Introduction

Mexica government officials in full battle gear. The Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Selden. A.1, folio 67r.

The quill moving over the paper made a faint scratching sound, then almost a squeak as the pen was pulled backward suddenly at an odd angle to cross out a word. The ink blotted. The writer paused; he needed to think. That wasn't what he had meant to say. He stared down at the pale folio lying on the wooden table. The author was a Native American descended from migrants who had once made their way down from the desert lands of the north, but his own life was quite different from that of his ancestors. It was 1612, and outside the grated window, the streets of Mexico City were bathed in sunlight, glinting off the colored tiles, the metal doorknockers, the smooth adobe walls. People rushed by, laughing and talking, hawking their wares, urging their children to hurry, some in Spanish, some in "Mexican," as the Spaniards called the Indians' language. Inside his shadowy room, don Domingo—or Chimalpahin, as he sometimes called himself, after a great-grandfather—felt at peace. He was busy. It had been almost a hundred years since the arrival of the Spaniards, but the figures in his head had lived three hundred years earlier. He heard them in his imagination. "Please," a defeated chief begged of the man who had vanquished him, "take pity on my daughter." "*Xicmotlaocollili yn nochpochtzin*." The chief spoke in the language of the Aztecs, and don Domingo wrote down his words in that language. He believed in the defeated chief, knew that he had once lived and breathed, just as surely as Chimalpahin himself did now. His beloved grandmother, who had died only a few years earlier, had been a little girl in the years immediately after the Spanish conquest; her childhood had been peopled by elders who had lived their lives in other times, so don Domingo knew with every fiber of his being that those times had not been mythical. He turned to look at his source, a sheath of old, tattered papers, on which someone else had described the events many years ago. He tried to find the right place in the midst of the dense writing. He was tired and considered stopping for the day, but then pushed on. His goal was nothing short of the preservation of his people's history as part of the world's heritage, and he had hundreds of pages yet to write.

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CLIMBING DOWN from the dizzying heights of one of the pyramids of Mexico, a visitor almost expects to feel the presence of the spirit of an Aztec princess. A person less inclined to travel might hope to have an epiphany about the lives of ancient Native Americans while visiting a museum—gazing through

the glass at a startling flint knife, seemingly brought to life by its embedded turquoise eyes, or admiring a tiny golden frog, caught by the artist preparing to leap. But no one would expect to hear an Aztec princess taunting her enemies in the stacks of a library. Yet that is exactly what happened to me one day about fifteen years ago.

Libraries are generally thought to be very quiet places, whether they shelter stacks of rare, leather-bound books or rows of computers. Another way to think of a library, however, is as a world of frozen voices, captured and rendered accessible forever by one of the most powerful human developments of all time—the act of writing. From that perspective, a library suddenly becomes a very noisy place. In theory, it contains fragments of all the conversations the world has ever known. In reality, some conversations are almost impossible to hear. Even someone who is desperately trying to distinguish what an Aztec princess is shouting, for instance, will generally have a hard time of it. She appears atop the pyramid, facing brutal sacrifice, but she usually remains silent. The voice overlaying the scene is that of a Spaniard, telling us what he is sure the girl must have thought and believed. Instead of her words, we hear those of the friars and conquistadors whose writings line the shelves of the library.

For generations, those who have wanted to know about the lives of ancient Native Americans have studied the objects uncovered in archaeological digs, and they have read the words of Europeans who began to write about Indians almost as soon as they met them. From these sources more than any others, scholars have drawn their conclusions and deemed them justified. But it was a dangerous endeavor that inevitably led to distortions. To make a comparison, it would never have been considered acceptable to claim to understand medieval France with access to only a few dozen archaeological digs and a hundred texts in English—with nothing written in French or Latin. Yet different standards have been applied to Indians.

