

## Introduction

# The Serpent's Quills, Keyboards, and Touchscreens

## Writing, Not Being Written

La serpiente es un símbolo para los pueblos de Mesoamérica. . . . Cuando uno escucha Quetzalcoatl piensa de inmediato en “La Serpiente Emplumada”; en el pasado glorioso de México, pasado que, de tan glorioso, nos estorba. Por eso preferí,—preferimos—hablar de los pueblos indígenas vivos, de *Las Plumas de la Serpiente* que siguen dotando a nuestro país de rostros y posibilidades múltiples.

(The serpent is a symbol for the nations of Mesoamerica. . . . When someone hears Quetzalcoatl, they think immediately of “The Plumed Serpent”; of the glorious past of Mexico, a past so glorious it gets in our way. That is why I preferred,—we preferred—to speak about the living Indigenous nations, of *The Serpent's Plumes* who continue to endow our country with multiple faces and possibilities.)

—Mardonio Carballo, *Las Plumas de la Serpiente* (2012)

“It’s so pretty! How difficult is it to learn Nahuatl?” Nahua writer, activist, and television/radio host Mardonio Carballo tires of hearing this remark.<sup>1</sup> Although seemingly positive on the surface, calling Nahuatl “pretty” falls into recycled tropes that treat Indigenous languages like a romanticized antique veneer smeared on Mexican nationalist sentiments, rather than a source for meaningful contributions to present-day society.<sup>2</sup> Carballo

responds that Nahuatl can be just as beautiful or ugly as any language. “How difficult is it?” belies the assumption that Nahuatl, the most spoken Native language in Mexico, is somehow rudimentary and easy to acquire. That view emerges in the erroneous use of *dialecto*, heard in the commonplace statement “Indians speak dialects, not languages,” to suggest a fictitious deficiency of complex grammar, lexicon, or writing. In 2004, Carballo wrote to renowned Mexican news reporter Carmen Aristegui to protest references to Indigenous languages as *dialectos* on her radio program. She subsequently invited him to correct such misrepresentations and share Native perspectives with her audience. This exchange led to the creation of the radio short series *Las Plumas de la Serpiente* (The Serpent’s Plumes), and *Las Plumas* endures nearly two decades later.

What is at stake in this battle over terminology? Carballo’s defense of the language points to Nahuatl’s importance in struggles that extend far beyond linguistic representation alone. Language is territory. In a broad sense of the term, territory encompasses an intersectional blend of acoustic, linguistic, visual, epistemic, and topographic spaces. Intimating that Nahuas failed to develop their linguistic skills mirrors a pernicious view that they also did not, and have not, sufficiently developed the lands on which they live. Within this settler colonialist framework, much as Castilian<sup>3</sup> displaces Nahuatl, transnational companies and nation-state-sponsored squatters who purportedly better exploit the “real estate” displace Nahuas. This study analyzes how Nahua writers use bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish *xochitlajtoli* (flowered words / sentences / discourse / language),<sup>4</sup> or “well-cultivated language,” written from the 1980s to the present, to defend territory in a wide sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> *Xochitlajtoli*’s invocation of a fruition situated within Nahua lands and audiovisual spaces insists upon a nexus among speech, the people, and what Marisol de la Cadena calls “other-than-humans” (*Earth Beings* xx). I understand Nahua territory as both archive and repertoire engaged in recording and performing languages, histories, and wor(l)dings at odds with nation-state-sponsored land appropriation and renderings of who constitutes sanctioned citizenry.<sup>6</sup>

I draw on Nahua perspectives as a decolonizing theoretical framework to argue that Nahua writers deploy unique worldviews, namely *ixtlamatlistli* (knowledge with the face, which highlights the value of personal experiences), *yoltlajlamikistli* (knowledge with the heart, which underscores the importance of an affective intelligence), and *tlaxpan* (that which is in front, which expresses a view of the past as in front of a subject, as opposed to behind—as *past* and *pasado* suggest in English

and Castilian). I use these concepts to dismantle the narrative frame of “vanquished Indians,” found in Mexican nationalist discourse and its championing of a pervasively procrustean form of “Modernity.”<sup>7</sup> While paradoxically upholding Indigenous symbols as fundamental to Mexico’s origins, state-sponsored nationalist discourse considers only *mestizo* subjects as full-fledged citizens. Their partial Native ascendancy makes them natural heirs to the land, but “progress” is contingent upon the distance removed from that Native past.<sup>8</sup> However, Nahua artists represent dynamic knowledge production against a backdrop of official history that depicts them as antiquated. The views of *ixtlamatlistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaxpan* are key in Nahua struggles and effectively challenge those who attempt to marginalize Native knowledge production. Yet, this is not a reactive response to colonial practices.<sup>9</sup> It constitutes a conscientious effort in which, through this Nahua lens, these authors offer remedies and healing from the deep wounds of colonialism. Their literature speaks to Nahuas and Native Nations throughout Abiyala (the Americas)<sup>10</sup> and on a global scale, as well as to a public at large that perhaps unwittingly perpetuates and benefits from colonial practices.

