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2020 NEH Summer Institute Opportunity

Worlds in Collision:

Nahua and Spanish Pictorial Histories and Annals in 16th-Century Mexico

A National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute
for 26 College Faculty participants

to be held at Adelphi University July 19 to August 9, 2020

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detail from copy of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, 16th c.

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A New Conquest History

Some 25 years ago, the Columbian Quincentennial invited fresh thinking about the European colonizing of the Western Hemisphere and the experiences and histories of the indigenous Native peoples. We now have occasion to contemplate another New World Quincentennial: the overthrow of Aztec Tenochtitlan and the founding of Mexico City (1519- 21), with the fateful meet-up of Hernan Cortés and the Emperor Montezuma [or Moctezuma] serving as an iconic tipping point of what has become a familiar master narrative of the Americas. Ever since the publication of Prescott's enormously popular *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), the oft-told epic tale has been that of how a small intrepid band of Spanish adventurers, led by an Odysseus-like Cortés, ever wily and resourceful, were able to overthrow the mighty but 'barbaric' Aztec Empire, led by a

morbidly indecisive and superstition-bound Montezuma. A negative complement to this clichéd tale of heroic conquistadors was the antithetical Black Legend (*Leyenda Negra*) focusing on the extreme cruelty of the Spanish, as portrayed in gruesomely graphic accounts, such as those penned by the moralizing Spanish friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, and then publicized far and wide by Spain's colonizing rivals, the English, the Dutch, and the French — to advance their own colonial self-interests.

Of course, mainstream scholarship has long-since dispensed with the simplicities of such master narratives, whether of the Heroic or the Black Legend variety. But it was not until the 1990's, as Matthew Restall has shown in a review of the field, that a "New Conquest History" began to take shape, a history based on a richer understanding of the 16th century Mexican context and, especially, on a new attention to the many indigenous sources already extant, plus a flood of newly edited and translated indigenous documents that continues to this day. Ethnohistorians such as Charles Gibson laid the groundwork for a clearer understanding that Central Mexico in the 16th century was not a singular ethnic or socio-political reality. For although it was the center of a tribute empire administered by the famous Aztec Triple Alliance, the Valley of Mexico was also home to a multitude of indigenous polities other than the "Aztecs" (or Mexica) — including many with their own languages and their own proud histories, polities who were never subdued by the Aztecs. Now it is widely understood, as part of this New Conquest History, that what the Spanish found themselves entangled in upon entering the Valley of Mexico, was in effect an indigenous civil war, and that it was the overwhelming force of the indigenous enemies of the Aztec Empire, led by the Tlaxcalteca and other Nahua groups, as much as the "guns, germs and steel" of the Europeans, that spelled the defeat of Tenochtitlan.

Pictorial Histories

This newer understanding has been immensely aided by the ongoing project of the editing and translating of Nahua-derived pictorial and pictorial/textual sources, including those mediated by 16th century evangelizing friars such as Bernadino de Sahagún and Diego Durán, as part of their project of trying to comprehend Nahua culture better in order to more successfully evangelize it. The friars introduced alphabetic literacy for their own purposes, but in consequence we are in possession of an unprecedentedly vast indigenous archive coming from the second, third, and later generations of literate Nahua and mestizo scribes and scholars, increasingly without any mediation by Spanish friars or officials — a huge corpus of written, pictorial, and combined written/pictorial Nahua-generated documents (both in Nahuatl and in Spanish), constituting the largest library of Native American-produced literature anywhere in the Americas. Following the pioneering work of scholars of Nahuatl texts, such as Charles Dibble, Frances Karttunen, and James Lockhart, a new generation of scholars fluent in Nahuatl, and versed as well in ethnohistory and iconography, has inaugurated an ongoing scholarly project to make accessible this corpus of Nahua-generated maps, pictorials, text/pictorials, and alphabetic texts.

But accessibility is really not enough; it does take time and careful study to properly digest and assimilate such new material; it ought not to be matter of simply adding un-contextualized items to a syllabus — which is what too often can happen with the sheer digital proliferation of primary source material. It often requires a longer gestation period before the substantial outcomes of new knowledge can make their way responsibly into research and teaching. For example, it can be extremely misleading to think of these Nahua-derived texts simply as giving us a "Native perspective," to counter-balance what we already had in the noted Spanish accounts by Hernan Cortés and Bernal Díaz. This very implication is telegraphed in the subtitle of a work that has become something of a classroom staple in recent decades: Leon-Portilla's *Visión de los vencidos* (1959), translated into English as *The Broken Spears/ The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (1962; 1992). "The Aztec Account" — just as the phrase "a Native perspective" — implies a singularity of perspective that is thoroughly inconsistent with the archive.

No Singular Point of View

As Dana Leibsohn and Stephanie Wood have shown in recent work, the Nahua-originated documents *do not and cannot provide a singular point of view*, but rather represent multiple perspectives deriving from one or another of the many Nahua polities from whence they derive. Tlaxcala was an outright enemy/rival of the Aztecs and saw itself as a leader in the conquest of Tenochtitlan; Tetzaco was part of the Aztec Triple Alliance, but in the end, sided with Cortés; Tlatelolco, twin city of Tenochtitlan but also its rival, fought to the bitter end and saw *itself* as the ultimate defender of their island city-state, viewing the Tenochtitlan Aztecs as failures and cowards. No singular “Native perspective” could possibly come from such a complex brew, especially when we consider that all these Nahua-produced texts and pictorials are from the colonial period, and that their authors’ concerns were not simply historic, but rather with important issues such as historic land claims and privileges still of vital contemporary interest to themselves and to their communities, or altepetls.¹

These colonial era Nahua scribes could be construed as living in *nepantla*, the Nahuatl term for living in two worlds, sometimes even with a “double consciousness,” and their attitudes can be vastly different from what a modern reader might expect. For representatives of communities who saw themselves as joint conquistadors with Cortés, it is not surprising that their accounts do not highlight the traumas of “Spanish Conquest” — because it is *their* conquest, and they are now concerned to maintain the privileges they consider their due. As Stephanie Wood titles it in her game-changing study, what we are often seeing in these texts is a matter of *Transcending Conquest* (2003). Thus, there is a growing sense that the most fruitful approach to these Nahua documents is to view them not simply as accounts of events, but as *discourses*, reflecting not only their ostensible subject matter, but their own circumstances of cultural production as well. Whether the documents present accounts of the pre-Hispanic past, or of the Spanish contact era, they are still colonial documents, with their various visions and understandings of that past processed through the prisms of their own colonial present.

¹The proper plural of *altepetl*, a major Nahua town or city-state, would be *altepemeh*, but here we treat altepetl as an English word and thus use the standard English plural.

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