

Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship 2009-2010

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Personal Statement

I arrived at the University of Minnesota in 1988 without a clear end goal in mind. I attended several quarters of classes, but eventually left school to travel in Mexico (at this time with absolutely no experience in Spanish). After returning to the States, I came back fairly fluent in the language and ready to open a restaurant in St. Paul, serving dishes based on the recipes gleaned from my travels. In 2002, I sold the business because I knew what I wanted to do: finish my undergraduate degree and pursue graduate studies. After completing the B.A., I was accepted to the department's M.A. program (leading to the Ph.D.) in Hispanic Literature.

In my second year of graduate studies, I read testimonies of Náhuatl-speaking Indians regarding the arrival of the Spaniards and the Conquest. I found it curious that we had to read these in translation to Spanish instead of the original language. When I asked my mentor, René Jara, about this, he suggested that if I thought it was so important, I ought to find an opportunity to study the language myself. This is exactly what I did, arriving in 2006 to Zacatecas, Mexico for my first of two summers of intensive language study with native speakers at the Zacatecas Institute for Teaching and Ethnographic Research (IDIEZ). At this time that I became acutely aware of what anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla has discussed in his much-cited book *México profundo* (1996): the intense preoccupation with the glorious Indians of the past, the outright disdain for the flesh and blood Indians of the present day, and all of the ideological maneuvering that entailed.

After only a few weeks of working in Náhuatl I found my footing. I began to make connections between the kind of experiences we were discussing in Mexico and my own personal history. My great-grandparents met at the Carlisle School, an Indian Boarding School whose unofficial motto was "kill the Indian to save the man." As I listened to my teachers, I heard the echoes of my family storyline: pressure to assimilate to dominant culture, land issues, discrimination, and most importantly, the precarious situation of our languages. I began to realize that I could honor my great-grandparents' sacrifices by doing the kind of work that says that being Indian is good enough. As I carry out my research in Mexico I have come to understand that this kind of research is one of the many ways to be Indian in the 21st century. It is through my work that I acknowledge my obligation to question and to deal with the wreckage of colonialism, to recover the stories of those who came before us, and to honor those that have survived in a hostile and shifting world.

Since my first summer of study, I have led bi-weekly Náhuatl language study groups at the U of M, and have traveled regularly to work with native speakers in Mexico. I also recently organized a panel at the annual Modern Language Association conference, "Indigenous Languages as Modern Languages" which is an example of the kind of hemispheric dialogues and activities I see myself pursuing in my professional career. When I complete my dissertation, I intend to teach at the college level, maintain my ties with IDIEZ, and facilitate the dissemination of Náhuatl language and cultural knowledge. I also plan to continue to create opportunities for native speakers to carry out independent research on their own culture. I hope to follow Professor Jara's example, and push students to seek the answers to nagging questions that can potentially open the door to worthwhile endeavors that they too are passionate about.

Reading and Writing Nahuas: Tracing the Náhuatl Intellectual Tradition

Kelly McDonough

Background

The Náhuatl language, once the common language of the Aztec Empire, is today one of the most widely spoken and best documented of Mexico's 64 indigenous languages. The study of this language and culture has generally been dominated by two lines of research. The first, the historical-ethnographic approach, analyzes the copious written documents in Náhuatl produced during the first 150 years of European colonization (16th-17th centuries). The second, from the anthropological and linguistic disciplines, focuses on the 20th-21st centuries, relying almost exclusively on the oral tradition in Náhuatl with little or no focus on indigenous individuals as producers of written knowledge. While these approaches have contributed greatly to the articulation of knowledge production and dissemination on (and by) Nahuas, there is a substantial gap in the research that has unwittingly suggested a rupture in the Nahua intellectual tradition from the late eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. By limiting research to the colonial period we have created a false impression of an intellectual tradition that "went away" (i.e. people stopped writing, speaking, and thinking in Náhuatl after the colonial period). Similarly, with the anthropological and linguistic reliance on oral discourse there is an erroneous understanding that Náhuatl knowledge is *only* concerned with the past (such as in orally conveyed myths and legends), or *only* the realm of oral knowledge, implying that Indians are incapable of engaging the present and the future, and not willing or able to utilize the written word, in their own language (let alone in a second or third language). My project begins to fill the gaps in current research while refuting the myth of a lack of a continuous written intellectual tradition.

Goals and Objectives

In my dissertation I aim to complete four major tasks: **1)** Reassert a continuous Nahua intellectual tradition that does not hold to the false dichotomy of orality being the realm of indigenous knowledge and writing the realm of non-Indians; **2)** Engage previously neglected or undervalued figures and concepts that can inform critical inquiry, contributing to both the intellectual health of Náhuatl speaking communities and the academy at large; **3)** Highlight the heterogeneity of Nahua experience, at the same time tracing some of the broader issues that minoritized peoples and Indigenous communities have reckoned with in Mexico from contact through today; and **4)** Emphasize methods of research that include Indigenous critical approaches and collaboration.