### Contemporary Xochitlajkuiloanij / Flowered Authors (Re)write, (Re)right, and (Re)rite

The authors addressed in this study similarly debunk the myth of their disappearance by insisting on their status as knowledge producers. I explore the writings and cultural production of contemporary Nahua *xochitlajkuiloanij* (the writers of *xochitlajtoli*) Natalio Hernández, Martín Tonalmeyotl, Ethel Xochitiotzin, Judith Santopietro, Mardonio Carballo, and Ateri Miyawatl. Taken together, these authors provide a panorama of contemporary Nahua literary production. This study is not an exhaustive account of Nahua writing, as there are numerous authors whose works should be analyzed in depth.<sup>11</sup> I focus on these six writers because they represent a range of ages, places of origin, and gender identities. In this sense *The Serpent’s Plumes* resembles Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice’s approach toward Cherokee literary traditions in *Our Fire Survives the Storm* (2006). He brings to the forefront a dynamic interplay of authors’ cultural expressions and understandings as “an analytical beginning, not an end point of discussion” (20–21). Reflecting the extensive corpus of contemporary publications, all authors in this study underscore the importance

of contemporary Nahua knowledge production. And, while they differ in their approaches and how they articulate *ixtlamatlistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaixpan*, they emphasize the importance of territory in its multiple permutations across land, airwaves, visual media, and the internet.

Often translated as “poetry,” the polysynthetic incorporation of *xochitl* (flower) in these authors’ *xochitlajtoli* (flowered words) carries greater meaning than the word *poetry* would suggest. *Xochitl* resembles what Paul M. Worley and Rita M. Palacios identify in the Maya concept *ts’iib* as “an alternative to understanding ‘writing’ that does not stand in opposition to alphabetic writing but rather fully encompasses it, placing it alongside of and in dialogue with a number of other forms of recording knowledge” (*Unwriting Maya Literature* 3). *Xochi*—figuratively and quite literally—projects a trans-genre mixture of poetry, narrative, ceremony, textiles, and other forms of expression, a wider conception of what constitutes a text or an archive. Flowers make natural dyes for the scribbling thread on text(iles). The land itself constitutes a text read for imminent dangers and events, while acting as a mnemonic scape for a community’s history. This is even more salient when one considers that the primordial flower in Nahuatl is maize, and *xochitlajtoli* can also signify “words of maize,” encompassing a wide arc of ceremonial expression centered on this sacred food. These words and Native spaces move toward a broader formulation beyond the narrow expression of written texts and accentuate carefully cultivated reflections.

Contemporary *xochitlajtoli* shifts away from the Mexican nationalist nostalgic gaze fixed on ancient Pre-Columbian *flor y canto* (flower and song) and iconography.<sup>12</sup> In the epigraph to this introduction, Mardonio Carballo reworks the trite nation-state appropriated symbol of the Mesoamerican deity of wind and learning, *Quetzalcoatl* (*La Serpiente Emplumada* or “The Plumed Serpent”). Official state and tourist discourses have so over(ab)used Pre-Columbian figures that, when not reappropriated by Nahua authors, they have become an impediment and play to the continual relegation of Nahuas to exotic relics.<sup>13</sup> The complex symbol of the Serpent’s Plumes (capitalized like a proper name) breaks with stereotypical portrayals by riffing off *Quetzalcoatl* to “hablar de los pueblos indígenas vivos, de *Las Plumas de la Serpiente* que siguen dotando a nuestro país de rostros y posibilidades múltiples” (speak about the living Indigenous nations, of *The Serpent’s Plumes* who continue to endow our country with a multiplicity of faces and possibilities; 7). The Serpent’s Plumes point to Nahua specificities—in other words actual Nahuas of “flesh and blood” as Carballo

describes on his program—by alluding to Carballo’s small Huastecan hometown of Maguey Maguaquite. Maguaquite (*bothrops asper*; mauakijltli in Nahuatl), also called *nauyaca* (four noses, because it appears to have four nasal passages), is the most feared snake in that region due to its powerful venom. The creative strength of Nahua publications is suggested by the image of the snake itself, whose elongated shape resembles a writing instrument as well as a tongue. Although a seemingly small shift, “Serpent’s Plumes” plays on the word *pluma* (feather) in Castilian, which can mean “pen” and underscores Nahuas’ creative production in the present. While wielding this pen, Nahuas publish and broadcast through a wide array of media such as books, progressive rock, rap, film, social media, podcasts, radio, and television (to mention only a few). Carballo named his film production studio *Nauyaca Producciones*, referring to the symbol of the Maguaquite and echoing the word *Nahua*. Analyzed in the fifth chapter, his book of *xochitlajtoli*-laden lyric essays *Las Plumas de la Serpiente* is based on a collection of radio shorts from his eponymous program on Carmen Aristegui’s news site. The figure of the serpent accentuates the capacity to defend and attack, which subverts the insidious depiction of Nahuas as vanquished victims. They write—text, tweet, post, perform, publish, and broadcast—as opposed to being written. To borrow from Native American studies scholar Cutcha Risling-Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, Karuk) and Indigenous education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori), these authors (*re*)write, (*re*)right, and (*re*)rite Indigenous epistemologies (Risling-Baldy 7–8; see also Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*). The Serpent’s Plumes serve as a central metaphor throughout this study of *xochitlajtoli*.

