fall under every possible word-order categorization: SVO, SOV, VOS, VSO, OSV, and OVS (Dryer 2013; Hammerström 2016, 25). Thus, regardless of the theory that one espouses, the communicative practices in which humans engage are not completely determined by whatever universals underlie language: an element of creativity is at work in the initial creation and negotiation of meaning.

This element of creativity inevitably becomes suppressed to the extent that we begin to follow preestablished rules or conventions. Every communicative practice operates on a continuum, one end of which corresponding to an absolutely rational, completely rule-governed practice with the other end being absolutely aesthetic, creative, and intuitive. Both extremes are theoretical; neither are possible in the absolute. All communicative practices have elements of both, but primordially they must originate from the creative, intuitive pole of the continuum. The primordial act of

communication moves toward the rational, rule-governed side of the continuum for the sake of efficacy, but the extent to which it does so depends upon a variety of factors, perhaps the most influential being the institution of alphabetic literacy. Alphabetic writing transpositions linguistic utterances from the ephemeral medium of speech to the more enduring medium of pen or print. Modern societies have institutionalized this literacy through formal schooling, newspapers, publishing houses, and so forth; these institutions, in turn, produce prescriptive style guides and grammatical rules that attempt to control not only the way we write but also the way we speak. We distinguish here between prescriptive rules enforced by institutions of literacy and more descriptive conventions that characterize communicative practices. The fact that grammatical rules need to be taught and enforced attests to the primordially “unruly” nature of language. This is not to say that linguistic conventions cannot have considerable force absent institutional prescriptions, but generally speaking they are not rules in the same sense as those enforced by institutions of literacy. The very notion of a grammatical “rule” derives from prescriptions imposed by institutional authority. Repeated deviations from prescriptive rules often acquire the status of rule-like conventions, but they reveal the primordial creativity of linguistic communication. This creativity is as characteristic of Spanish or English (whether of the sixteenth century or of today) as it is of Nahuatl.

The formulation and enforcement of grammatical concepts and syntactic rules by institutions of literacy induce a regularity in the language that did not exist as such prior to this formulation and to which actual practice rarely conforms in any absolute way. Even the relatively limited institutionalized alphabetic literacy of the sixteenth century caused the Spaniards to think of language in alphabetic and formal grammatical terms. However, languages like Nahuatl whose syntax and lexical elements had not been subjected to an organic grammatical analysis do not always submit easily to rules and categories, and even less so to those developed for other languages, and this is why the Spaniards felt as if they were taming the language when they created grammatical rules for it.

The sense that Nahuatl and other Indigenous languages of the Americas are radically different has not diminished over time. Richard Andrews and James Lockhart both comment, for example, on the strange nature of Nahuatl nouns, which can take subjects like verbs (Andrews 1975: xiii, 143–144; Lockhart 2001a: x; 2001b, 1). As of this writing, the Wikipedia entry for “Classical Nahuatl Grammar” states that “Classical Nahuatl is a non-copulative language, meaning that it lacks a verb ‘to be.’” But this is not actually true. The Nahuatl verb *ca* means “to be,” but it is not always used. In his Nahuatl grammar, Michel Launey explains that the Nahuatl verb *ca* means “to be” only to express location like the Spanish *estar* (2011, 43). He states that in sentences that have nominal predicates such as “Mary is a woman,”

Nahuatl has no verb “to be.” In such sentences “the noun itself serves as the predicate” (18). For this reason, Launey goes so far as to say that “to understand what a Nahuatl noun really signifies, we should consider that *mēxicatl* does not simply mean ‘(a) Mexica’ but ‘to be a Mexica.’ Similarly, *cihuātl* is not just ‘(a) woman’ but ‘to be a woman,’ and so on” (18). Lockhart and Andrews make similar arguments: Lockhart states that Nahuatl nouns are closer to what we call verbs (2001a: x; 2001b, 1), and Andrews claims that the word *chichi* is not the equivalent of the word “dog” but of the assertion “It is a dog” (2003, 112, 148).

I would argue, however, that these claims that Nahuatl nouns function essentially as verbs are based on a misunderstanding of the nature of language. The *ca* verb is used in the present tense like the Spanish verb *estar*, but as Launey himself explains, in the past tense, it is also used like the Spanish verb *ser* with nominal predicates (2011, 75). So it isn’t that Nahuatl doesn’t have a copulative verb. It is just that in the present tense, Nahuatl speakers dispense with the need for the copulative verb *ca* by attaching a subject prefix directly to a noun. This phenomenon has less to do with the nature of Nahuatl nouns than it does with the pragmatics of Nahuatl communicative practice. It is true that the Nahuatl verb *ca* is not used in the present tense with nominal predicates. But this practice—that is, the fact that Nahuatl nouns can take subjects like verbs—is not as odd as Andrews, Lockhart, and Launey seem to believe. The word *chichi* can mean “it is a dog,” both because in practice no verb is necessary and because in Nahuatl the third-person subject is a null morpheme. A more illustrative example of how subject affixes attach directly to nouns would be *tichichi*, which literally translates as “you dog” but which Andrews and Launey would translate as “you are a dog.” However, in some cases we do the same thing in English: “you dog” is a perfectly acceptable way of expressing the meaning “you are a dog.”

