

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Indigenous Agency, Historians' Agendas, and Imagination in History Writing

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This essay reviews the following works:

The Lords of Tetzcoco: The Transformation of Indigenous Rule in Postconquest Central Mexico. By Bradley Benton. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 195. \$99.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107190580.

Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire. By Ross Hassig. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 186. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826357120.

Pueblos within Pueblos: Tlaxilacalli Communities in Acolhuacan, Mexico, ca. 1272–1692. By Benjamin D. Johnson. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 252. \$31.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781646420148.

The Aztecs at Independence: Nahua Culture Makers in Central Mexico, 1799–1832. By Miriam Melton-Villanueva. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 249. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780816533534.

Portraying the Aztec Past: The Codices Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Aubin. By Angela Herren Rajagopalan. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. Pp. 212. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477316078.

When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting That Changed History. By Matthew Restall. New York: Ecco Press, 2018. Pp. 526. ISBN: 9780062427267.

Dressing the Part: Power, Dress, Gender, and Representation in the Pre-Columbian Americas. Edited by Sarah E. M. Scher and Billie J. A. Follensbee. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018. Pp. vii + 497. \$125.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813062211.

The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar: And Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico. By Lisa Sousa. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 404. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780804756402.

The Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs. By Camilla Townsend. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 336. \$29.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190673062.

There is little controversy today regarding the assertion that history is not just about the past. Generations of historians, in addition to their primary occupation of writing history, have asked questions and made statements about what history is, how it can or should be studied and written, for what purposes, and with what kind of effects. An important thread in this discussion has focused on history's present agendas and goals, recognizing that "all history is 'contemporary history.'"¹ However, even if history is now seen

¹ E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1984 [1961]), 21.

as “an enterprise that takes place in the present,”² and despite emerging decolonizing paradigms in the humanities, one may still ponder how often historians actually engage in dialogues with those for whom the narratives they develop could matter most. Among these people are the members of today's Indigenous population of the Americas, including the contemporary Nahuatl-speaking descendants of the Aztecs, who have rarely been recognized as such after the creation of independent Mexican state that instead saw them, other Native groups, and their languages as obstacles to progress and modernization. This vision of cultural discontinuity is not entirely gone today, and in my opinion, it poses challenges and responsibilities for historians exploring the Indigenous past. It is not a coincidence that recurring themes of the studies discussed in this essay include overt and covert forms of violence and discrimination, racism, gender identities, women's rights, and Indigenous agency—all pressing concerns of our own time.

Contemporary positionalities materialize in entirely new approaches to old stories, including both the preconquest past and the Spanish conquest itself. But also many new stories have emerged within the last several decades as historians have pushed forward, in hitherto unknown directions, both our knowledge of encounters between Spaniards and Native people and the latter's sociocultural history, which did not end in the ashes of the conquest. These new stories expand well beyond such celebrated dates in traditional historiography as 1521 and the fall of Tenochtitlan, the main capital of the Aztec empire. The inclusion of sources in Indigenous languages such as Nahuatl, Mixtec, Zapotec, or Yucatec Maya in studies on colonial history has made it possible to defy a historiography dominated and biased by Europeans' accounts and to ask new questions about the past that are also very relevant for the present. Some of the studies discussed below clearly show that as historians we are driven by our contemporary agendas and rationalities, but it is only through deep readings of Native sources that we can painstakingly engage in reconstructing and understanding ontologies which are not our own.³

And yet, as we will see, historians are still bound to face some enduring concerns, such as the legacy of Leopold von Ranke's primary agenda of history writing, *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (“how it really was”).⁴ Historians' claims that their works present true stories of the past may now be framed by or hidden in research agendas aimed at rendering Indigenous voices and recounting stories of, and also by, (past) Indigenous actors. However, perhaps more problematic are the smoothly authoritative narratives of the past, whose authors draw on modern epistemological and methodological paradigms to create a superficial sense of transparency regarding their own positionality in their research. It is fortunate for readers of colonial Mexican history that recently this way of writing history on the Spanish conquest and its actors has been irrevocably unmasked, along with its enduring legacy perpetuated in popular works of historiography, art, and literature.

“I have ... tried to make this book more than just another telling of the same story,” states Matthew Restall (xi) in his book *When Montezuma Met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting that Changed History*, describing a mission which has no doubt been accomplished. Focusing on the history of Spanish-Aztec encounters initiated in 1519 and their direct aftermath, he explores and uncovers how powerful historiographical “facts” and discourses were created, or, in fact, invented. The historical narratives he explores are “replete with omissions, fabrications, and contradictions” (19), formed through an incessant interplay between alleged facts, their witnesses, authors of historical sources, and the perspectives of modern historians. In a pioneering exercise in historiographical deconstruction, Restall brings under his critical scrutiny an incredibly rich plethora of historical and literary sources that were both created by and reflected in the enduring, complex, and multivoiced imaginative retelling of the encounters and stories of its protagonists. As he convincingly argues, presenting and perpetuating the encounter with Spaniards as Moteuczoma's surrender was crucial for the legitimacy of Spanish conquest and the colonization of the Americas. This also explains the construction of an enduring image of Aztec religious and social life as being characterized by dreadful rituals of manslaughter and cannibalism—a depiction that is still cherished in both modern professional and popular historical writing yet is built on hypocrisy, ethnic prejudice, and Eurocentric ideologies.

