

## **Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive**

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It is difficult to believe now that generations of scholars in the 20th century argued with insistence that the indigenous cultures of the Americas were destroyed by European imperial expansion. It is even harder to believe that scholars writing about Mexico – where evidence of native civilizations persisting beyond the arrival of Spaniards has always been available, and grew increasingly so during the 20th century - viewed that arrival as marking a firm ending and a dramatic civilizational apocalypse. Some saw the end as a providential and redemptive transition, a view more often found earlier in the century and among scholars whom we would categorize today as apologist Hispanists. Others lamented the end, emphasizing the tragic nature of cultural loss, using their knowledge of Spanish colonialism to detail its destructive cultural impact, or deploying their understanding of native-language sources to reconstruct that ending.

The latter position, more likely to be found later in the 20th century and even in the present one, had immense power to persuade – and to mislead. For it seemed indigenist, inspired by empathy with the underdog and a desire to give voice to the vanquished. The earlier Hispanist version is now but a whisper, while the later indigenist one lives on, a few of its giants still writing, while groups of younger scholars bear its torch. Furthermore, a longer version of the historiographical tale that I have reduced to a sweeping summary would reveal key variants between the US and UK, France and Spain, and within Mexico itself; and it would likewise show contrasts between the study of the Nahuas of central Mexico and that of other Mesoamericans (especially that of the Maya, where the historiographical turn has been staggeringly absolute). Nonetheless, it is still hard to believe how dominant the old view was, and how consistently it excluded, or reduced to a single dimension, colonial-era Nahuas of the kind that populate the pages of Camilla Townsend's new book.

The Nahuas that she has with great skill and care resurrected for us lived originally in the 16th and 17th century. They were small town intellectuals and government officials, local men of standing who were committed to doing what their pre-colonial ancestors had done: 'to protect their community and its ways against all comers, to bend with changing times, but never break' (p. 1). That is one of a many elegant turns of phrase with which Townsend articulates the motley middle ground between the abovementioned culture-loss perspective and an overemphasis on persistence or even resistance. In that middle ground, the

exploitation and humiliation of colonialism are still undeniable and often inescapable. Yet Nahua noble families can also continue to govern and defend their communities and its traditions with a degree of autonomy sufficient to preserve, and leave to us, ‘an intricate, multifaceted contribution to the human experience’ (p. 225).

That ‘contribution’, the sources that allow Townsend to explore that middle ground, are the *xiuhpohualli*. The *xiuhpohualli* were the ‘yearly count’ documents or annals traditionally maintained in Nahua city-states and other communities for many centuries – both before Spaniards arrived and from the 1520s to the 1690s. The latter, the colonial-era *xiuhpohualli* written alphabetically, are Townsend’s subject and source. She explains the larger context that allowed ‘dozens, even hundreds, of post-conquest histories’ (p. 3) to be written and remain extant, but the book focuses primarily on six examples and their creators. Moving chronologically, she reveals the threads of continuity and change across the generations, for ‘the genre of *xiuhpohualli* had proven strong enough and flexible enough to incorporate the new without obliterating the old’ (p. 223).

If that sounds drily philological, the result is not. Townsend is able to combine a reading of the content of each document with a reconstruction of its author or authors to create a series of biographies that are also community micro-histories. In other words, she brings to life credible characters whose actions and feelings – expertly and carefully teased out of the *xiuhpohualli* – turn Nahuas of the era from remote and pixelated figures into real ones. The more we see the joys and struggles of 16th-century men like don Alonso de Castañeda Chimalpopoca and don Mateo Sánchez, the better we understand Nahua life in the early colonial period. This is hardly the first book to do that, but it does it ways that are new – its innovative use of sources, for example – and welcome.