Contemporary Nahua knowledge production is absent in the public imaginary. Quetzalcoatl, Moctezuma, Malinche, Cuauhtemoc, Mexihco-Tenochtitlan . . . these figures and places come to many people’s minds when they think of Nahuas, more popularly known as Aztecs or Mexicas.<sup>14</sup> Mexicas founded the *altepetl* (city-state) of Mexihco-Tenochtitlan, the Centro Histórico of present-day Mexico City, and dominated the surrounding regions—reaching as far as Central Abiayala (Central America)—into the early sixteenth century. They speak Nahuatl,<sup>15</sup> like numerous other *altepemeh* (city-states). While *Mexica* denotes people from the area of Mexihco-Tenochtitlan and most likely derives from the name of an early leader, *Nahua* refers to all who speak Nahuatl or arguably those who have an ancestral connection to the language. Nahuatl derives from a verb meaning “to sound clearly” and has loaned numerous words

to English and Castilian.<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite being the most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico, popular understanding of it is anything but clear. References to Nahuas in Mexico's past abound on money, in museums, within murals, national flags, names, surnames, video games, street signs, and toponyms like *Mexico* itself. They are understood to have once *been* glorious, howbeit with their culture no longer having relevance. Calling Nahuas "Aztecs," a term even sixteenth-century Mexicas would have considered anachronistic, reflects the tendency to relegate them to a distant past and obscures their complexities.<sup>17</sup> Many, both in Mexico and on an international scale, are unaware that there are millions of Nahuas today.<sup>18</sup> According to Mexican nationalist discourse, Nahuas cleared the ground for the country predestined to emerge in the nineteenth century (Tarica xxii–xxiii). This narrative of antiquity teaches that Spanish invaders conquered the Mexicas, and Nahuas subsequently disappeared, leaving mere vestiges of their once awe-inspiring apotheosis to be reincarnated as a mystic trope in the construction of the modern Mexican Republic.

How Nahua writers represent themselves offers a radically different account. Nonetheless, pervasive nationalist discourse steeped in colonial practices often drowns out their voices. That discourse dismisses Native knowledge production as straggling superstition, exploits Native populations deemed to be cheap manual labor, and racializes them as an inferior group destined to penury. Nahua authors dismantle such myths regarding themselves and other Native Nations; they signal the intricate linguistic and social landscapes surrounding them. As explored in detail within this study, language plays a key role in this struggle, in ways that go well beyond a revisionist history. These writers articulate a decolonizing framework from perspectives grounded in their language and lived experiences.

This study is not an ethnography. Readers will not find *the* Nahua perspective here. *Nahua* refracts into multiple meanings, spaces, and ideas. Authors pull influences from a wide gamut of regions, experiences, and publications. Within this multivocality, the perspectives of *ixtlamatlistli* (knowledge with the face), *yoltlajlamikilistli* (knowledge with the heart), and *tlaixpan* (that which is in front, or the past in front) are read into a dynamic literary and artistic arena to imagine a world that engages genuinely with Nahua voices, with all their nuances and diverse viewpoints. I deploy these perspectives to analyze Nahua literature, but they can also function as frameworks to examine other contexts, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Nahuas observe instead of being observed, and they write instead of being conscripted into ethnography or what literary

scholar Gloria Elizabeth Chacón calls “tributary knowledge” (46). Their perspectives fundamentally challenge broad colonial brushstrokes that paint them as incapable of offering solutions for the present (discounting their experiential knowledge), overly emotional and unqualified to lead (viewing affective intelligence as weakness and collectivity as precluding individual thought), and confined to a distant past (rather than recognizing the past as in front). In fact, if there is an ethnography present here, it is the work of these authors who flip the imperial gaze and conduct critical ethnographies of the societies and urban spaces surrounding them.

What is the importance of this literature? Who reads it?<sup>19</sup> Nahuas have asked themselves these same questions, often self-critically. The stakes are high in this endeavor. Literary scholar Arturo Arias describes the ethical commitment that these authors feel toward their communities (“Tramas y dramas de la descolonización” 202). They negotiate this responsibility along with their insertion into a literary and academic intelligentsia that hesitates to grant them full membership. Academic and political spheres often view them as too ensconced in communalism to think independently.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise, if Native intellectuals appear independent, these same spheres of influence deem them distanced from their communities and too “tainted” by foreign ideas to represent their people properly.<sup>21</sup> As Anishinaabe Irish literary scholar Kelly S. McDonough indicates, these debates and the association of terms like *intellectual* with an embrace of Western Modernity and betrayal of one’s Native heritage have led some Nahua writers like Gustavo Zapoteco Sideño to reject being called “intellectuals” altogether (*The Learned Ones* 7). McDonough observes how the public bias against Native writing manifests itself when people swear that Nahuas, at least “real Nahuas,” do not write (5). Such an assertion is symptomatic of the pervasive view that Native people are un(der)developed in all aspects, evidenced by the false assumption that they speak an illiterate “dialect” devoid of complex grammar (5). Numerous scholars in Native American and Indigenous studies attest that Western ideologues consider the combination of *Nahua* or *Native* with *intellectual* to be an oxymoron.<sup>22</sup> Particularly one sees in Nahua literature the potential to imagine spaces of empowerment and shift t(r)opographic encroachments on Nahua realities. The defense of acoustic, linguistic, visual, epistemic, and topographic spaces is interwoven, although the recognition of that intersectionality is understudied in academia.