Restall uncovers the many layers of Western imagination involved in rewriting the story of the encounter(s) from different angles, including the depiction of Moteuczoma's personality and psychological profile, as well as the motivations behind his decisions and his widely unquestioned surrender to Cortés. In doing so,

² Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), x.

³ See, for example, Greg Anderson, “Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past: The Case for an Ontological Turn,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 787–810.

⁴ Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker: von 1494 bis 1535* (Leipzig: Reimer, 1824), 1:vi.

Restall reaches beyond historiographic deconstructions and thus exposes himself to the forces of historical imagination. His own narrative aims at uncovering the goals and strategy of Moteuczoma during the encounter, drawing readers' attention to a fascinating and undoubtedly significant aspect of Mexica culture: the palaces, gardens and zoo of the *huei tlahtoani* ("the great speaker," the Aztec title for the supreme ruler), which "reflected *his* empire" (135) much as did the war booties and ritual deposits left by Moteuczoma's predecessors, known today through their archaeological remains. But when telling his story of the Mexica ruler as a passionate "collector" (130) who skillfully lured Spaniards into Tenochtitlan to "collect them," Restall fails to explain the numerous efforts made by Aztec intelligence to steer the intruders away from a personal encounter with their *huei tlahtoani*. These attempts began right after Cortés disembarked on the coast of Veracruz in April 1519 and continued throughout his journey toward the imperial capital, where he first set foot in November of the same year. Nor does Restall reflect on the meaning of the lavish gifts bestowed on the Spaniards or of the culinary test for gods or humans⁵ that Aztec messengers applied to the Spaniards on the coast (an important episode that is missing from Restall's narrative).

To understand more comprehensively the encounter between Moteuczoma and Cortés, one needs to explore the Nahua conceptualization of war and the role of negotiation during times of conflict,⁶ as well as different forms of dependence as understood within Aztec politics. While I fully agree that the "Spanish-Aztec war" was not a surrender in the European sense of the word, the strategy of the Spaniards was largely incomprehensible in Aztec culture. Moreover, the meaning of the emperor's gifts to Cortés cannot be explained in terms of "a long-standing tradition of diplomatic gift giving," as Restall puts it (132), because their function within the context of political negotiations differed significantly from the generous gift giving to both vassals and enemies that occurred during festive occasions in Tenochtitlan. It was the war of conquest, and other forms of submission—not collection making in a (modern) European sense—that opened the way for the subsequent "collection" of exotic objects from the peripheries of the empire that then found their way to Tenochtitlan, including royal palace complexes and ritual deposits. Restall's Moteuczoma was "a fearless master collector, a bold zoological imperialist" (143); thus he argues that a scenario in which "the emperor sought peacefully to lure the foreigners into his city—is far more logical" (144).

But is this logic based on the rationality of the Aztecs, who are so culturally remote from us, or our own sense of rationality? And how do we tell them apart? Because if we fail to do so then we run the risk of contributing to "posthumous personalities" (106) of the Aztec ruler and perpetuating historical myths, such as his immediate imprisonment by the Spaniards, that Restall convincingly and masterfully unveils, deconstructs, and explains in another part of his book. In his narrative, Restall (138) ascribes to Moteuczoma a desire to "attain universal knowledge." While this is yet another European concept, I do agree that cognitive motivation could indeed be behind the *huei tlahtoani's* numerous attempts to identify and correctly classify the intruders within the Mexica system of knowledge (e.g., through culinary and dressing tests for gods, described by both Native and some Spanish sources⁷). The vision of Moteuczoma "hunting" Spaniards (145) may indeed seem appealing as it restores full agency to the Indigenous side, but it is left to readers and other historians to accept or reject this narrative. The same can be said about Restall's hypothesis regarding the existence of what he calls "the Tlaxcallan Triple Alliance" (210), or the permanent alliance between Tlaxcallan, Cholollan, and Huexotzinco,⁸ which is very confidently incorporated into his narrative.

This criticism notwithstanding, the unquestionable value and novelty of Restall's book is grounded in his clear research agenda that embraces the experiences of people who are marginalized, neglected, or entirely absent from historical discourse: Indigenous women, slaves, and other Native actors. He convincingly depicts

⁵ In order to verify the status of strangers, Moteuczoma's messengers gave the Spaniards human food (maize, beans, etc.) and gods' food (a human sacrificial victim). By rejecting the divine food with disgust, the Spaniards confirmed their human nature. See Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, Book 12, The Conquest of Mexico*, edited by Arthur A. Anderson and Charles Dibble (Santa Fe: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1975), 15; *Anales de Tlatelolco: Los manuscritos 22 y 22bis de la Bibliothèque de France*, edited by Susanne Klaus (Markt Schwaben: Verlag Anton Saurwein, 1999), 126. See also Ryszard Tomicki, *Ludzie i bogowie: Indianie meksykańscy we wczesnej fazie konkwisty* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1990).

⁶ See, for example, Justyna Olko, "Los mensajeros reales y las negociaciones de la paz: El concepto de la guerra justa entre los aztecas," *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 34 (2004): 125–148.

⁷ See footnote 14.