The picture of the Aztecs that has emerged is bloodcurdling. The flint knives with their embedded eyes, the sacrificial stones, the skull racks, all leave indelible images in the imagination. We moderns look at them and then invent the accompanying scene—the spoken words, the music, and the context. We envision orgies of violence, like the one depicted in the film *Apocaylpto*. Textbooks present these same images and teach young people that the nobler native peoples were waiting to be released from a regime of such cruelty. The books written by sixteenth-century Spaniards likewise encourage readers to believe that the people whom the conquistadors defeated were barbaric in the extreme, that God willed the end of their civilization as it encapsulated all that was wrong with human nature. Even those written by more sympathetic observers—those Spaniards who lived in an indigenous community and learned the language—are filled with condescension toward the people they never quite came to understand, interpreting events through a European set of expectations, and thus seeing the choices the Indians made as bizarre at best.

The Aztecs would never recognize themselves in the picture of their world that exists in the books and movies we have made. They thought of themselves as humble people who had made the best of a bad situation and who had shown bravery and thus reaped its rewards. They believed that the universe had

imploded four times previously, and they were living under the fifth sun, thanks to the extraordinary courage of an ordinary man. Elders told the story to their grandchildren: “When all was in darkness, when the sun had not yet shone and the dawn had not yet broken, the gods gathered and spoke among themselves.” The divinities asked for a volunteer from the few humans and animals creeping about in the darkness. They needed someone to immolate himself and thus bring forth a new dawn. A man who was very full of himself stepped forward and said he would do it. “Who else?” the gods asked, but their question was met with silence. “None dared, no one else came forward.” The gods called on a quiet man who sat listening. His name was Nanahuatzin (Na-na-WA-tzeen). He had not thought of himself as a hero, but he accepted the task readily on the grounds that the gods had been good to him in the past. The two men were made ready for sacrifice, the proud hero receiving beautiful, precious accoutrements, but Nanahuatzin only paper trinkets, reeds, and pine needles. At last it was time. The hero went forward. “The flames flared up high, and he became terrified. He stopped in fear, turned about, went back … he tried again … but he could in no way dare to do it.” The gods turned to Nanahuatzin and stared at him. “He hardened his heart, shut his eyes firmly, and did not stop short.” He jumped. “His flesh crackled and sizzled.” The gods sat waiting. “Then began the reddening of the sky all around.” And the sun rose in the east, its life-giving rays penetrating everywhere. Without fanfare, Nanahuatzin had done what was needed to save life on earth.[1]

The Aztecs were master storytellers, and they wrote down many of their stories in the sixteenth century, in the decades after the conquest. Spanish friars taught their young people to transcribe sound by means of the Roman alphabet, and they used the new tool to write down many of the old oral performances. That had not been the Spaniards’ original intention. The zealous friars taught the boys the alphabet so they would be able to study the Bible and help disseminate the tenets of Christianity. But the Aztec students did not feel limited in its application. They were not startled by the principle of writing, for their people already had a tradition of standardized pictographic symbols, which they had long employed to create beautiful screenfold books, some for the use of priests in their prognostications, and some for the use of officials who maintained records of tribute payments and land boundaries. None of these works survived the bonfires of conquest, but the fact that they had once existed proved to be important: the Aztecs saw immediately how valuable it would be to adopt this new, phonetic system. They could use it to record anything they chose, writing not only in Spanish but also sounding out words and sentences in their own language of Nahuatl (NA-wat).

In the privacy of their own homes, away from the eyes of the Spaniards, what the Nahuatl speakers most often wrote was history. Before the conquest, they had a tradition called the *xiuhpohualli* (shoo-po-WA-lee), which meant “year count” or “yearly account,” even though Western historians have nicknamed the sources “annals.” In the old days, trained historians stood and gave accounts of the people’s history at public gatherings in the courtyards located between palaces and temples. They proceeded carefully year by year; in moments of high drama different speakers stepped forward to cover the same time period again,

until all perspectives taken together yielded an understanding of the whole series of events. The pattern mimicked the rotational, reciprocal format of all aspects of their lives: in their world, tasks were shared or passed back and forth, so that no one group would have to handle something unpleasant all the time or be accorded unlimited power all the time. Such performances generally recounted stories that would be of interest to the larger group—the rise of chiefs and later their deaths (timely or untimely), the wars they fought and the reasons for them, remarkable natural phenomena, and major celebrations or horrifying executions. Although certain subjects were favored, the texts were hardly devoid of personality: different communities and different individuals included different details. Political schisms were illustrated via colorful dialogue between leaders of different schools of thought. The speakers would sometimes even slip into the present tense as they delivered such leaders' lines, as if they were in a play. Occasionally they would shout questions that eager audience members were expected to answer.[2]