My attention to territory is inspired by a roundtable of Nahua scholars at the Otros Saberes Congress of the Latin American Studies Association

(LASA) in Boston in 2019. While a longer panel at the congress offered simultaneous interpretation into Castilian and English, we also organized a preconference presentation in which participants spoke in Nahuatl without translation. The intent was not to exclude audience members who did not speak Nahuatl, but rather to invite them to listen attentively and recognize the performative importance of filling acoustic spaces with Native languages. In the Q&A, many in attendance commented on how not everyone in the audience could understand, and that challenged academics' desire to know everything. One attendee then remarked that language was all fine, but "Where are the politics? What about land rights?" Nahua scholars Sabina de la Cruz, Bety Martínez, Eduardo de la Cruz, and Abelardo de la Cruz responded that you cannot dissociate language from the defense of the land and its political implications. Language is not "merely cultural." Western frameworks categorize and subcategorize concepts into separate disciplines and themes to the extent that methodologies of comparative studies and intersectionality are needed to remedy that tendency. The intersection of different types of territory was obvious to the Nahua researchers.

The title *The Serpent's Plumes: Contemporary Nahua Flowered Words in Movement* emphasizes how authors' *xochitlajtoli* confronts the Mexican nation-state's appropriations of Nahua symbols, such as the Plumed Serpent, in dynamic ways (*movement* referring to both authors' migration to urban centers and Nahua perspectives in which the word for movement can signify walking, philosophy, and life). In its departure from the mock plumage of pervasive stereotypes, Carballo's metaphor of the serpent's feathers features the experiences of Nahua migrants. Many have had to migrate (in a figurative sense "fly") to Mexico City, as in the case of Carballo, or to other countries, principally the United States and Canada. This movement defies common stereotypes regarding Indigenous peoples, namely notions of fixedness and isolation. Nahuas network with people transnationally. Each "feather" or Native personal experience featured on Carballo's program adds another ink-dipped quill to a panoply of shared suffering and synchronicities. Carballo's own life reflects this. He relocated in his teens from the Huasteca Veracruzana to Mexico City to complete his secondary education. Nearly all published Nahua artists have had similar experiences of migrating from smaller communities to urban settings. Their negotiation among these different places is central to present-day Nahua literature and reflects how their efforts join a panorama of Indigenous struggles on a continental and global scale.



Note that in the epigraph to this introduction Carballo writes in Castilian rather than Nahuatl. The play on language with “las Plumas de la Serpiente” only works in Castilian, although it connects with distinctive cultural symbols in Nahuatl and Carballo’s home community. While Nahuatl plays a key role, some authors like Carballo write mostly in Spanish or a sort of Spanahuatl, or hybridization of the two languages. In part this is because it reflects the reality of many Nahuas, especially those who have relocated to urban areas. Writing in Castilian also allows Carballo to reach a wider audience. Much like in Northern Abiyala, Native Nations in Mexico have appropriated the colonizers’ language and Indigenized it in unique ways as we see with Spanahuatl. Within this language, it is important to observe a distinct conception of what constitutes territory. You can leave your family’s lands (tikisa), but you do not leave them in the sense of abandoning or leaving them behind (tijkaua, from which the verb to denote forgetting is derived). The territory moves with a person in a perennial reciprocal relationship, akin to one’s mother not ceasing to be a mother when a child moves away. Our Earth Mother (Totlalnantsij) here is still Our Earth Mother elsewhere. The perspectives of ixtlamatlistli, yoltlajlamikilistli, and tlaixpan are tightly bound up with this relationship, intertwined with the knowledges gained from close interaction with those landscapes (ixtlamatlistli), the affective connection to them (yoltlajlamikilistli), and a reciprocity with their history in front (tlaixpan), much like relatives commune with their deceased loved ones.

### Tendencies within Nahua and Native Studies

Previous studies, with notable exceptions such as Kelly McDonough’s *The Learned Ones*, tend to offer overviews of Nahua literary works and read them in translation. *The Serpent’s Plumes* closely analyzes this artistic production in the Nahuatl language. Without engaging with the texts in Nahuatl, we miss the aforementioned perspectives on decoloniality vis-à-vis language use that are more poignant in Native language texts. The Castilian versions are not exact replications, and it is pressing to analyze these texts in/on their own terms. *The Serpent’s Plumes* brings Nahuatl to the forefront, both in methodology and within the works themselves. My approach reads between the Nahuatl and Castilian to elucidate critical perspectives articulated through this translingual literature.<sup>23</sup> Certain mean-

ings, often with subversive implications, are lost or hidden in translation. Concurrently, there are messages in the Castilian that do not appear in the Nahuatl. Self-translation serves as a strategy for marking these differences and highlighting Native concepts within the interstices of rough translations. For example, Mardonio Carballo's essay collection *Las Plumas de la Serpiente* contains abundant code-switching plays between Nahuatl and Spanish that are not fully understood without reading both languages.

These authors' works form part of larger projects to *strengthen* (kiyolchikaua) use of Nahuatl (as opposed to "revitalize" it).<sup>24</sup> Natalio Hernández has led the Fundación Macuilxochitl, an organization that joined choirs from Mexico City and the Huasteca to sing bilingual compositions. Ethel Xochitiotzin is a professor of Nahuatl in Tlaxcala. Martín Tonalmeyotl, Judith Santopietro, and Mardonio Carballo are influencers who promote the language on social media. Santopietro created the *libro cartonero* publishing house Iguanazul for Indigenous authors. Tonalmeyotl and Miyawatl help fellow authors publish in anthologies, editorial series, and newspapers. It is important to recognize their works as part of these wider efforts.