Consequently, the book is not only a contribution to the ethnohistory of colonial Mexico and to the study of the colonial period in general, but it also boosts our efforts to move beyond black-and-white views of Spanish-Nahua (and by extension, European-indigenous) interaction in the centuries of conquest and early colonization. By taking us inside Nahua communities and the minds of the men writing their annals, Townsend helps us to grasp how a micropatriotic view of the world still divides men into allies and enemies – but not always along the racial lines depicted in the histories written by colonial-era Spaniards and by many 20th-century scholars. One of the most vivid examples is the friendship that developed in Tecamachalco between the Nahua nobleman and *xiuhpohualli* author, don Mateo Sánchez, and the Franciscan fray Francisco de Toral. In lesser hands, their alliance might have been dismissed as the collaboration of a colonizer and a member of the coopted conquered elite. In Townsend’s hands, over a dozen evocative pages, we see two like-minded men finding meaningful common ground and fighting together to protect a community, to bend but not to break – whether the threats came from Spaniards or from Nahuas.

My sole quibble with this wonderful book – more of a note of mild frustration – relates to the ambivalent way in which it is pitched. On the one hand, it seems to be a decidedly scholarly work constructed with a highly specialist audience in mind. Published with a university press, the book includes a 30-page appendix of texts in Nahuatl. It is a monograph with primary sources in transcription and translation, a monographic sub-genre that in the last 30 years has become common in – even typical of – the field of colonial Mexican and Mesoamerican ethnohistory. The book’s historiographical context is that of the New Philology, the loose school of scholars within that field who emphasize the close analysis of indigenous-language sources. Indeed, the book is dedicated to James Lockhart and Luis Reyes, and begins with an ‘acknowledgments’ that throws the reader right into that historiographical inner circle (although Townsend never refers explicitly to the New Philology); it then follows with an introduction that conforms exactly to the norms of a monograph. Imagine approaching the book with little prior knowledge of colonial Mexico, as most of the students in a recent graduate seminar of mine did: the towns where the Nahua sources were written are listed in the table of contents, but there is no map to locate them, an immediate sign that readers are expected already to know the place, time, and subject. A few students admitted that they initially took this to be based on a doctoral dissertation, until they discovered the depth of the Townsend back-catalogue.

Yet, at the same time, there are early clues that a larger audience is imagined in some vague way. The title is ambitiously, even misleadingly, broad (Native America?), while the subtitle, styled as a ‘how’ phrase, hints at an accessible and explanatory argument of the kind favored by the academic publications of trade and commercial presses (the New York office of Oxford University Press, whence this book came, is often perceived as a sort of trade division of the press). The fact that the Nahuatl texts are placed in an appendix, not interlaced with or facing their translations at the start of each chapter, indicates accessibility concerns. Furthermore, these are not unabridged texts – that would have extended the book by many hundreds of pages – but brief excerpts, juxtaposed with a single image that faces each chapter’s opening page. There is also a well-composed glossary.

Above all, there is the impact of Townsend’s writing. From the first paragraph of the ‘Introduction,’ it is clear that the reader will not have to endure the stiff mud of so much academic writing, with its dull jargon and circular argumentation. Townsend’s style is a restrained literary one, a tad florid but never at the expense of clarity. It is as if she yearns to write historical novels, but is too devoted to her source documents and too mindful of the methodologies she has mastered to permit herself such an indulgence. *Annals of Native America*, like Townsend’s previous books, is written with a care so tender that it sustains multiple readings. And that only makes one wish all the more that the ambivalence of pitch had been resolved in ways that permitted this work to reach more readers.

In the April 2015 issue of *Reviews in History*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, bouncing off a plaintive line in a recent book by Serge Gruzinski, remarked pointedly that historians wanting more readers might ‘think searchingly, conjure vividly, and write powerfully’. I suggest that in her new book Townsend has done just that. The result is not just compelling; it is important. For it combats that old stereotype – both in Hispanist and indigenist forms – of conquered or vanquished ‘Indians’. It reveals a persistent civilizational vibrancy that not only helps us better understand the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico, but something altogether broader and more urgent – the Native America of the book’s title.

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