Furthermore, the relationship between an utterance and the meaning that it conveys in a particular instance is not determined strictly by the nature of the words or even the grammatical structure itself. Linguistic utterances have no fixed, abstract referents. The nature of reference in practice cannot be reduced to the correspondence between a particular sentence much less a particular word like “dog” and an abstract referent like the idea of a dog. Even if one believes that a specific referent (e.g., dog) is essential to the nature of a specific word (e.g., “dog”), in actual practice it is not limited to that meaning. And this is true of all languages. A speaker of any language can use their term denoting dog to mean “it is a dog.” But this term can also mean any number of other things, either in addition to or in place of its original, base meaning. In English, for example, “dog” can also mean “Watch out for the dog!” or “you filthy low-life.” To give another example, if one adopts Andrews’s perspective, the word “fire” in English or any other language can mean “There is a fire” or even “There is a fire; get the hell out of here!” But it can also mean “pull the

trigger on your rifle!” or “give me a match” or more recently for many people “cool,” “excellent,” and so on. What this demonstrates is that meaning is not located solely in the word or utterance itself but also in the context of its use.

It is misleading to say that in Nahuatl *chichi* means “it is a dog,” not only because this meaning depends on the context in which the word is expressed but also because it projects a linguistic structure onto an utterance that does not employ that structure. The claim that *chichi* means “it is a dog” assumes that full sentences underlie all linguistic utterances. But this idea only makes sense to a mentality that has been conditioned by conventions and stylistics such as those of modern alphabetic literacy that normativize full sentences (Brokaw 2021, 108; Linell 2005). At the time of the conquest, Nahuatl speakers had not been conditioned by this type of literacy. Nahuatl writing did employ glottography, which would have induced at least in Nahua scribes a higher degree of self-consciousness about the formal properties of the language, but the nature and extent of their glottography was very different from European alphabetic literacy. Nahuatl writing practices combined glottography and iconography, and even if one assumes that literacy in Nahua writing was widespread the fact that iconography constituted a much higher proportion of the written signs means that its cognitive impact would have been greater than that of the glottographic practices.

Writing systems—whether glottographic or iconographic—enter into a dialogic interaction with the language that they represent. Communication is a multidimensional activity that cannot be reduced strictly to verbal expression. The transpositioning of verbal language into any glottographic script disembodies it and divorces it from all the other elements that normally come into play in the communicative act (facial expressions, gestures, tone, context, etc.). The loss that occurs in this transpositioning results in a reduction of communicative efficacy. European writing systems attempt to compensate for this loss by introducing conventions specific to the medium (punctuation, word spacing, the normativization of full sentences, etc.) that help avoid the ambiguity and confusion that would be caused by a strict transcription of oral discourse (Brokaw 2021, 107).

The relatively rapid introduction of alphabetic writing in Nahuatl almost certainly led scribes to transposition Nahuatl oral discourse without adopting all the discursive conventions that Spanish had been developing for centuries in its dialogic interaction with alphabetic writing practices. What Lockhart calls the “verbless sentence” may have been more common in Nahuatl oral discourse, and this may even have been more in tune with an iconographic mode of thought that employs images to convey meaning, but it is not uncommon in the oral discourse of other languages. What makes the verbless sentence in Nahuatl seem so odd is at least in part the fact that it appears in written texts. The fact that Nahuatl linguistic practice

does not require a verb in all instances does not mean that nouns therefore become verb-like. Rather, it means that Nahuatl linguistic practice relies upon pragmatics in such cases more than other languages do. This type of pragmatics is more characteristic of oral discourse than alphabetic discourse, and the documentation of Classical Nahuatl by colonial grammarians was based on oral practices that historically had not been conditioned by alphabetic writing. Even today, most Nahuatl speakers have remained outside of the institutions of alphabetic literacy.

However, from the beginning of the colonial period, the Spaniards also trained Indigenous nobles to write alphabetic Nahuatl as well as Spanish and Latin. In 1535, Carlos V ordered that the religious orders establish schools to educate Indigenous nobles; he reaffirmed this order in 1540, and Felipe II issued a similar order in 1579 (Heath 1972, 35). But even before these formal edicts, Spanish missionaries had already begun this endeavor. Pedro de Gante set up a primary school in Texcoco in 1523, just four years after the arrival of the Spaniards, and Martín de Valencia established one in Mexico City in 1525 (Baudot 1995, 105). In 1533, the Franciscan order began operating an institution of higher learning known as the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, which was officially inaugurated in 1536. There has been some debate about whether the primary purpose of the school in Tlatelolco was to prepare the Indigenous students for ordination to the priesthood (Maxwell and Hanson 1992, 5), for participation in colonial governance (Laird 2014, 152), or for work as “native linguists” that would “reconcile cultural spheres” (Arencibia Rodríguez 2006, 264). Regardless of any intent, all these schools contributed to the creation of an alphabetically educated Indigenous ruling class and a cadre of Native Nahuatl speakers who assisted the priests in their research and evangelization efforts. Native Nahuatl speakers were instrumental, of course, in the investigations of the language itself, and they engaged in their own research for their own audience. Around 1540 a Native Nahuatl speaker produced a trilingual dictionary by copying Antonio de Nebrija’s Spanish-Latin dictionary and adding Nahuatl definitions (Anonymous n.d.; Clayton 1989, 2003, and chapter 7 in this volume).