⁸ Tlaxcallan was a state to the southeast of the Valley of Mexico that successfully resisted Tenochtitlan's imperial expansion in a number of wars, the last of which occurred in 1515, a few years before the arrival of the Spaniards. After initial military resistance, the rulers of Tlaxcallan decided to ally with Cortés in his march on Tenochtitlan and then also participated with the Spaniards in other campaigns throughout Mesoamerica. Cholollan and Huexotzinco were neighboring states (*altepetl*) whose relationships with the Aztec empire were more dynamic, ranging from a relatively independent status to acceptance of some forms of imperial control.

the Spanish-Aztec war as a violent conflict “marked by civilian massacres and atrocities of all kinds” (278), with high mortality rates on both sides, accompanied and followed by violence, rape, sexual predation, slavery (especially of Indigenous women, children, and teenagers), and racism on a massive scale. It is a deeply convincing, fact-based, well-documented, and moving historical narrative of what he aptly calls a “genocidal war” (328) (and its genocidal aftermath, I would add). Another appreciable and novel contribution made by Restall’s book is his deeply revisionist story. He “resisted the temptation to structure the chapters to follow as a simple narrative” (xxxii); instead, he told it “multiple times, with narrative pieces removed from the story, examined in detail, and then reinserted” (xxxii). As a result of this, along with his selection of historical and literary sources, he brings to our attention “the blurring of lines between fact and fiction, truth and invention” (335) in history making. Restall’s writing, however, is much more about the Europeans than the Nahuas or other Indigenous people, as it is based on various Spanish sources, including some little-known testimonies. For example, he convincingly dismantles the glorious image of Cortés as a genius strategist, invincible commander, and main author of the successful conquest. Instead, he carefully paints a strikingly different portrait of a military leader at the mercy of Indigenous initiatives and politics, a man of habitual violence, an abuser and rapist of countless Native women, a massive enslaver, perhaps the murderer of his own wife, and an ultimate political loser.

A quite different approach to Aztec history, spanning preconquest times through the encounter period and early colonial history, is taken by Camilla Townsend in her recent book *The Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*. It builds on a well-established tradition in Mesoamerican ethnohistory of studying the Indigenous past through available sources in local languages, but also goes far beyond this in the methods of history writing and its purpose. Right from the beginning Townsend is quite transparent about her efforts to bridge distinct ontologies—to “grasp the perspective of people whom we once dismissed” (12)—through a deep reading and analysis of the Nahuas’ own accounts. This approach has also influenced the structure of her book and the methods of her work that lie behind it: “To make it easier to peer into their world, now so very foreign to us, each chapter begins by stitching various sources together to create a vignette about a single person that once lived. This is an imaginative act, and perhaps dangerous in a work of history. ... If we are very careful to have learned as much as we can before we try to leap the longer distances into more foreign territories, I believe this is the right thing to do” (12).

The book is rooted in the Nahuatl-language annals, where, in Townsend’s words, “we can hear Aztecs talking” (5). The narrative concentrates on key moments of Aztec history, presenting the course of events through the imagined experience of specific individuals: the sacrificed daughter of a defeated Mexica leader; the victorious Mexica ruler Itzcoatl; a Chalca singer negotiating with the *huei tlahtoani* of Tenochtitlan; the famous translator Malintzin; Tecuichpotzin, the daughter of Moteuczoma baptized as Doña Isabel; the Native chronicler Chimalpahin, and the Cuahntinchan noble Don Alonso de Castaneda. Townsend smoothly weaves individuals’ lives into reconstructions and explanations of specific historical contexts, exploring causal chains of events and their cultural meanings. By probing deeply into the operation of a “dangerous politics born of polygyny” (81) that explains many key events in Aztec history, she argues that marriage alliances and the position of one’s mother in polygamous arrangements reflected shifting power balances, determined social standing, and drove key political decisions. Polygamy is also the focus of another recent book, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire* by Ross Hassig, who views it primarily as a mechanism of social mobility in Aztec culture. In particular, he argues this was an efficient way of upward mobility for commoner women, a mechanism that ceased to exist in the colonial period with the imposition of monogamy, which cemented divisions and gaps between different social classes.

The Fifth Sun presents the first encounters with Spaniards from the Native perspective of an enslaved girl who later became known as Malintzin, and then from the viewpoint of her son with Cortés, don Martín. Townsend recounts the dramatic circumstances of the first decades of colonial life, Christianization, and enduring social and ethnic tensions as well as violent escalations of conflicts in Mexico-Tenochtitlan, such as the tumultuous events of 1564. This year witnessed the increase in tribute demanded by Spanish authorities from the Native population, which provoked riots and prolonged protests, and eventually led to the death of the last dynastic ruler, don Luis Cipactzin. Townsend carefully reconstructs the motivations, attitudes, and actions of many people involved in this dramatic course of events.

Throughout Townsend’s book, the agency of Indigenous actors emerges as one strong thread that weaves together different key moments of this historical narrative. The numerous examples of Native agency span a broad continuum of what can be seen as an individual and collective capacity to act, determined by existing social and cultural structures, but also adapting and evolving in response to a changing world. They range from active resistance to subtle negotiations and survival strategies, as well as saving the memory of one’s

people from the threat of “great social amnesia” (153). This story of the Nahua people, so “adept at surviving” (6), recounted from their perspective even if by the pen of a modern scholar, conveys an image of a “legible past that renders them human and envisions them equal in the drama of the world’s history” (208). While one might disagree about some minor details of this narrative (e.g., the traditional interpretation of the Triple Alliance-Tlaxcallan conflict as ritualized “flowery wars”), it is admirable how Townsend exploits the details of microhistory based on Native accounts to answer bigger questions, reveal meanings behind particular events, and offer the reader macro-level conclusions.