After the conquest, the young people trained in the Roman alphabet began to write down what various elders said, carefully transcribing their words onto paper and then storing the folios on a special shelf or in a locked box—another well-loved innovation the Spaniards had brought. As the colonial period went on, and fewer people remembered the old days, the genre became more terse, a simple annual record of major events. Still, the authors clung tenaciously to the traditional year-by-year format, usually including the calendar of the ancien régime, moving from the top of the page to the bottom, or sometimes left to right along a lengthy strip. The style belied the stereotype that Native Americans necessarily thought in a cyclical manner, for these were always linear accounts, offering theories of cause and effect, helping the readers or listeners to understand how they had arrived at the present moment, and teaching them what they needed to know about the past in order to make their way forward into the future. Some writers were descended from the Aztec conquerors themselves, some from their friends and associates, some from their enemies. Don Domingo Chimalpahin, from the conquered town of Chalco, was the most prolific of these indigenous historians, filling hundreds of pages in his clear penmanship, using materials other people had written down closer to the time of conquest as well as performances people gave for him to transcribe. By day, he worked for the Spaniards in one of their churches, but in the evenings, his time was his own.

For too long, little has been done with the xiuhpohualli, the annals. They are written in a language relatively few people can read, and their approach to history is quite different than Westerners' so they can be difficult to understand. Other sources have thus seemed preferable, and from them, some fine books have been written.[3] Nonetheless, the Aztec histories are worth considering carefully. They reward patience, just as the Aztecs themselves were wont to do.

In the annals, we can hear the Aztecs talking. They sing, laugh, and yell. It turns out that the world they lived in cannot be characterized as naturally morbid or vicious, even though certain moments were. They had complex systems in place regarding both politics and trade that were highly effective, but they were aware of having made mistakes. They were grateful to their gods, but they sometimes lamented their

divinities' unkindness. They raised their children to do the right thing by their own people and to be ashamed of selfishness, though individuals sometimes displayed this trait. They believed deeply in appreciating life: they danced with joy; they sang their poems; they loved a good joke. Yet they interspersed moments of lightness, humor, and irony with other occasions laden with pathos or gravity. They could not abide a dirty floor, which seemed to indicate a deeper disorder. Most of all, they were flexible. As situations altered, they repeatedly proved themselves capable of adapting. They were adept at surviving.

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ONE DAY IN A LIBRARY, some Nahuatl words in one of Chimalpahin's texts suddenly fell into place, and I heard an Aztec princess shouting at her enemies. They had captured her, and she was demanding to be sacrificed. She veered startlingly from the script I had been taught to expect. She was neither threatening her enemies nor succumbing to them as a brutalized victim, nor was she sanctimoniously or fatalistically promising to die in order to appease the gods and keep the universe intact. She was raging about a specific political situation that I had finally read enough to understand, and she was demonstrating courage. In that moment, I realized that these people whom I was coming to know through their own words were far too complicated to fit within the frameworks long imposed on them, based on the old sources—the silent archaeological remains and the Spanish testimonies. Their beliefs and practices changed as circumstances changed. Only by listening to them talk about the events they experienced could I truly come to understand them. I could not approach their world with a preconceived understanding of who they were and what they believed, and then apply that vision as a key to interpreting everything they said and did. Only by moving through their own accounts of their history, paying close attention to everything they themselves articulated, could I come to understand their evolving beliefs and transforming sense of themselves.