For the Spaniards, the study of the language was primarily a means to facilitate the governing and evangelizing of the Indigenous population. To this end, many Spanish priests studied Nahuatl, but they still needed the assistance of Native speakers in their multifaceted projects, particularly in the early colonial period. One of the first projects that newly alphabetized Native Nahuatl speakers participated in was the production of religious texts for use in evangelization. Pedro de Gante, for example, oversaw the production of a pictographic catechism ([1529] 1973) and a *Doctrina* in Nahuatl (1547). Other Nahuatl language religious texts included confessional guides (e.g., Molina 1565), sermons (Sahagún 1563), and plays (Sell and Burkhart 2004).

In addition to the study of Indigenous languages and the production of religious texts, the Spaniards studied the history and culture of the groups that they governed, and the students at the school at Tlatelolco and other schools were instrumental in these efforts as well. For the Spanish Crown, the history of Indigenous polities had implications, at least theoretically, regarding the justification of the conquest and the status of the Indigenous in the new colonial order. And for the priests of the Catholic Church to effectively convert the Nahuas and other Indigenous groups, they had to understand their history, their culture, and the concepts that informed their thoughts and behaviors.

In 1533, the president of the Real Audiencia in Mexico commissioned Andrés de Olmos to investigate the history and culture of the Indians. Olmos's initial research resulted in a work titled *Tratado de las antigüedades de México* containing sections on religion, history, calendrics, society, and language (Baudot 1995, 41). Unfortunately, this text was lost, but Olmos continued his investigations throughout his life. In addition to a *vocabulario* and a grammar, he collected a set of Nahuatl *huhuehltlahtolli* (discourses that convey moral instruction to Nahuatl youth), a series of sermons in Nahuatl, and several other texts. Olmos developed a method involving interviews with Native informants, the use of Indigenous iconographic texts, and the categorization of source data (Maxwell and Hanson 1992, 9), and he would have employed the students at Tlatelolco in compiling his earliest works.

Other priests adopted this same methodology, the most notable being Bernardino de Sahagún, who taught at the Colegio de Tlatelolco. Like Olmos, Sahagún studied the language, culture, and history of the Nahuas, and he produced several religious and ethnographic texts with the collaboration of students from the school at Tlatelolco. He is best known for the monumental twelve-volume *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Sahagún [1579] 1994), which covers religious, social, cultural, and historical topics. Sahagún had his assistants document the initial historical and ethnographic information in Nahuatl. The version of the *Historia* known as the *Florentine Codex* contains a thorough text in Nahuatl, iconographic elements, and Spanish glosses that summarize the Nahuatl text.

While primary schools and the school at Tlatelolco were training the first generation of alphabetically literate Nahuas, marriages between Spaniards and Indigenous women produced a Nahuatl-speaking mestizo class that also often received an alphabetic education. This education made it possible for the Indigenous nobility to participate in colonial government, but it also laid the groundwork for the creation of an intellectual culture based on Nahuatl alphabetic literacy. Initially, the Native intellectuals who emerged from this context during the first fifty years or so after the arrival of the Spaniards worked primarily alongside, and under the direction of, Spanish priests on projects that related in one way or another to evangelization

(sermons, catechisms, confessional guides, etc.). But even in this period, in some cases Native authors began evincing a specifically Nahuatl intellectual culture. Ben Leeming has recently discovered two mid-sixteenth-century Antichrist plays by Fabián de Aquino that were produced outside of the supervision of the Spaniards and that demonstrate a uniquely Indigenous take on Christianity (2017, 2022, and chapter 8 in this volume). John Schwaller argues that this phenomenon becomes more prominent at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with works such as Juan Bautista's *Vida y milagros del bienaventurado San Antonio de Padua* and *Libro de la miseria* from the first decade of the century, Bartolomé de Alva's translation into Nahuatl of three Spanish Golden Age religious-themed plays (Burkhart 2008), and Luis Lasso de la Vega's *Huei Tlamahuizoltica* (the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe narrative) from 1649 (Sousa, Poole, and Lockhart 1998; Schwaller 1994).