But it is much more than that: through this book we actually *experience* the past rather than simply read about it. It is not only convincing; it is simply captivating. Townsend has the courage to resort to “poetic license” (269), but even then we do not lose the sense of transparency as the endnotes provide a full disclosure, informing critical readers about exact sources, possible discrepancies, uncertainties about the facts, and the source of the historian’s preferred interpretation. By combining deep reading of Native sources with reexperiencing the emotions of their actors and reliving their deeds and decisions, Townsend puts into practice an ideal of historical writing outlined by Axtell: “With imagination applied to deep knowledge, we can establish the real choices that people had in the past.”⁹ The importance of imagination in historical research, “a boundless resource ... [that] spares no detail while working away at the grand design,”¹⁰ goes back to ideas developed by Collingwood,¹¹ later refocused and expanded on by Hayden White and other historians.¹² More recently, the liberty of historical judgments and the application of our own criteria of reason have been subjected to justified criticism from the “ontological turn” in history.¹³ And yet, even if we rightly assume that our minds, motivations, and sensibilities may be very different from those of the people of the past that we study, we have no choice but to “revivify, resurrect, and re-create the past for ourselves, in our mind’s eye,” often taking the liberty of poets and novelists when making “the courageous step—to imagine what we know,”¹⁴ or, rather, what we think we know. The *Fifth Sun* is a convincing realization of this ideal.

A prominent concern in Townsend’s book relates to the agency and impact of women in Nahua history, be they royal daughters, high-born spouses shaping the destiny and position of future rulers, or culture brokers like Malintzin. This female presence points to a significant and well-established theme in Mesoamerican scholarship¹⁵ that has recently acquired a new and comprehensive study with Lisa Sousa’s *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar: And Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico*. The book is based on a rich collection of archival, textual, and pictorial sources from Nahua, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Mixe areas, scrutinized with the clear goal of delving into women’s economic and sociopolitical status mainly in colonial New Spain, but with some important insights into pre-contact times. Sousa also traces possible patterns of change over time, as well as the impact of Spanish gender ideologies and the colonial legal framework on Native concepts and practices.

The book’s rich contents reconstruct and provide access to a complex universe of preconquest and colonial women, their lives, relationships, roles, duties, activities, and beliefs. Sousa discusses gender relationships, duties and mutability, the concept of body and its transformations; she also provides a comprehensive analysis of marriage practices and the related clash of Native and European norms, explaining how it resulted in significant realignments of social relations and tangible disadvantages for Indigenous women. Then the study takes us into marital relations, rules of cooperation between spouses, and the economic and political dimensions of marriage and patterns of violence, a theme that permeates the entire book through the inclusion of an enormous body of court documents. In addition to documenting forms of oppression toward colonial Indigenous women, this evidence reveals women’s responses to numerous forms of violence and how they exploited the legal framework and social networks to protect and defend themselves, as well as other women, from abuse and mistreatment.

⁹ James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14. Also see Axtell, *Beyond 1492*, 6: “a major component of the historian’s equipment, indeed his most important tool, is his imagination, not unlike the poet’s or the novelist’s.”

¹⁰ Axtell, *Beyond 1492*, 20.

¹¹ Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993 [1946]).

¹² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹³ Anderson, “Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past.”

¹⁴ Axtell, *Beyond 1492*, 10.

¹⁵ See, for example, Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Susan Kellogg, *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America’s Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Sousa also probes the concept of sex and associated behaviors, approached mainly from the perspective of Nahua sources, and used as a framework for selected Mixtec and Zapotec trial documents related to sexual practices. This in turn leads us to the treatment of sexual transgressions, including adultery, again combining into one narrative Central Mexican concepts known through such primary sources as the Florentine Codex with trial cases from other regions. Sousa pays significant attention to the fascinating theme of punishments for adultery; however, since some of the colonial sources are used to reconstruct preconquest practices, it is difficult to distinguish between pre- and postcontact norms and assess how deeply local traditions transformed the Christian laws that gradually took over in this sphere of life. Indeed, an additional analysis of how local colonial practices deviated from peninsular Spanish law would be very enlightening in this context.

Many new insights are provided by the subsequent discussion focusing on duties, responsibilities, organization of labor, and the often blurred divisions between male and female professions and tasks. Offering rich documentary detail highlighting women's engagement in a wide spectrum of economic activities, this part of the book dismantles an idealized and simplified vision perpetuated in earlier scholarship. To make the picture even more complete, Sousa expands her presentation of the female universe with her discussion of household structure, social relationships, kinship, and ritual bonds, closing with perhaps the most fascinating of all, a chapter on "rebellious women." In this highly engaging and colorful narrative of the key roles women performed in colonial riots, rebellions, and other acts of resistance, Sousa brings together important and largely unstudied colonial evidence and convincingly links it to known preconquest episodes of extreme cases of female agency. She goes on to explain the economic motivations and circumstances underlying such conflicts and their resolution, as well as the political consciousness of female actors.