In *The Learned Ones*, McDonough observes this commitment in contemporary Nahua authors Luz Jiménez and Ildefonso Maya. She offers an extensive analysis of Nahua literary production and highlights a continuity of intellectual history, from the sixteenth century to the present, contrary to the typical depiction of their knowledge production as having fallen into a Dark Age after the Spanish invasion. She argues that Nahua intellectual tradition was suppressed and that, despite this marginalization, texts from the colonial era to the present attest to a continuous tradition. McDonough signals how Nahuas redefine what it means to be an intellectual. She uses *ixtlamatilistli* (literally, "knowledge with the face") as a key approach in her analysis of Nahua literature. I build on this excellent work by focusing on contemporary authors in order to underscore that these writers do not always need to be linked to the Pre-Columbian or early colonial period.

*The Serpent's Plumes* enters a critical conversation within recent Indigenous studies publications. Especially with UNESCO's declaration that 2019 was the Year of Indigenous Languages, and a subsequent declaration that 2022–2032 is the Decade of Indigenous Languages, there has been a surge in studies on Native literatures.<sup>25</sup> Arturo Arias's first two volumes of *Recovering Footprints* (vol. 1, 2017; vol. 2, 2018) examine contemporary Maya literature, and the forthcoming third volume will address literatures,

including Nahuatl, throughout Mesoamerica. Arias's work shifts effectively from global Native studies to analyzing specific Mesoamerican contexts. It resists the temptation to create macronarratives, while at the same time tracing similarities, alliances, and dialogues across a wide berth of Indigenous literary production. *Recovering Footprints* does so by reading narratives found in what Arias describes as the "marginality of marginality" (vol. 1, 51). Arias argues that contemporary written Indigenous narratives reenact aspects of Indigenous epistemologies, what Mayas call "cosmovisión" or "cosmocimiento" (33). He concludes the first volume of *Recovering Footprints* stating that his main goal is to develop an analysis based on Maya terms for these narratives, and the development of this terminology is an ongoing process (224–25). I take up Arias's invitation to develop those terms within a Nahua context with this study's framework based on Nahua perspectives by analyzing xochitlajtoli and seeking to avoid overarching narratives distanced from specificities.

In this vein, *The Serpent's Plumes* resembles Keme's *Le Maya Q'atzij / Our Maya World* (2021) and Worley and Palacios's *Unwriting Maya Literature* (2019). Keme offers a critical analysis of ten contemporary Maya authors' articulation of their Native rights and cultural identities. He signals decolonizing strategies in Maya poetics to interrogate "the structures of colonial power while also vindicating the complexity that the Maya world represents through their works" (9). Keme uses Q'atzij, the K'iche' term for "our word" or "our tongue," to denote contemporary Maya poetry and signal a broader conception than "literature" in Western paradigms. This term stresses "the value of the 'word' as a carrier of knowledge and wisdom in the creation of the universe and humanity" (9). In *Unwriting Maya Literature*, Worley and Palacios argue, in a related manner, that the Maya ts'ib encompasses myriad ways of recording knowledge. They affirm with this term that "Eurocentric models of literary criticism can only partially account for what happens in these works and that they must be understood as literary works within the context of their own traditions that fall outside of the Western tradition" (9). While *The Serpent's Plumes* focuses on texts written with Latin graphemes, it also opens to a wider consideration of what constitutes a text with the term xochitlajtoli. Xochi- appears in multiple settings and genres, continually referenced within written texts, such as the xochikali (flowered house or ceremonial house) and xochitlatsotsontli (flowered music or ceremonial refrains). The xochikoskatl (flowered necklace) is present in ceremonial spaces; it is also the title of Natalio Hernández's first book and Mardonio

Carballo's program on Radio UNAM. Additionally, *xochi-* appears in *xochitlajtsontli* (flowered embroidery), *xochitlajkuiloani* (flowered writer or poet/novelist), *xochitekitl/xochitlachijchialistli* (flowered work, the task of tying ceremonial flowers), *xochikuikatl* (flowered song or maize song), and *Chikomexochitl* (Seven Flower, the sacred life force of maize). This study addresses how contemporary Nahuatl texts intersect with a multiplicity of spaces and media.

McDonough, Arias, Keme, Palacios, and Worley share the goal of using Indigenous frameworks as a methodology for their study of Indigenous literature, principally Maya cultural production. *The Serpent's Plumes* seeks to develop a similar framework to read contemporary *xochitlajtoli*. These studies, and others like them in Latin American and Native studies,<sup>26</sup> aim to rewrite the "universal" literary canon. *The Serpent's Plumes* builds on this important work by confronting language barriers—not only between Castilian and English but also among the numerous languages spoken in Abiyala—that hinder trans-Indigenous and transnational discussions.<sup>27</sup> In part due to this divide within Native American and Indigenous studies, it is more common for scholars from the US and Canada to dialogue with colleagues in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia than with neighboring scholars in Southern Abiyala. By addressing race and ethnicity within Abiyala, *The Serpent's Plumes* considers the lived experiences of Native peoples in Mexico and the US who unsettle and complicate the meanings of *Latinx* and *Chicanx*. This analysis of contemporary Nahuatl authors' works is of particular interest to comparative literary studies in placing new authors into dialogue with wider literary production to, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, "take the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant" (*Death of a Discipline* 9). Nahuatl literary production heeds Spivak's calls for a "fostering not only of national literatures of the global South but also of the writing of countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when the maps were made" (15).