This culture of Nahuatl literacy emerged even earlier in more secular texts produced by the first generation of Native and mestizo chroniclers such as Chimalpopoca (Alonso de Castañeda), Don Mateo Sánchez, Don Pedro de San Buenaventura, Hernando de Alvarado Tezozomoc, Diego Muñoz Camargo, Juan Bautista Pomar, and Juan de Tovar. These Nahua writers and intellectuals took an interest in researching the history and culture of the Nahuas in the sixteenth century at the same time as Spaniards such as Jerónimo de Mendieta and Diego Durán. All chroniclers from this period relied by necessity on Native informants and often Indigenous iconographic documents as well. But some, both Native/mestizo and Spanish, produced hybrid texts that employed both iconography and alphabetic writing (Chimalpopoca; Durán; Tovar), and others wrote in Nahuatl (Tezozomoc).

A second generation of writers born in the last decades of the sixteenth century further developed this alphabetic Nahuatl intellectual culture. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, born around 1578, drew from Native sources to write extensively about the history of the Nahuas. Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin, born in 1579, produced historiographic work in both Spanish and Nahuatl, thus continuing the tradition initiated by Sahagún's assistants and Tezozomoc. These efforts were not limited to religious and historiographic works. In the sixteenth century, an anonymous writer and Juan Bautista Pomar compiled the collections of Nahuatl poems known as *Cantares mexicanos* and *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*, respectively (see Bierhorst 1985 and 2009). Regardless of whether one believes that these poems were originally composed in the precolonial or colonial period, their alphabetization reflects, and contributes to, the development of a culture of Nahuatl literacy.

In 1640–1641, another initiative involved the translation of three Spanish Golden Age plays into Nahuatl by Bartolomé de Alva. On the one hand, these translations of Spanish plays are derivative of Spanish culture; on the other hand, they are not

strict translations. They adapt the plays to the Nahuatl context, as all translations must do. These plays had religious themes, but they also inscribed them within Nahuatl culture and put Nahuatl “on a par” with Spanish (Burkhart 2008, 48).

Bartolomé de Alva belonged to a group of Nahuatl-speaking intellectuals in the seventeenth century associated in one way or another with Horacio Carochi (Schwaller 1994). Angel María Garibay describes Alva’s project of translating European dramas into Nahuatl as “broken flight” because it did not lead to a more institutionalized tradition (Garibay, *Historia II*: 340; cited in Schwaller 1994, 396). Even leaving aside the question of pre-Hispanic versus colonial origins, this notion of broken flight may be even more appropriate to the poetry of the *Cantares mexicanos* and the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* because the tradition to which they belong also died out.

These types of cultural productions reveal the way in which colonial domination never destroys Indigenous agency; it just induces it to redirect its energies. The extent to which these energies were directed to developing and preserving alphabetic literacy in Nahuatl depended, like all literacies, on institutions that perpetuate it. Evangelization efforts and the colonial administration drove many of the initiatives that led to the production of Nahuatl texts throughout the colonial period, but even in these contexts Native authors often disseminated a uniquely Nahuatl perspective. And numerous local institutions and private individuals engaged in their own religious and secular projects. Camilla Townsend observes that by around 1600, Indigenous intellectuals began producing historical texts to preserve traditional historical knowledge that they felt was in danger of becoming lost (2019, 13–14). In some cases, these chroniclers produced their works in Spanish (Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl), but others such as Chimalpahin, Juan Buenaventura Zapata y Mendoza, and Don Miguel Santos wrote in Nahuatl (Townsend 2019, 175–225).

In the eighteenth century, this type of research diminished significantly; or if it continued to be produced, it appears less frequently in the archive. At this time, many of the Indigenous elite began to see the continued use of Nahuatl as an impediment to their participation in the colonial order. In 1728, a group of nobles petitioned the archbishop of Mexico requesting that the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco be reopened, and that the curriculum contain a rigorous program of Spanish instruction (Heath 1972, 78). Spanish priests continued to publish grammars, vocabularies, sermons, catechisms, and other religious texts in Nahuatl throughout the eighteenth century (Schwaller 1973), but the historiographic projects of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave way to more strictly pragmatic endeavors of the present.

As Yáñez Rosales (chapter 4 in this volume) demonstrates, priests continued to study and publish on Nahuatl into the twentieth century, but the perspective of these

studies changed in the mid-eighteenth century. Schwaller argues that starting around 1840, “works in and dealing with Nahuatl became more analytical and less creative. Production shifted from that of religious works, grammars, and dictionaries for clerics to linguistic studies and secular works for the educated and scientifically-oriented public” (Schwaller 1973, 70). In this period, the French scholars Joseph Aubin and Rémi Siméon spent time in Mexico, learned Nahuatl, and studied the Indigenous past. Aubin acquired an impressive number of iconographic and alphabetic documents, a portion of which had been collected in the seventeenth century by Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci, and he produced a study of what he called the “didactic painting” and “figurative writing” of the ancient Mexicans (Aubin 1885). For his part, Siméon, published the largest Nahuatl dictionary since that of Molina (Siméon 1885).