This book, rooted in the Nahuatl-language annals, offers five revelations about the Aztecs. First, although Aztec political life has been assumed to revolve around their religiously motivated belief in the necessity of human sacrifice to keep the gods happy, the annals indicate that this notion was never paramount for them. It has traditionally been said that the Aztecs believed they had to conquer others in order to obtain the requisite number of victims. Or alternatively, some cynics have asserted, they merely claimed they had to do so for this reason, in order to justify their inherent desire for control. The Aztecs' own histories, however, indicate that they understood clearly that political life revolved not around the gods or claims about the gods but around the realities of shifting power imbalances. In a world in which chiefs had many wives, a leader could father literally dozens of sons, and factions developed among them based on who the boys' mothers were. A weaker faction in one city-state might eventually ally with a losing band of brothers in another city-state, and together, they might suddenly topple dominant family lines and change

the political map of a region. The writers of annals explained almost all their wars in terms of this form of gendered realpolitik. The prisoners of war who ended up facing sacrifice were usually collateral damage in these genuine struggles. Only toward the end, when Aztec power had grown exponentially, did a situation arise in which dozens of victims were brutally murdered on a regular basis in order to make a terrifying public statement.

Second, there has been a problematic tendency to deem some people in the Aztec world evil and others good. What else could explain brutal warriors living side by side with gentle, Mexican corn farmers, or slaveholders existing in a land of beautiful poetry? But the same individuals could be farmers in one season and warriors in another; the man who at dusk blew the conch shell and chanted profound poems might call a terrified slave girl to him later that evening. Like other dominant cultures, they wielded most of their violence at the margins of their political world, and this choice made possible the wealth that allowed a gloriously beautiful city to grow and flourish—one filled with citizens who had the leisure time and energy to write poetry, create aromatic chocolate drinks, and sometimes debate morality.

Third, a great deal of ink has been spilled over the question of how the Europeans were able to bring down such a kingdom, but each generation of scholars has ignored certain aspects of the reality that the Aztecs themselves were explicitly cognizant of in their writings. Until the late twentieth century, historians condemned the Aztecs to fatalism and irrationality, regularly suppressing abundant evidence of their savvy strategizing. In more recent times, it has been assumed that a universal hatred of the Aztecs caused other people to ally with the Spaniards and thus defeat them. But the Aztec royal family was related to nearly every ruling family in the land. Some people hated them, but others aspired to be them. What is everywhere apparent in the historical annals is the recognition of a great technological power imbalance in relation to the newly arrived Spaniards, one that called for a rapid reckoning. It was possible, some thought, that this current crisis might be the war to end all wars, and many wanted to be on the side of the victors as they entered the new political era.

Fourth, those who lived through the war with the Spaniards and then survived the first great epidemic of European diseases found to their surprise that the sun continued to rise and set, and that they still had to face the rest of their lives. There was almost no time for self-pity. The surviving children were becoming adults with their own expectations, and the children born since the cataclysm had no memories of the events that had scarred their elders. Startlingly, the annals reveal that it was not just the young people who proved themselves disposed to experiment with the new foods and techniques and animals and gods brought by the people from across the sea. Some who were already adults when the strangers came helped lead the way in demonstrating the importance of a phonetic alphabet, for instance, or learning how to build a ship larger than any prior canoe, or constructing a rectangular rather than a pyramidal tower. Not everyone exhibited this remarkable curiosity and pragmatism, but many did. Moreover, the people proved adept at protecting their own worldview even as they adopted the more useful elements of Spanish life.

Finally, over the course of the next two generations, more and more people were forced to grapple with the enormity of the extractive economic policies the Spaniards introduced, and even more experienced racialized injustice. Yet even then, they were not destroyed but rather maintained their balance. Like so many people in other times and places, they had to learn to make peace with their new reality so they would not go mad. Certain figures in the generation of the grandchildren, like the historian Chimalpahin, became committed to writing everything they could remember of their people's history so that it would not be lost for all time. They became true scholars, even though the Spaniards did not recognize them as such. It is their efforts that now allow for the reconstruction of what their people once thought about. In short, the Aztecs were conquered, but they also saved themselves.