### From Southern Californahuas to the Huasteca Veracruzana: Networks and Methodologies

Above all, the most significant aim of this project is to collaborate with Nahuas as colleagues and full-fledged knowledge producers. As opposed

to entering communities with a foreign model (i.e., Western theoretical frameworks and pedagogies), I have sought in my fieldwork to promulgate and work closely with Nahua-run programs. In conducting this research, I was affiliated as an instructor and advisor with the Macuilxochitl Cultural Foundation, directed by Natalio Hernández from 2009 until its final year in 2019. Since 2012, I have collaborated on projects with the organization Xochiojtl (Flowered Path), directed by Eneida Hernández and Natalio Hernández. Initiated in 2012, this organization has assumed and amplified the goals of the Macuilxochitl Cultural Foundation. Both Macuilxochitl and Xochiojtl have aided youth in the Huastecan community of Tepeko (Lomas del Dorado, Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz), and Xochiojtl plans to create a cultural center there. A central component of contemporary Nahua literature and these efforts is to promote respect for Nahua ceremonies. The texts I study are intertwined with the goal to help Nahuatl-speaking youth and are more fully understood with participation in programs led by Nahua authors. Such projects correlate with the theoretical basis of my research in which Indigenous knowledges should be met on their own terms and in their own language.

The roots of this study or *tekipamitl*, “work-furrow,” began nearly two decades ago while I was living in Southern California. There, my Nahua friends Benjamin and Freddy Luna spoke Nahuatl at home. They told stories about their family members’ active roles in society. For example, their grandparents fought in the Mexican Revolution. The subsequent move to Southern California was a deliberate decision in which they developed a transnational network of kinship. While Benjamin and Freddy communicated in Nahuatl among themselves, they spoke only Castilian outside the home. They avoided doing so publicly out of fear of oppression for speaking what others disparagingly called a *dialecto*. My experiences with their family instilled in me a determination to understand Nahua communities’ diverse self-representations.

Nahuas are no distant Other; they work, create, and intervene in English-dominated areas. Nahuas constitute a significant population whose presence is obscured within Mexico and the US. I began learning Nahuatl in Southern California. In 2008 I had the opportunity to study at a summer language immersion course in Oapan, Guerrero. In 2009 this program moved to the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ) at the University of Zacatecas. Nahua professors from the Huasteca Veracruzana teach the classes there. In both Veracruz and Guerrero, numerous Nahuas had long-term ties with relatives in the US.

Their perspectives elucidate the complexities of US Latinx communities, a category to which they are ascribed instead of Native, although they would not necessarily consider themselves Latinx or Hispanic.<sup>28</sup> Even in the small community of Morris, Minnesota, where I live, there are Nahua families.

“Axnijneki ninauatis pampa san nisaniloa nauatl *cuatrapeado*” (I don’t want to speak Nahuatl because the Nahuatl I use is broken), the father of a teenage student explained to me in Tepeko in 2010. I heard this self-deprecation many times thereafter, always with the Castilian loanword *cuatrapeado*—a word that carries connotations of speaking senselessly like an animal (from *cuatro* + *pies*, four-footed). Such is the product of systemic discrimination over centuries against Native languages and cultural practices. Parents who have experienced this marginalization frequently avoid teaching their children Nahuatl in the hope that they evade a similar fate. In Tepeko, children of some migrants return speaking more English than Castilian (and no Nahuatl). Interactions with them, as well as depictions privileging English within mass media, motivate children in the community to want to learn English.

Natalio Hernández is from Tepeko and—with the aim of uprooting discriminatory practices and strengthening use of the Nahuatl language—he developed the novel idea of an annual bilingual Nahuatl-English summer course for high school students. When Hernández asked if I could impart this course in 2010, it was the last thing I wanted. Why have a gringo from the US teach the colonial language? He explained that most children did not want to speak Nahuatl, but all desired to learn English. The colonizer’s language could serve as a *gancho* or hook to draw them into the course and teach that Nahuatl is just as important. Hernández led the formation of curriculum for this course based on a mix of methodologies from student-centered communicative techniques and approaches gleaned from a key text in the formation of Nahua pedagogical perspectives, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). My experience with the Nahuatl-English course exposed the far-reaching effects of English in both linguicide and epistemicide. With television and internet widely available, this process is ever accelerating.

“Namaj nikita kena ipatij nauatlajtoli uan axmelauak tlen techijluiaj koyomej” (Now I see that Nahuatl is valuable and what the “coyotes” tell us isn’t true), Norberto said in one of the class sessions. Koyomej, “coyotes,” refers to people who persecute Indigenous communities, and who promote the idea that Nahuatl is synonymous with backwardness and unintelligence. Normally reticent to speak the language, Norberto changed

his perspective after studying contemporary Nahua cultural production. Class activities included some of the literary texts explored in the present study and a special presentation by Nahua medical doctor Enrique Ramírez. Becoming acquainted with an accomplished doctor who values his Nahua upbringing was a life-changing experience for students. They began to question stereotypes regarding Native Nations and to criticize the bullying of classmates who admit they are Nahua. The successes of the course confirm the powerful effect (and affect) that ethically minded teaching and cultural production led by Nahuas can have. These experiences were the principal influence that guided me to analyze this cultural production in greater detail and also formed the key network, principally through Natalio Hernández, that resulted in meeting dozens of Nahua authors throughout Mexico.