European scholars such as Aubin and Siméon were interested in Nahuatl and Nahua culture as objects of scientific study, and this perspective was consistent with a shift that was marked most clearly after 1821 in the nation-building projects of newly independent Mexico. As Kelly McDonough explains, these projects involved the subsumption of the “Indian” under the category “citizen.” On the one hand, this homogenization of the population under this category ostensibly made everyone equal. On the other hand, it erased Indigenous culture, and this erasure allowed conservative governments to justify the dispossession and privatization of Indigenous communal lands (McDonough 2014, 89).

This may be at least in part why nineteenth-century Nahua intellectuals like Faustino Galicia Chimalpopoca spent more time negotiating the present than preserving the past. Chimalpopoca was a Native Nahuatl speaker and a devout Catholic who attended, and later taught at, the Colegio de San Gregorio. He was politically conservative, but he had a decidedly liberal perspective on Indigenous issues. He defended the preservation of communal lands, advocated for the use of Nahuatl in both religious and secular contexts, and taught the language at the Colegio de San Gregorio and later at the University of Mexico. He transcribed and translated many Nahuatl texts, and he produced works designed to teach Nahuatl and promote Nahuatl literacy (McDonough 2014, 111). According to Chimalpopoca, “the true history of Mexico is marked in her language, in Nahuatl” (cited in McDonough 2014, 108). Unfortunately, many of his contemporaries disagreed. The dominant perspective of this period saw Nahuatl as an impediment to modernization and to the unity of the Mexican nation. Thus, the ideology of modernization and Mexican nationalism created an environment that was not friendly to the preservation of Nahuatl. Chimalpopoca was an exception in that he was a nationalist who valued Nahuatl.

Unfortunately, Chimalpopoca’s ideological stance lacked the institutional support that would have given it a chance at success. The cultural prestige and political dominance of Spanish in the colonial period naturally put Nahuatl in an inferior

position. Like most cultural products and practices, language depends upon institutions that perpetuate it. Thus, the survival of Nahuatl depended upon the extent to which Indigenous individuals, families, and communities did not integrate into Spanish-speaking society. In the colonial period, the two-republic model, the training of Indigenous scribes who produced Nahuatl language documents, and the acceptance of these documents into the archive provided a certain level of institutional support for the preservation of the language. Even so, contact with Spanish and increasing bilingualism influenced the nature of Nahuatl linguistic practice. James Lockhart and Frances Karttunen have identified three stages in the development of Nahuatl after the conquest (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976), with a fourth phase added later (Lockhart 1994). In each phase, Nahuatl evinces progressively more Spanish influence because of increased levels of contact and bilingualism. Magnus Pharo Hansen (2016 and chapter 5 in this volume) explains that the implication of this model is that the process would eventually lead to the complete disappearance of Nahuatl in favor of Spanish, and this seems to be what happened in those areas where Nahuatl documents allow the process to be tracked. But Hansen points out that Nahuatl is still spoken in the communities that did not produce alphabetic documents. In other words, it seems that Nahuatl literacy went together with increased levels of bilingualism and contact with Spanish, which ironically undermined the continuity of Nahuatl in the long term.

Kelly S. McDonough traces the legacy of Nahuatl intellectuals from the colonial period through the present, but just as important she points out that the Nahua intellectual tradition did not depend upon alphabetic literacy (McDonough 2014, and chapter 11, this volume). Those of us who approach Nahuatl by way of alphabetic writing must always remind ourselves that the written language captures a particular instance of linguistic practice that is mediated by alphabetic script, and that a wealth of intellectual and “literary” traditions existed, and continue to exist, independent of this medium. For example, Jonathan Amith has documented a tradition of oral stories in Nahuatl from Guerrero (2009). Amith’s volume and his larger project are appropriately titled “Ok nemi totlahtōl,” which translates as “Our language still lives.” Even many alphabetic activities may be historically invisible merely because they have not made it into the archive or because that archive has not been thoroughly explored.

The kind of scholarly engagement with Nahuatl described here occurred in one way or another, although with some differences related to changes in the sociopolitical context, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of more formalized academic disciplines. In the mid-twentieth century, Robert Barlow acquired expertise in Nahuatl, taught at Mexico City College, and

financed a short-lived Nahuatl language newspaper (McDonough, chapter 11 in this volume). Angel María Garibay contributed to the establishment of the study of Nahuatl language and culture as an independent discipline in Mexico through the creation of the permanent Seminario de Cultura Náhuatl at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in 1956. This seminar produced generation after generation of scholars who have contributed to our understanding of Nahuatl language, culture, and history, including such luminaries as Miguel León-Portilla, Alfredo López Austin, Karen Dakin, José Rubén Romero, Jorge Klor de Alva, Thelma Sullivan, and Patrick Johansson. In 1959, Garibay and his most distinguished student and disciple, Miguel León-Portilla, founded the journal *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* to provide a venue for the publication of Nahua-related research. León-Portilla succeeded Garibay as director of the permanent seminar and editor of *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*. Like Garibay, León-Portilla not only encouraged the study of Nahuatl language but also actively promoted the recognition of the Nahua past as equivalent to classic Western antiquity—although to a large extent at the expense of the former’s specificity. In numerous works, starting with *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes* (1956), and until his death in 2019, León-Portilla passionately upheld the universal worth of ancient Nahua culture. León-Portilla’s *Visión de los vencidos* (1959), a compilation of Indigenous sources on the Spanish conquest translated from Nahuatl, became extremely popular. The English translation, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, appeared in 1962.