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THE AZTEC HISTORY-TELLERS who once performed on starlit evenings would be the first to remind us that beyond any lessons we may derive from it, real history is exciting. The drama of humankind inherently constitutes a good yarn, and the Aztec past is no exception. Any history of theirs must explore the experience of a once-powerful people facing unspeakable disaster—and surviving as best they could. The Spanish conquest, for all its importance, was neither an origin story nor an absolute ending. The Aztec people lived for centuries beforehand, and they are among us still. Today about 1.5 million people speak their language; many more count themselves as the Aztecs' heirs. In the past, books about the Aztecs have either treated only the preconquest period, leading up to the crescendo of conquest in a final chapter, or have begun with an introductory chapter on pre-Columbian times and the arrival of the Europeans, and then presented a study of postconquest Mexico. This book is about the trauma of conquest, but it is also about survival and continuity—a paradox that reflects the nature of the actual lived experience of any devastating war. Here, the Spanish conquest is neither introductory nor climactic. Instead, it is pivotal.

The story begins in the deep past. In ancient times, the greater Mesoamerican world trade system stretched up into today's Utah. For example, the ornamental mineral—what we often refer to as jade—traveled on trade routes from the central basin of Mexico to the inner sanctum of Chaco Canyon in today's New Mexico; turquoise from the north made its way south. When the great corn-farming states of central Mexico fell, news passed by word of mouth to the mobile nomadic peoples of today's southwestern United States. In times of drought or duress, large groups listened to the rumors and moved south, looking to conquer fertile lands and make new lives. They had no horses: they learned to travel light, move with stunning speed, and employ deadly tactics. In wave after wave, they took the central basin, and the names of their leaders and the gods who advised them went down in legend. A series of great civilizations emerged, melding the practices of ancient corn farmers with the ideas of the innovative, daring newcomers. The last of the migrants from the north to arrive were a group called the Mexica (Me SHEE ka). Their late arrival might have been what rendered them among the scrappiest people of the central basin, for in the

stories they told, they prided themselves on having once been underdogs, and they swore that they would rise.

As the peoples of the central basin jockeyed for power and access to resources, political alliances rose and fell. A woman who married with the enemy to protect an alliance might suddenly discover that alliances had shifted and thus might find herself demoted to a mere concubine. But her sons might not accept the change and instead choose to fight for power. Itzcoatl (Eetz-CO-wat), a Mexica ruler's son by a slave girl, brilliantly took advantage of the fissures that existed throughout the region and thus was able to help his family line rise to a position of prominence. This was no stable world of immutable beliefs but instead a shifting, constantly altering world, much like that of early Europe. The people's religion was both violent and beautiful. To thank the gods for what they had, they sometimes made an ultimate sacrifice: that of human life. Yet most of the time they were devoted not to death but to protecting their people's lives and working toward their future.

By the late 1400s, the Mexicas' village on an island in a lake had turned into a world-class city, tied to the land by three causeways. Great painted pyramids rose on all sides, surrounded by breathtaking gardens. The library of the ruler contained hundreds of books, and the music and the dancing performed at the palace brought renown to the city. Yet what made all this beauty and high culture possible was the Mexica rulers' increasingly draconian measures, their tightening bureaucratic organization and control in various arenas of life, the ritualized violence they regularly enacted before audiences, and the warfare they did not fear to wage at the edges of their realm. Life within the valley was stable, and some of the people were truly great artists. But the Mexica, like many others in comparable positions in world history, chose not to think much about the fate of those in the war-torn periphery of the world they had made.

Into this arena sailed the Spaniards, the first time in 1518 and with more serious intent in 1519. At this point the chronology of the book tightens: chapters One through Three treat multiple decades, and chapters Six through Eight do the same, but the two central chapters, Four and Five, are devoted to the arrival of the Spaniards, covering the years from 1518 to 1522 in great detail. Perhaps in some ways this gives too much power to the swaggering conquistadors, but it was indeed a critical time for the Mexica and merits careful consideration. Although the story of the arrival of Hernando Cortés has been told many times, it is done differently here, offering a tale of military rather than spiritual loss on the part of the Indians. The Mexica did not believe that the god Quetzalcoatl walked among them, nor were they impressed by a vision of Mary or one of the saints. Moctezuma, the king, simply found himself in possession of less military power than the newcomers, and he recognized this. Part of the story lay in the hands of the people whom the Mexica had rendered enemies—among them a young girl whom the Spaniards called Malinche, whose people had been under fierce pressure from Moctezuma prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, and she translated for the newcomers.