Pursuing different forms of female agency, Sousa compares her methodology of bringing together pieces of information from different sources and regions to "a woman's work of spinning thread and weaving cloth" in order to "tell a coherent, complex story of indigenous women's lives" (8). The weaving metaphor brings into mind an obvious—I assume intended—association with Indigenous women's work. Moreover, the book's title suggests that the narrative(s) of the book represent Indigenous voices recovered from archival documentation. Indeed, Sousa's research is based on a huge body of archival materials, mostly previously unstudied and referring to court cases, that are woven together to form a historian's "thick description." However, she does not include original documents in Native languages, while the documents she does analyze do not always contain direct testimonies by women, though in some of them they appear as plaintiffs and witnesses. One may ask, then, whose story it is and how, if at all, this ambiguity is addressed by the historian. Given the growing general awareness, including in the field of history, of countless contemporaneous appropriations of Native voices, heritage, perspectives, and other elements of culture and identity, such ideological and methodological clarification is very important.

In her comparative-synthetic approach Sousa also faces the challenges of cross-regional comparisons. Bringing together four different cultures, usually studied separately, is an unquestionable novelty and constitutes a significant enrichment of existing scholarship. However, in most of the themes that she treats, the broader textual analysis and description is based primarily on Nahua or Central Mexican sources, such as the Florentine Codex, with further examples drawn from colonial sources (dictionaries and legal materials) focusing on the Zapotec, Mixtec, and Mixe cultures. The latter are nevertheless neatly woven into discussion rather than analyzed separately in their own contexts and then compared for similarities and differences. An illustrative example is Sousa's construct of "serial monogamy," supposedly practiced in preconquest Mesoamerica, including the Nahua world (51). In fact, this is based only on the interpretation of a reference from the Zapotec grammar by Fray Juan de Córdoba, who lists several reasons for divorce among the Zapotecs. The problem with this interpretation also lies in the fact that polygyny was practiced both among nobles and commoners, as correctly stated by Sousa, who restricts it, however, to a "small number" of each of these groups (51). While Ross Hassig argues that it was widespread both within the Aztec empire and in other regions of Mesoamerica, the scale of preconquest polygamy is, in fact, extremely difficult to establish based on available sources.

Thus, while I am firmly in favor of a comparative method in the study of history, I believe it is crucial first to understand local diversity, striving to "describe community lives on their own terms"¹⁶ before "collapsing" different cases and community histories. This is actually one of the prerequisites of microhistory, which advocates for a deep immersion into past reality, within a very specific context, complete with its protagonists and their ways of acting. Only later, the threads meaningfully connect different stories and different

¹⁶ Frederick E. Hoxie, "Ethnohistory for a Tribal World," *Ethnohistory* 44 (1997): 605–606.

pictures, revealing broader patterns through small places, but not all of them the same or even similar. Well established within Mesoamerican ethnohistory, the methods of the New Philology, pioneered by James Lockhart in the 1970s, provide a close counterpart to the school of microhistory developed originally in European scholarship. As Sousa's book and other works discussed in this essay show, this approach hasn't lost its potential for exploring Indigenous pasts and reviving the lives of its actors. When we read the story about the woman who turned into a jaguar, such a fascinating piece of evidence that opens a window to the past, we want to delve into the story and learn about its protagonists, their motivations and ideas, the underpinnings of their actions, their physical and spiritual reality and its logic, as well as the community where they lived. Such pieces, studied with methodological rigor and enriched by the historian's imagination, can indeed allow us to retrieve and experience an ontology that is not our own.

At the same time, it is clear how much the essential social issues debated today guide historians' agendas for studying the past: gender and women's roles, their rights, status, and agency are one such burning issue. But the key to understanding gender roles is not limited to written sources or postconquest materials. While Sousa's book is based on written and, to a lesser degree, pictorial sources, anthropologists can also "make archaeological objects speak" in order to learn more about gender roles and identities. A recent example of this approach is the collective volume *Dressing the Part: Power, Dress, Gender, and Representation in the Pre-Columbian Americas* edited by Sarah E. M. Scher and Billie J. A. Follensbee. A common denominator shared by these contributions is the communication of identities through costume, as seen in preconquest visual sources. Pursuing a more holistic understanding of gender in different cultures of the Americas, the authors of the volume explore how complex gender relationships and identities are both manifested in social relations and constituted by them. The studies also demonstrate the fluidity of gender and its manifestations, revealing how gender and associated costumes relate to or are appropriated by relationships of power.

Billie Follensbee discusses elements of costume associated with ancient Olmec culture that are usually associated with only one of the two dominant biological sexes, but which, in certain special contexts, may be worn by members of the opposite sex. She argues that in cases when such accoutrements are worn by women it signals their appropriation of power and status, implying that access to power was perhaps more fluid and less gender-restricted than commonly thought. Again, as in later contexts studied through written sources, women's personal agency could have been an important factor in sociopolitical relationships. A cognate interpretation is pursued by Cherra Wyllie, who delves into the imagery of elite women in Las Higueras mural painting of Classic-period central Veracruz. These high-ranking women, wearing regalia and attributes usually reserved for men, seated on thrones and wearing prestigious headdresses, dominate the narrative as its key protagonists. Wyllie argues that while at an earlier stage of the murals it is men who dominate all spheres of activity, in the subsequent stage women take over as ascendant actors in the processional narrative, holding banners and accompanied by standard bearers, merchants, musicians, and captives. Moreover, female protagonists enter the martial domain, performing rites associated with warfare that were previously reserved for men.