Around the same time in the United States, developments in linguistics, anthropology, and history had laid the groundwork for several scholars who began studying Nahuatl and using it in their research in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Charles Gibson demonstrated the importance of accessing the Indigenous perspective through Nahuatl language sources (1964). Charles Dibble and Arthur Anderson began a long-term project to translate and publish Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* (1970–1975). Arthur Anderson, Frances Berdan, and James Lockhart followed Gibson’s lead in advocating for the use of Nahuatl documents in historical research (Anderson, Berdan, and Lockhart 1976; Lockhart 1994). Lockhart founded what he called the “New Philology,” which studies ethnohistory using Native-language texts, and over many years at UCLA he trained numerous scholars who work with Nahuatl and other Native-language sources: for example, Susan Schroeder, Robert Haskett, John Tutino, Sarah Klein, Stephanie Wood, Matthew Restall, Kevin Terraciano, Rebecca Horn, Camilla Townsend, and John Sullivan. Other hubs of Nahuatl studies emerged at various universities in the United States. Joe Campbell taught a program intermittently at Indiana University from the 1970s through the 2000s. Yale University offered a summer program for many years. And the language

has been taught at many other universities: the University of Chicago, Tulane, the University of Utah, and others.

Much of this academic study has focused on Classical Nahuatl, but it is important to keep in mind that Nahuatl continues to be a living language. The number of Nahuatl speakers has been in decline since the colonial period. In the twentieth century, the Mexican government began promoting bilingual education, but the purpose of this program was to Hispanicize the Indigenous population (Flores Farfán 1999, 37; Marcelín-Alvarado, Collado-Ruano, and Orozco-Malo 2021, 619–620). This tactic contributed to a further decline in the number of Native speakers. It also meant that language activism inevitably shifted from preservation to revitalization. However, in most cases, preservation and revitalization initiatives have been local endeavors that have not been fully documented in academic scholarship.

Beginning in the late 1980s but more intensely starting in the mid-1990s, largely in response to the Zapatista rebellion, the Mexican government began to acknowledge demands by Indigenous groups. The San Andrés Accords in 1996 represented a particularly productive negotiation in which the government agreed in principle to recognize Indigenous rights. The agreement was never fully implemented, but these and other events initiate an ideological shift in Mexican politics that is at least nominally sympathetic to Indigenous issues. Regarding education and Indigenous languages, this period marks a transition from bilingual to intercultural education, which in theory values and supports Indigenous languages (Marcelín-Alvarado, Collado-Ruano, and Orozco-Malo 2021).

Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of this transition was the establishment of Intercultural Universities in the early 2000s. These schools are in areas with large Indigenous populations, and inherent to their mission are language revitalization and community outreach and engagement (Casillas Muñoz and Santini Villar 2006, 19–23). Critics have pointed out that these universities actually perpetuate an ideology of integration (Marcelín-Alvarado, Javier Collado-Ruano, and Miguel Orozco-Malo, 2021, 621) and that they have not been effective at language revitalization (Sandoval Arenas 2016).

Around the same time that the Intercultural Universities were being formed, John Sullivan, who studied Nahuatl with James Lockhart in the 1990s, founded the nonprofit Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ; Zacatecas Institute for Teaching and Research in Ethnology). Justyna Olko and John Sullivan explain that Nahuatl is disappearing because intergenerational transmission has decreased dramatically in recent decades. This reduction is due to a variety of interconnected factors such as a negative language ideology and what we might call a lack of linguistic infrastructure (e.g., schooling in Nahuatl, written materials in Nahuatl, the production of literature in Nahuatl, etc.) (Olko and Sullivan 2014, 377–378). The

goal of IDIEZ, now under the direction of Native speakers, is to address these underlying causes of language decline by creating the requisite linguistic infrastructure and promoting the use of Nahuatl as a language of instruction and knowledge production. To this end, in addition to teaching Nahuatl language and culture, they have produced a monolingual Nahuatl dictionary and several other texts in Nahuatl.

More recently, the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI) has also begun implementing institutional measures to address structural obstacles inherent in the system and the problem of linguistic infrastructure. Carlos Sandoval, a language activist and professor at UVI, identifies the same issues as Olko and Sullivan, and he explains that UVI is taking steps to overcome them: the use of written Nahuatl with a standardized alphabet (although different from the one used by IDIEZ), the production of a bilingual magazine, the use of Nahuatl in public spaces, the use of Nahuatl as an academic language, and so forth (Sandoval Arenas 2016). The Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural has also created a master's program in Nahuatl language and culture delivered and administered completely in the language (Bernal Lorenzo and Figueroa Saavedra 2019). The initiatives at UVI primarily, but also others like it, are at least beginning to create the kind of institutionalization for which Chimalpopoca advocated in the nineteenth century.