Design and Methodology

My dissertation covers nearly 500 years, beginning with the early Colonial Period (15th century) and continuing on into the present. Each chapter dips into distinct time periods witness to substantive historical changes that markedly affected Nahuas and their intellectual production. I begin each chapter with a biographical sketch of a Nahua intellectual. I also explore specific questions that arise from a reading of their life experiences and their written texts. Taking my cue from K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty, I utilize a three-pronged descriptive approach, outlining official rhetoric, quotidian practice, and Indigenous experiences. I am concerned with letting the texts and native speakers speak for themselves, that is re-connecting the theorization of a population with the actual population being theorized. With this in mind, I

move beyond archival and bibliographic study in order to carry out multi-sited fieldwork. I have studied the Náhuatl language, conducted focus groups reading the texts alongside native speakers (some encountering their cultural patrimony for the first time), and carried out formal and informal interviews with indigenous intellectuals today. As such, my dissertation is also a vehicle to disseminate new Náhuatl intellectual production.

Potential Significance

Since no other study exists that pieces together the unbroken line of intellectual production in Náhuatl, each chapter not only sutures this history, but also identifies other individuals that should be addressed in future research as belonging to this trajectory. This articulation has the potential to substantially contribute to the intellectual health of a community that has been told for 500 years that they are “a people without history.” Finally, I analyze how and why the individuals treated in my dissertation chose to publicly maintain and disseminate their language and cultural knowledge in the face of massive pressures to assimilate to dominant cultural norms. With this information, we can begin to understand the conditions necessary to create an atmosphere where indigenous people can choose who and how they want to be without outside pressures.

Progress to Date and Schedule for Completion

The first chapter serves as a general introduction to the problem and the literature review. In this chapter I include a broad history of the development of the field of Náhuatl language and culture studies from contact to the present day. I also discuss key terms that I will use throughout the dissertation: intellectuals, assimilation, resistance, transculturation, expectations, authenticity, native informant, collaborator or participant. Additionally I outline some of the issues such as orthographies, translation, and indigenous language pedagogy that will be seen throughout the writings on Náhuatl over the following centuries.

In the second chapter, I focus on religious education and native language legislation in the colonial period, including what I characterize as the containment of Indians. I dialogue with native-speaker of Náhuatl and Jesuit priest, Antonio del Rincón (1566-1601), the author of the first Indigenous American linguistic treatise, and the first Jesuit to write a grammar of his own native language, *Arte mexicana* (1595). To complete this chapter, I will carry out archival research in Mexico City at the Universidad Iberoamericana and the National Archive, as well as spend three weeks with native speakers addressing his work and other texts of the Náhuatl Golden Age.

In the third chapter I discuss the rhetoric of nation-building during the 19th century including the denial and disappearance of Indigenous people in the discourses of citizenship. To this end I conducted historical and archival research at the National Archive in Mexico City to analyze the career and writings of Nahua politician, attorney, scholar of colonial Náhuatl texts, and Náhuatl teacher to Emperor Maximilian I: Licenciado Faustino Galicia Chimalpopoca (d. 1877). I contend that Chimalpopoca's outspoken support of the short-lived French occupation of Mexico (1864-1867) has unjustly relegated him to an unpopular footnote in the history of Nahua letters. I have completed most research and plan on completing the first draft of this chapter by May 2009.

In the fourth chapter, I highlight the scientific, economic, and anthropological discourses of Social Darwinism manifested in the nation's resolve to deal with the “Indian problem” of the early 20th century. I analyze the testimony of Doña Luz Jimenez (18xx – 1965) a native speaker

of Náhuatl from Milpa Alta, who among other professions was a muse and model for many muralists and painters, notably working extensively with Diego Rivera and Jean Charlot. Luz's tales of day-to-day life, myths, her first-hand perspective of the Mexican Revolution, and her own experience with assimilative schooling come to us by way of Mexican anthropologist Fernando Horcasitas, who hired Luz as both a linguistic informant and co-teacher of the Náhuatl language at the Colegio de Mexico. Luz's stories also point to the double marginality of being female and Indian. My research on Luz took me to Mexico City, to interview her living family members in February and March 2009. I have completed a draft of this chapter and will present a paper on Luz Jiménez in May of 2009 at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association annual conference.

Finally, in the last chapter I explore bilingual education in Mexico and the cooptation of Indigenous peoples to promote assimilation in the latter half of the 20th century. To this end I focus on the work of Nahua writer, artist, and teacher, Idelfonso Maya Hernández (1926-). Nearly his entire corpus depicts indigenous peoples in Mexico interacting with state institutions, in particular educational programs, that have intervened (beckoned or not) in their lives since colonization and on into the 21st century. In this chapter I examine Maya's play *Ixtlamatinij* (The Learned Ones), and also discuss my experience meeting and interviewing the author in 2007 and 2008. In November of 2008, I presented a summarized version of this chapter at the Midwest Modern Language Association and will send a modified version as an article to the *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* journal in March 2009.

With the award of the Dissertation Research Fellowship, I will be afforded both the time necessary to focus exclusively on the completion of my dissertation by May 2010, and the ability to travel to Mexico to continue archival research and focus group work with native speakers of Náhuatl.

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