In much the same vein, Kim N. Richter's study of costume details of anthropomorphic sculptures from the Postclassic Huastec culture shows that men and women were represented as equal in social standing, confirming the role of women as powerful social actors. Matthew G. Looper, exploring symbolic intricacies of Classic-period Maya male and female costumes, argues that, like men, female leaders wore accoutrements associating them directly with the lunar aspect of the Maize God, especially when conducting sacrifice. Karon Winenz discusses not only how Maya women were featured as key agents in assuring dynastic continuity and royal descent—facilitators of communication with the ancestors, rebirth, and legitimate transition of power—but also, as in other Mesoamerican cultures, how they made their appearance in the contexts of warfare. While it is extremely difficult and risky to relate this imagery to the ethnohistorical records of a much later period, these iconographic data alone attest to the power and prestige of women, dismantling the image of male-dominated societies and the stereotypical roles of Indigenous women that were promoted and perpetuated by Christian and colonial religious discourses.

Indeed, the study of the preconquest past, the violent encounters with Europeans and their aftermath would be incomplete without the perspectives offered by Native pictorial sources. Mesoamerican manuscripts, often called codices, mostly originating in the colonial period with some surviving from preconquest times, form a rich and diverse corpus embracing ritual-calendrical, genealogical, and historical genres as well as tribute lists and maps. A recent book by Angela Herren Rajagopalan, scrutinizing the content and histories of the Codices Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Aubin, is built on extensive and well-established scholarship. She carefully examines the intertextuality or possible dependencies between the three pictorial manuscripts—each

created in different moments of time—exploring when their narratives converge, how and why they diverge, as well as the ways in which their stories intersect with purely textual historical accounts. Her book also sheds light on the material aspects of these manuscripts, the identity of their Native authors, and their strategies or motivations.

Particularly enriching is her engagement with the Codex Azcatitlan, a mid to late colonial manuscript and possibly a copy of a much earlier prototype now lost to us. Rajagopalan argues that its *tlahcuilohqueh* (painters) chose to follow the canonical Mexica history but articulated it from a Tlatelolcan perspective,¹⁷ perhaps as a result of working for a sponsor from Tlatelolco or because they may have been directly linked to this *altepetl* (an Indigenous state) themselves. This hypothesis is supported by some close correspondences between this pictorial manuscript—or its earlier prototype—and key sixteenth-century Nahuatl narratives shaped by Mexica-Tlatelolca memories of the traumatic events of the conquest and its direct aftermath. The Native agency of the Codex Azcatitlan is also observable in the ways that this source “celebrates indigenous victories and dignifies indigenous losses” (85); it also highlights the continuity of local rulership into the early years of the colonial period despite the disruption caused by Spaniards and other calamities that affected the Native people. This suggests a shared ontological perspective, illustrated in additional pictorial narratives created in Nahua and other ethnic communities across New Spain.¹⁸

New insights concerning cultural and political continuity, as well as forms of Native agency, are also to be found in recent studies dealing with the powerful ally of Tenochtitlan—Tetzoco. In *The Lords of Tetzoco: The Transformation of Indigenous Rule in Postconquest Central Mexico*, Bradley Benton explores the history of this *altepetl*, from the times of the conquest, through the consolidation of colonial rule, to the late sixteenth century, tracing the gradual demise of the position of the Indigenous aristocracy and the reorientation of its strategic goals outside the traditional political arena. He convincingly argues that initial political continuity was possible through what he terms the “reassertion” period between 1540 and 1564. During this time members of the royal family, notwithstanding some crises and succession struggles, managed to secure key positions in the local government and became active on the political stage of New Spain. The stable economic status of the Tetzocan nobility was undermined in subsequent decades by changes in the tributary system, which bypassed their key role in its collection, while Spanish pressure on Native lands increased.

Benton presents the accelerating struggle over land and water resources through the testimonies of a number of archival documents that reveal the extent of the conflict between Tetzocan nobles and entrepreneurial intruders. He argues that a significant change came with the growing position and influence of the first generation of mestizos, who, like Juan Bautista de Pomar, became key actors in local politics, economy, and legal struggles, as well as unrivaled intermediaries with Spanish authorities. This triggered prolonged conflicts with local nobility, who, in effect, became further detached from their traditional power base in the patrimonial lands of the *cacicazgo* and from their control over local governorship. The main focus of Benton's research is the political history of the high circles of Native elites and their local strategies when dealing with Spanish authorities. Accordingly, much of the social, economic, and cultural history, as well as the local microhistorical context, is omitted. Not only commoners, but also actors from the lower nobility are missing from this rather smooth narrative based largely on Spanish sources. Perhaps a different yet complementary story could emerge from exploring Nahuatl documents of the Tetzocan region, especially those not reflecting a centralistic perspective.

Such an alternative approach is found in the book *Pueblos within Pueblos* by Benjamin Johnson, who tells the story of communities within the broader Tetzocan or Acolhuacan area, both before its inclusion in the Aztec empire as well as after its demise. Taking a microhistorical approach to studying *tlaxilacalli*, “face-to-face human networks” (3)—or “commoner-administered communities,” as Johnson (24) calls them—he shows the *longue durée* of these fundamental structures of socioeconomic organization. He convincingly argues that the common translations of the term *tlaxilacalli*—as *barrio* (neighborhood or district), subunit, constituent part, or subject town—misrepresent and flatten its nature, especially in relationship to the *altepetl*, or ethnic state to which it belonged and paid tribute. As Johnson correctly notes, the concept could embrace many facets of communal organization, from a group of settlers, an ethnic minority, a tribute or

¹⁷ Tlatelolco was a separate *altepetl* adjacent to Tenochtitlan and occupying the northern part of the same island on Lake Tetzoco. It became subject to Tenochtitlan in 1473 but was reestablished as an independent *altepetl* after the Spanish conquest, during which it fought side by side with the Mexica.