Even researchers from outside Mexico have begun integrating traditional scholarship and community engagement that promote the revitalization of Nahuatl. This step marks a fundamental shift at a time when the field of Nahua studies has been expanding. The goals of community outreach and language activism naturally focus on contemporary issues, but Nahua studies continues to encompass all aspects and periods of Nahua language and culture. For academic researchers outside of Mexico who wish to specialize in Nahua studies or even colonial Mexico more broadly, it is now essential that they study Nahuatl or other Indigenous languages; instructional programs for non-Native speakers like those at Indiana University, UCLA, Yale, IDIEZ, and now UVI have made that possible. Many of the contributors to this volume have benefited from these programs.

The chapters in this book speak to the roots and resiliency of Nahua culture and language, highlighting the adaptations and changes it has undergone over the centuries. The first essay sets the stage by offering an overview of the linguistic development of Nahuatl. In chapter 2, Karen Dakin sheds light on the early history of Nahua languages in Mexico and Mesoamerica by considering the division into the so-called Western and Eastern varieties. After an overview of prevailing theories about Nahua language diversification, Dakin describes several linguistic variants that point to the historical origins of the split between the two groups and help establish the chronology for those specific features. Dakin's

consideration of the development of the Nahuatl language and its variants adds to our understanding of the sociohistorical identity and changing position of what became Mesoamerica's lingua franca. As she notes, the existence of markedly different Nahuatl dialects indicates a changing history of political interaction among the region's multilingual societies.

The next three chapters showcase the place of Nahuatl in the linguistic and social geography that links ancient Anahuac, to colonial New Spain, to modern Mexico. In chapter 3, Mercedes Montes de Oca Vega considers the use of diphrases in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl place-names. Also known as semantic couplets, diphrases combine two or more terms to create an idea that is greater than the sum of its parts. Found in both graphic and textual sources, diphrases help conceptualize specific relationships through a selection of meaningful referents. This strategy is related to privileged speech, such as might be used to address revered ancestors, deities, and high-ranking individuals. In the case of toponyms, diphrases activate the landscape so that what might otherwise be generic spaces become specific places. Montes de Oca Vega's review of toponymic diphrases sheds light on the way the study of Nahuatl can yield important insights into Nahuatl cultural practices.

Next, in chapter 4, Rosa H. Yáñez Rosales addresses the evolution of Western Nahuatl, Nahuatl from southern Jalisco and Colima, a dialect whose documentation is rather scarce. Based on a review of published language samples and on her field research, Yáñez Rosales considers the dialectal peculiarities and the decline of Nahuatl in the region. In the town of Tuxpan, for example, the tradition of formally greeting distinguished visitors in Nahuatl lasted until the late twentieth century. On the other hand, in the town of Ayotitlán, the words that healers incorporate into the curing prayers they recite for the sick are barely recognizable as Nahuatl. Even so, these traditions are proof of the lasting symbolic value of the Nahuatl language. The distinctive features of the dialect spoken in western Mexico, Yáñez Rosales finds, can still be heard in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 5, Magnus Pharo Hansen examines the process of language shift in the state of Morelos. Hansen argues against the traditional account of a slow and gradual language shift from Nahuatl to Spanish. Instead, he proposes that the decline of the Nahuatl language accelerated sharply in the early twentieth century because of a shift in the state's demographics caused by the intense violence of the Mexican Revolution. According to Hansen, the revolutionary upheaval turned the Indigenous population of Morelos into a minority. Thus, the Nahuatl language lost ground as a regular means of communication among the Indigenous towns of the region. Hansen asserts that ethnohistorical, ethnographic, and ethnolinguistic considerations can help recover local histories that might otherwise be forgotten. Thus, Hansen's contribution exposes an event of genocidal proportions in recent Mexican history.

The focus next turns to Nahua cultural practices and intellectual work from the sixteenth century to the present to show that even as they have evolved, Nahua cultural expressions maintain a connection to pre-Hispanic antiquity. In chapter 6, John F. Schwaller investigates ritual running among cultures that belong to the Uto-Aztec language family—including Mexica, the Rarámuri, and the Hopi—and considers the role of porters in pre-Hispanic Mexica society. The chapter pays particular attention to the terms used to describe running in Mexica religious rites, such as Panquetzaliztli, Ochpaniztli, and the New Fire ceremony, in the Nahuatl section of the *Florentine Codex*. Schwaller argues that the rich vocabulary associated with running, swiftness, and haste, along with the symbolic value of running, indicates the important role that runners and bearers—of news, goods, or even gods—played in Mexica religious and commercial life.