Given the linguistic discrimination against Nahuatl, why write this study in English?<sup>29</sup> Would it not be more appropriate to publish in Nahuatl or Castilian? In the synopsis in Castilian of their English-language academic publication *Unwriting Maya Literature*, Worley and Palacios ask these same questions. Despite the contradictions within an academia that demands publications in English, they aver that inner critiques intervene in dominant scholarly paradigms from Latin American, Mexican, and Mesoamerican studies. The fact that the English hegemony reaches into Tepeko in the Huasteca Veracruzana underscores, somewhat ironically, the exigency of publications in English to combat that very hegemony. Worley and Palacios state, “[A]lthough we cite and attribute the authorship of ideas that are not ours throughout the book, we consider it more than necessary to indicate that the key concept, the backbone, of our study is not a new concept or ours; neither is it an academic neologism with copyright: the authorship and authority of *ts’üib* pertains to Maya nations” (my trans.; 4). The same can be said of the Nahua perspectives that serve as the crux of the present study.

### Nahua Methodologies and Intellectual Rights

This study has its theoretical footing within the Nahuatl language itself. In contemporary Nahua cultural production in Mexico, the perspectives connected to *ixtlamatilistli* (knowledge with the face), *yoltlajlamikilistli* (knowledge/remembrance with the heart), and *tlaixpan* (altar / that which is in front) continually emerge. One of the main roots of this methodology

derives from a weekly exercise led by Nahua artist Eneida Hernández in the Huastecan Nahua community of Tepeko. Called “Tijxochiyotisej tlajtoli” / “Hacer florecer la palabra” (Making the Word Flourish), the regular meeting entailed community members discussing words or phrases at length for an hour or more. Out of these dialogues came thoughts on the meanings and historic importance of *ixtlamatilistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaixpan*. The terms used to identify these perspectives can vary among the thirty Nahuatl variants (or *dialects* in the proper meaning of the word), but the concepts behind them are cross-regional. These same perspectives are readily apparent within contemporary Nahua literature and serve as a lens to delve deeper into them. Using Native categories for textual analysis of their own literary production offers innovative theoretical and aesthetic approaches to challenges across Abiyala.

A significant shift, especially within the last decade, calls for studies centered on Indigenous methodologies.<sup>30</sup> What are the implications of this move? Osage literary scholar Robert Warrior asserted at a talk at the University of Minnesota that it comes down to a question of whom you cite (“The Finest Men We Have Ever Seen”).<sup>31</sup> He critiques the incessant need to quote “untouchable” Western intellectuals such as Alexander Humboldt and Thomas Jefferson when Native intellectuals expressed similar ideas. Kanaka Maoli scholar Lisa Kahaleole Hall analyzes at length this pressure to cite Euro-American scholars while Native intellectuals’ ideas are left uncited or plagiarized.<sup>32</sup> On his media programs, Carballo addresses numerous forms of plagiarism, from foreign companies copying Native textile designs to the appropriation of the Mesoamerican scientific discovery of maize cultivation.<sup>33</sup> Land acknowledgments imply that Native peoples were and *are* here, and should carry with them earnest engagement with their present speaking, thinking, and theorizing. This study seeks to answer this call to *cite*, *site*, and *center* Native perspectives.

Although Nahua artists do not explicitly postulate concepts like *ixtlamatilistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaixpan* as theory in a Western propositional sense, they offer alternative perspectives that should be set in critical dialogue with mainstream theoretical frameworks. These views constitute a philosophy, in Nahuatl *nemilistli* (way of life / walking / feeling / thinking), articulated in practice and based on personal experiences and on an affective connection with one’s knowledge production—a way of life key to healthy kinship and communities. In short, rather than suggesting that Nahuas seek to reach the upper echelons of Western philosophy, “philosophy” carries a great significance for Nahuas since their views



traditionally have been excluded from the field. Both Natalio Hernández and Miguel León Portilla address how many people view *philosophy* and *Nahua* as incommensurate. León Portilla met resistance when he wrote his dissertation, later published as *La filosofía náhuatl* (Nahuatl Philosophy, 1956). Now in its tenth edition, this work helped open a space for Nahua perspectives to be taken seriously. His analysis of the *ixtlamatini* (one who knows wisdom with the face) as philosopher resembles contemporary iterations of *ixtlamatilistli*.