The war against the Spaniards was a horrific period in which all kinds of people—Malinche, for instance, as well as Moctezuma's captive daughter—simply did their best to stay alive. Aside from the destruction of the war, the death toll from the smallpox brought by the Spaniards led some native people to believe that they would all die … but they did not. Those individuals who had come to know the newcomers best began to counsel the people of the central basin—the Mexica, and those segments of the populace who had thus far remained loyal to them—to opt for peace and save their lives. As paramount rulers, the Spaniards would offer one advantage—they were even more powerful than the Mexica, which meant not only that they could defeat them but also that they could insist that all intervillage warfare cease in the regions they controlled. Many opted for that possibility and thus gave victory to the newcomers.

In the initial decades after the Spaniards' triumph, the people found that they faced overwhelming changes in many regards but that life continued much as usual in other ways. It varied considerably from place to place. In the great city of the Mexica, Moctezuma's daughter and Malinche, for instance, both did their best to ward off desperation and negotiate the pitfalls of life alongside the arrogant and powerful newcomers. Yet in a small town to the east, which thus far remained largely untouched, a young man who had learned the Roman alphabet from the friars tranquilly taught his father all that could be done with it. Working together, they wrote what was in effect the first permanently legible Nahuatl book. In this time of change, contradictions abounded.

In the Americas, within about a generation of the Europeans first establishing themselves in any one area, the indigenous nearly always mounted a sustained resistance. This was as true among the Aztecs as it was everywhere else. In the case of Mexico, the 1560s brought recurring crises. In the central basin, the Mexica were told for the first time that they would have to pay a tax or tribute as great as any other conquered people. The protests on the part of both men and women caused many to be imprisoned and sold into indentured servitude. The records they kept of their arguments with the Spaniards speak eloquently of both rage and pain. Their lives touched those of alienated Spaniards who were also considering rebellion. The son of Malinche by Hernando Cortés ended up being brutally tortured in what was in medieval courts a perfectly legal proceeding—the simulation of drowning, like today's waterboarding. By the end of the decade, the Indians had made clear to the Spaniards the limits of their suffering—but the Spaniards had also made clear to them the limits of their freedom.

By about 1600, the last of the people who remembered the days before the Europeans were dead or dying. Then, there was a great burst of effort among their grandchildren to write down what they knew of that past world. One of these historians was don Domingo Chimalpahin, the Indian from Chalco who worked for the church of San Antón at the southern gate of the city; another was don Hernando de Alvarado Tezozomoc, a grandson of Moctezuma. Some of what they wrote constitutes a fascinating and horrifying account of the colonial era they lived through. However, their manuscripts do more than record their own tumultuous times. They offer a glimpse of how at least some native people thought about what had

happened to them and how they envisioned their futures. They would be the last for many years to write analytically as indigenous intellectuals. Thereafter, poverty and oppression largely held sway in their communities until the twentieth century, when a reservoir of remembered anger surfaced in revolution and rebellion, and ultimately new vistas on ancient traditions opened.

The story of the Aztecs is a grand and sweeping panorama, but it is also filled with real people, who experienced history as individuals. Admittedly, these individuals can sometimes be hard to construe from our vantage point. 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 who once lived. This is an imaginative act, and perhaps dangerous in a work of history. Yet conjuring the world of anyone long dead, even kings and presidents whom we purportedly know well, is also an imaginative act, but it is regularly undertaken. 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 it is the right thing to do. By carefully re-creating the world of Chimalpahin and that of his grandmother's generation, we may be able to hear more clearly what they have to say, not only its substance but also its tone. Chimalpahin and his peers wanted posterity to hear them—they said so clearly in their writings—and so we should listen for their sake. But we should also do it for our own. For who can say which is the more empowered, them or us, if we can speak to each other successfully across the chasm of time and difference? Do we ourselves not become both wiser and stronger every time we grasp the perspective of people whom we once dismissed?