¹⁸ See, for example, Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Lori Boornazian Diel, *The Tira de Tepechpan: Negotiating Place under Aztec and Spanish Rule* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); and Michel R. Oudijk, *Codice Azoyú 2: El señorío de Tlapa-Tlachinollan* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2012).

military unit, a land endowment, a Catholic parish or subdivisions within those categories. His aim is to better understand the operation of peripheral *tlaxilacalli*, both in relation to their *altepetl* and on their own autonomous level, including the nature of their collective actions and their impact on imperial structures and central-level politics over centuries.

Johnson (3) tells us “a root-level history of autonomy” that is indeed essential for challenging more conservative historiographies presented from the point of view of the center or its centralized power. It brings to the surface a crucial group, very often neglected, underrepresented, or entirely absent in typical historical discourses—the commoners. Johnson probes historical accounts shedding light on the history of *tlaxilacalli* in the formation of an early Acolhua state; for example, its importance as the fundamental sociopolitical resource of the famous ruler Nezahualcoyotl in his struggle against the Tepanec state in the first half of the fifteenth century. He unveils the role of these enduring structures in the consolidation of what would become the imperial Triple Alliance and in its subsequent fall.

Johnson then takes a closer microhistorical look at Cuauhtepoztlan, one of the *tlaxilacalli* of the *altepetl* of Tepetlaoztoc. In doing so, he examines landholding disparities among its members, its internal hierarchy and officers, mechanisms of replicating bonds, and obligations and practices that cemented the community, which was also home to a marginalized Hñähñu (or Otomi) ethnic minority. Finally, we learn how postconquest arrangements affected these fundamental components of sociopolitical organization in the Nahuatl world. Johnson argues that despite suffering profound socioeconomic changes, such as the pauperization of the nobility or demographic decline due to deadly epidemics, *tlaxilacalli* managed to survive by reconfiguring into spaces of local autonomy, despite, or perhaps owing to, external disruptions and transformations. He also draws readers' attention to the performance of individual political actors, ranging from the high elite to Spanish entrepreneurs, who threatened the territorial integrity and economic well-being of different *tlaxilacalli*. But what emerges from these micro-scale analyses is certainly of interest for broader Mesoamerican and Latin American scholarship. In particular, it offers a better understanding of the key mechanisms and strengths of corporate agency, which provided communities with a means of resilience into the later colonial period, fueled by the strength of collective identities.

Stories of resilience and agency do not end in the colonial period. In her pioneering work, Miriam Melton-Villanueva extends the study of Nahuatl-written history to the early Independence period, the time at which writing in Indigenous languages officially ceased to exist. Her book stems from her discovery of Nahuatl documents in towns of the Toluca Valley's Metepec region, embracing a collection of over 150 Nahuatl and some Spanish testaments written by Nahuatl notaries between 1799 and 1832. This is the period when writing in the Indigenous language waned, especially after 1821, when the independent Mexican state deprived it of any legal or administrative value or recognition. Melton-Villanueva convincingly argues that after three hundred years, despite the colonial aim to homogenize and assimilate Indigenous people into largely Spanish organizational and social arrangements, they were able to secure political and ritual spaces that efficiently “protected their community's values and interests” (43).

Some notaries switched to Spanish in 1821 or immediately after that year, but this was not always the case. Nahuatl remained the language of choice, while bilingualism with Spanish was apparently very limited. As it turns out, the old art of writing in Nahuatl was sometimes passed from father to son, a profession and tradition kept within the community. The *altepetl* of San Bartolomé, for example, as Melton-Villanueva's study reveals, housed a diverse group of notaries, or *escribanos*, who were active throughout the colonial period and who continued their work in Nahuatl into the national period, choosing to cherish their old culture of writing, along with the richness of individual and inherited conventions. Nahuatl *escribanos* emerge as agents of cultural reproduction and persisted in their work for centuries, “replicating not just formulas but also lineages, training, and community advocacy” as well as “participating in self-governance” (153). Significantly expanding on the understanding of the role of Native notaries in the colonial Americas, Melton-Villanueva argues that their role as primary carriers of cultural continuity was possible despite pressures to transition to writing exclusively in Spanish. While eventually unavoidable, the change occurred much later in this town than previous scholarship assumed: “transition to Spanish happened on local terms, on timelines that differed among neighbors” (153).

Similar to the other studies reported in this essay, Melton-Villanueva highlights the presence of women: in the local microcosm of the Metepec region, they were salient protagonists in ritual life and “culture-makers.” Their agency is seen, for example, in the far higher percentage of women compared to men who ordered masses, as opposed to responsory prayers. Furthermore, they were issuing more wills at the time of independence, as well as participating in more elaborate rites than men, reversing previous patterns. It is through sociopolitical and ritual life, as well as community and family bonds, that we can gain important

insights into local patterns of “tensile resilience” forged by regular community members “through the daily work of self-organization” (149). While many aspects of this reality are irrevocably lost to us, it is through Native testaments¹⁹ that historians are able to retrieve essential aspects of the Indigenous past: as aptly expressed by Melton-Villanueva, “death became a moment of continuity.” This statement opens for us an important dimension of Indigenous ontology, past and present, in which social obligations, land keeping, ritual bonds, and dependence between ancestors and their descendants are primary and enduring mechanisms for ensuring cultural and social replication across generations.