In chapter 7, Mary L. Clayton considers the Newberry Library's Ayer manuscript 1478, an undated and anonymous trilingual Spanish-Latin-Nahuatl dictionary, composed during the sixteenth century, based on Nebrija's *Vocabulario de romance en latín*. Clayton previously demonstrated that the Ayer manuscript is a copy of an earlier work containing all three languages and presented evidence that the author of the Nahuatl glosses was almost certainly a Native speaker of Nahuatl rather than Spanish. In this volume, she shows how the fact that the author was preparing a passive dictionary rather than an active one allowed him to employ strategies for confronting new concepts that were not available to Alonso de Molina in his dictionaries and gives examples that show his resourcefulness in squeezing meaning out of Nebrija's Spanish-Latin pairs in a variety of ways. In addition to devising fully Nahuatl equivalents and utilizing Spanish borrowings, he made use of hyperonyms and explanatory equivalents, taking hints from Nebrija's disambiguating glosses and his Spanish explanations for Latin equivalents. In some cases, he relied on Nebrija's Latin, with variable results. This variety of devices, along with his point of view as a Native Nahuatl speaker, gives the dictionary its distinctive character.

The translation of foreign concepts was nowhere more salient and consequential than in the religious sphere, owing to the systematic efforts of zealous Catholic missionaries who sought to master local languages to reshape Native belief. This translation was often done with the help of literate and indoctrinated Native speakers, such as the students at the Franciscan school in Tlatelolco. However, as Ben Leeming shows in chapter 8, not all religious texts composed by Nahua intellectuals were written under the stern eye of a wary friar. Leeming highlights the work of colonial Nahua intellectual Fabián de Aquino, who copied, adapted, and composed Christian religious texts in Nahuatl without necessarily having obtained the church's approval. The chapter focuses on Aquino's Nahuatl rendering of a popular genre of medieval European religious writing known as the *contemptus mundi*. Noting that

Aquino may have been influenced by the work of Fray Luis de Granada (1505–1588), Leeming argues that the former's creativity and masterful use of Nahuatl resulted in a unique expression of Nahua Christian religiosity. Aquino's *contemptus mundi* exemplifies how Christian devotional literature was received and reworked by literate Nahuas who were not directly associated with official evangelical efforts.

Beyond theological and metaphysical questions, the mundane details incorporated into religion-themed works also reflected Nahua ideas and concerns. In chapter 9, Louise M. Burkhart focuses on the role of the notary in Nahua religious dramas. The important role that notaries played in real life was mirrored on stage: they wrote and read the documents that sanctioned important events. In plays about the Passion of the Christ, Burkhart argues, the character of Escribano, possibly played by an actual notary, enhanced both the gravity and immediacy of events being portrayed. Even when the testimony was false and the result grievous, and even when they might sometimes serve unjust authorities, fictional notaries exhibited great discretion and fidelity, for in truth, in both the public and private spheres, much depended on a notary's accuracy and trustworthiness.

Chapter 10 shows that Nahua traditions continue to have important implications in the material and spiritual worlds. Alan R. and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom offer an anthropological study of cut-paper images used in a Nahua community for healing and spiritual cleansing. Based on many years of direct experience, the authors argue that these sacred paper cuttings are a living tradition linked to pre-Hispanic graphic conventions and religious beliefs. Cut by ritual specialists, the anthropomorphic images embody powerful spirit entities that must be bargained with to solve specific problems, such as a person's illness, and maintain order in nature. The chapter describes the various paper figures, the entities they represent, and the symbolism of their careful layout as part of an offering. The features of the cuttings and their arrangement constitute a contemporary expression of the highly sophisticated semasiographic writing system whose origins can be traced to Mesoamerica's earliest civilizations.

Along with traditional practices rooted in ancient lore, Nahua intellectual production has persisted through the centuries, continuing to adapt to new realities. In chapter 11, Kelly S. McDonough surveys Nahua intellectual activity from the sixteenth century to the present. She highlights how Nahuas were always able to adapt to changes, managing not only to preserve but also to assert their identity and cultural traditions against hegemonic forces that sought to undermine them. Starting in the sixteenth century, Nahuas quickly embraced alphabetic writing as a tool to defend their material and immaterial heritage. Crucially, they wrote in Nahuatl, which served as a mechanism and symbol of resistance and self-determination. McDonough posits that Nahuatl is particularly concerned with relationships, including those with the

past and the ancestors, and among kin. Those connections have been preserved over many generations through the written work of Nahuatl intellectuals.

Ranging widely across several disciplines, from ethnohistory to literature, and from anthropology to philology and pure linguistics, the chapters included in this volume link their authors to a long series of Native and non-Native Nahuatl-speakers and observers going back centuries. The contributors highlight the continuity of Nahuatl as a vital language and cultural vehicle. Collectively, they speak to the origins of Nahuatl; its past and present evolution according to contemporaneous political, demographic, cultural, and economic pressures and changes; its rich literary and cultural heritage; and its prominent historical role in the history of precolonial, colonial, and independent Mexico.²

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