

## BOOK REVIEW

### New Ways to Research Nahua Culture-making

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*The Aztecs at Independence: Nahua Culture Makers in Central Mexico, 1799–1832.*  
By Miriam Melton-Villanueva. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2016.  
Pp. 256. \$55.00 (cloth).

“The Aztecs are a conquered, vanished people.” This is a myth that many people today perpetuate, and it is at the heart of the misinformation that Miriam Melton-Villanueva dispels in her ground-breaking book, *The Aztecs at Independence: Nahua Culture Makers in Central Mexico, 1799–1832*. Melton-Villanueva interweaves her personal, familial connection to the Metepec region of the Toluca Valley with her research in order to highlight the continuity of Nahua, also known as “Aztec,” culture and knowledge systems that survived Spanish colonialism and Mexico’s nation-building after Independence. Her analysis of notarial records from the Independence archive, which consists of more than 150 Nahuatl-language (as well as some Spanish-language) wills written by and for Indigenous people from the altepetl (city-state) of San Bartolomé Tlatelolco (and three neighboring altepetl), provides a glimpse into daily life and cultural practices of Nahua peoples during the nineteenth century. The significance of this text lies in Melton-Villanueva’s analysis and organization of these previously unknown Nahuatl-language wills written between 1799 and 1832, which counter previous scholars’ assumption that the production of Nahuatl-language texts ended by 1800.

The book is informally divided into two sections. The first section, chapters one through four, focuses on Nahua officials who were in charge of producing

and preserving Independence-era testaments. These chapters explain the differences, as well as the interconnectedness, between parish government (*fiscalía*) officials and town council (*cabildo*) officials, which Melton-Villanueva argues were both responsible for ensuring the continuation of Nahua culture-making. As *fiscalía* and *cabildo* official positions during the Spanish colonial era were reserved for men, this section focuses on the role that Nahua men, as *escribanos*, played in continuing their ancestral culture of writing. Although they are distinct institutions, the *fiscalías* and *cabildos* shared members through successful rotation systems that ensured the Nahua “cellular structure” of society survived—this ensured that leadership within each unique *altepetl* was horizontal, not hierarchical (25).

Chapters five and six make up the second part of *The Aztecs at Independence*. This section focuses more on the informal, yet equally (if not more) important, roles as culture makers that Nahua women (and non-official men) played during the transition period of Mexico’s Independence. Not only did Nahua women issue the majority of testaments, but they also owned the majority of land, which they would then pass on to their inheritors. This is significant not only economically and socially, but also because it played a large role in ritual obligations within Nahua communities like San Bartolomé. As becomes clear in chapter six, the land that women left behind for their inheritors was not simply for subsistence purposes, but rather, working the land entailed veneration to their respective household saints, as well as to their deceased ancestors. Thus, “this is how something as ordinary and discrete as land inheritance, in the name of the household saints, fostered cultural resilience” (143).

Working with Independence-era Nahuatl texts whose existence were previously unknown to scholars, Melton-Villanueva uses this book to set the foundation for further academic endeavors relating to Nahuatl and Mexican

ethnohistorical studies. Although it is an ambitious project, given the many aspects of Nahua social life that she tries to encompass in this brief text, Melton-Villanueva knows that her book will open doors for future scholars to continue her work; throughout the text she offers analysis of the documents that she is working with, but more important, she asserts that her work leaves many “avenue[s] of research open to more questions than answers” (121). Significantly, Melton-Villanueva shares with her readers the indexing and organization system that she developed while working with these previously untapped Nahuatl-language testaments, demonstrating her commitment to continue working with these documents, as well as sharing this responsibility with others, to continue shedding light on the cultural resilience of Nahua people, both past and present.

*The Aztecs at Independence: Nahua Culture Makers in Central Mexico, 1799–1832*, is a call to action for scholars in the fields of Nahuatl studies, ethnohistory, and more generally, Latin American Studies, to search in unexpected places for sources that carry the long-silenced voices of Indigenous peoples. Particularly, Melton-Villanueva suggests for scholars to work with records that were not administered or kept by the colonial governing powers, but rather by local institutions, like parishes. This text is crucial for scholars who work at the intersections of Chicano/a Studies and Native American Studies because Melton-Villanueva, by returning to her ancestral homeland, becomes a bridge that brings to the present the voices of her ancestors previously buried in archives, thus providing an exemplary model for Xicanxs to do the critical and challenging, yet necessary, work of tracing their Indigenous roots.