No chapters of history are closed. The works reviewed here demonstrate this very clearly, not only in the most obvious sense that historical narratives are subject to new archival finds, the unceasing scrutiny of historians, their new methodological tools, and the potential of their imagination, but also in a more profound way. They have left me with a feeling of uneasiness, which is what I expect from good scholarship. It is an uneasiness that calls for self-reflection, suggesting the need “to challenge all that we thought we knew” (Townsend, 212), and to face and confront the never-ending and enduring desire to know *wie es eigentlich gewesen (ist)*. But as much as we struggle to understand past realities on their own terms, we are also conditioned by our own worldview.²⁰ As the studies discussed herein show, historians can draw on methodological tools, deep analysis of available sources, and the resources of their imagination in order to skillfully and consciously bridge cultural difference and develop a sense of affinity based on shared motivations, desires, and emotions that are inherently human, because “good history explores the tension between them” (Townsend, 212).

In this sense, the aforementioned studies are not only significant contributions to Mesoamerican or, more broadly, Latin American historical writing, but also to historical scholarship in general. When compared with scholarship focused on European history, Mesoamerican historiography is more concerned with reconstructing specific aspects of past realities, rather than engaging in straightforward methodological and theoretical disputes. This does not mean, however, that such work does not contribute to the methodological development of the broader field. As we can see, it does so both through historical deconstruction and historical construction based on often neglected sources in Indigenous languages, bringing alive an essential goal of microhistory: its focus on human agency, reviving past actors not as “puppets in the hands of underlying social, cultural, or other forces of history, but as active individuals who have goals and possess options and therefore make choices and decisions.”²¹ As I have argued, these studies also provide, even if indirectly, important perspectives on the role of historical, or rather, historians' imagination as part of a critical, rigorous, and transparent research approach embracing past ontologies and the Indigenous capacity to act. Imagination, in all of its different meanings, guises, and applications within historical theory, has always been and continues to be, as exemplified by the works discussed in this essay, an inherent part of historical writing, with much potential as well as many dangers and risks.

Moreover, it is clear that these recent historical narratives are not only driven and shaped by solid research and sensitive imagination. They are also influenced by present-day concerns relating to various forms of violence, racism, social justice, and gender issues as well as women's and Indigenous people's rights, advocacy, and agency. As I have argued, the studies discussed in this paper provide novel contributions with regard to all these major themes in the area of Latin American history. Therefore, while this scholarship recovers and helps us to understand many neglected facets of the past, it is also about contemporary challenges and values, revealing that history *is* about the present.

As I have been writing this essay the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a disproportionate death toll among Indigenous groups all over the world, with Latin America's Native groups particularly vulnerable. The pandemic highlights racial and ethnic inequalities and escalates discrimination and stigmatization; however, it also spurs Indigenous responses. Such recent stories of agency now form a central part of journalists' narratives and will surely become a highlight of future historians' writings. For example one of these stories belongs to the members of the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge Sioux reservations in South Dakota, who

¹⁹ This builds on well-established scholarship studying Indigenous testaments in Latin America. See, for example, Sarah L. Cline and Miguel León-Portilla, *The Testaments of Culhuacan* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin America Center Publications, 1984); Matthew Restall, *Life and Death in a Maya Community: The Ixil Testaments of the 1760s* (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 1995); Susan Kellogg and Matthew Restall, eds., *Dead Giveaways: Indigenous Testaments of Colonial Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998); Caterina Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Justyna Olko, John Sullivan, and Jan Szeмиński, eds., *Dialogue with Europe, Dialogue with the Past: Colonial Nahua and Quechua Elites in Their Own Words* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2018).

²⁰ Anderson, “Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past.”

²¹ István M. Szigjártó, “Probing the Limits of Microhistory,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47, no. 1 (2017): 195.

established highway checkpoints to protect their territory from the pandemic.²² This act of defense of tribal sovereignty and the right to protect the Indigenous population provoked threats and legal action from the state's governor. This brings to mind countless testimonies of prolonged colonial struggles against structural oppression, injustice, and attempts to impose centralization. It also reminds us of the responsibility that historians hold toward the descendants of the people whose histories we write and who are rarely consulted for the purposes of professional history writing. While none of the studies I reviewed explicitly engages with the present-day descendants of the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples, for whom these stories may matter the most, there are some precedents that already pave the way²³ for what is bound to be the next major chapter in the writing of Mesoamerican history.

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²² "Dispute over South Dakota Tribal Checkpoints Escalates after Gov. Kristi Noem Seeks Federal Help," NBC News, May 21, 2020; Mark Walker and Emily Cochrane, "Tribe in South Dakota Seeks Court Ruling over Standoff on Blocking Virus," *New York Times*, June 24, 2020.

²³ For example, Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*; Ethelia Ruiz Medrano, *Mexico's Indigenous Communities: Their Lands and Histories, 1500–2010* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2011).

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