From contemporary Nahua *xochitlajtoli*-flowered words emerges a mode of reading tied to *ixtlamatilistli*. This deep reading heeds what Robert Warrior describes as a dynamic process between what the writer means to write and what readers interpret, and the experiences both bring to this encounter (*The People and the Word* xiv–xv). Nahuas expand the notion of what constitutes *ixtli* / face-text. *Xochitlajtoli* serves as a means to experience these contexts, and, in this sense, it offers a degree of experiential knowledge. In the Huasteca Veracruzana, such knowledge would be more often referred to as *tlajlamikilistli* (knowledge/remembrance) and *tlachialistli* (observation, perception, foresight). In contemporary Nahuatl, the concepts of *ueuejtajtoli* (old/wise words) and *ueuejtlakamej* (old/wise people) link to a distinct view in which elders with their wealth of lived knowledges are intellectuals. In their movement and migration toward urban centers, Nahua artists highlight their communities' lived knowledges. They propose a remapping in which, instead of receiving from the North, Nahua communities transit knowledge globally to prioritize their perspectives taken lightly by society writ large. The emphasis on the eyes in Nahua literary production highlights an ability to observe among these movements and underscores *ixtlamatilistli*.<sup>34</sup> This ocular focus breaks with stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples as made for manual labor and incapable of critical analysis.

The related concept of *yoltlajlamikilistli* (knowledge/remembrance with the heart) accentuates an affective intelligence in which cognition is “conjugated” with emotions (Natalio Hernández, *Semanca huitzitzilin* 11–15). *Conjugated* suggests a nexus between cognition and affect, and signals that this perspective is codified in the language itself. *Yotl* (heart / corn seed) integrates into verbs as an adverb (such as *nijyolmati*, “I know with my heart [as a medium or tool],” and *nimoyolnojnotsa*, “I inner-dialogue with my heart”). Additional terms that connect with *yoltlajlamikilistli* are *yolchikaualistli* (strength of heart) and *kuali iyolo* (a good heart). In fact, *yol* so commonly appears in texts that it is often

dropped in translations, both because of the difficulty in communicating its deeper meanings and to avoid sounding redundant in Castilian. Thinking/feeling/dialoguing with the heart is a common metaphor that marks one's cognition and affectivity as inseparable, both in Nahua literature and everyday life. This view underlies the affective space of kinship and practices through reciprocity and community festivities, of seeing these practices as knowledge production as opposed to folkloric traditions. By emphasizing the heart, Nahuas do not reiterate the hackneyed depiction of Indigenous peoples as led by instincts. Instead, they foreground the ability to exercise this affective intelligence that recognizes the intimate weave of emotive and cognitive responses.

Perspectives encompassed by *tlaixpan* (that which is in front) link to *ixtlamatilistli* and *yoltlajlamikilistli*. Invoking the past as in front of the subject in a dynamic present and future, *tlaixpan* denotes altars made for festivities like the Day of the Dead. Deceased relatives' pictures rest on these altars, and the deceased, like the past, are at the fore. They constitute what is known and guide us into an unpredictable future. Nahuas use the strength from that past to project their own perspectives into a dynamic present and future. Contemporary literary references to weaving, farming, and other forms of expression tap into a long tradition of ancestors' creative production. This context is key, for example, in understanding Martín Tonalmeyotl's book of poetry *Ritual de los olvidados*, and its imagery of abandoned adobe homes (see chapter 2). With *tlaixpan* and the regeneration that it entails, I analyze how life and death metonymically parallel an agricultural regeneration.

A forward-looking view toward the past materializes, through Nahua literature, in other terms such as *notsonyo* (my genealogy or "the essence of my head, what is on top"), *noneluayo* (my ancestry or "roots"), *nokuamekayo* (my ancestors, or "head thread"), *noixmatkauaj* (relatives, or "those whom I know with my face"), and *moikxipejpena* (to retrace everywhere one has been during their life, or "gather one's feet"). Ancestors feature prominently at the base of genealogical trees, which are flipped from Western genealogies in which the deceased appear in branches and genealogy moves downward to descendants in the present. This view turns nationalist discourse—in its effort to confine Nahuas in the past—on its head. The past is not left behind in a teleological view of humanity. Similar to the Hawaiian conception of *mo'okū'auhau* that Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu and Manulani Aluli Meyer explore in the

edited collection *The Past before Us*, *tlaixpan* is a “constellation of points in time” that marks genealogical relationships among human ancestors and the landscape (1–6).<sup>35</sup> It encapsulates a field of vision in which the land is sacred kin instead of real estate, and knowledge is relational as opposed to transactional (6). Native intellectual rights germinate in those interconnections, rather than in a transactional step in which one becomes an authority based on a university degree.

*Ixtlamatlistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaixpan* work in tandem. *Yoltlajlamikilistli* has *tlajlamikilistli* (knowledge/remembrance) at its core. That knowledge dialogues with ancestors’ knowledges; rather than individualist, it is based on remembrance without the Western obsession of originality. The painting/textile by Eneida Hernández on this study’s cover illustrates how these three perspectives combine. *Uníverson de las hilanderas* (Universe of Women Spinners; 2010) is inspired by a series of traditional images embroidered on blouses, but Hernández uses them innovatively to portray the connection between the sky and the earth. This textile canvas is oriented toward the east, effectively turning Western maps on their side. Reflecting these interconnections and movement, the altars prevalent throughout Nahua cultural production face the East to greet the morning sun. The arc over the altar represents solar passage across the sky.<sup>36</sup> Like the sun’s movement, the care for ancestors’ knowledges embodied upon the altar is far from static. In addition to their role in the articulation of Nahua identities, *ixtlamatlistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaixpan* function within literary analysis to better capture complex symbols, poetic and narrative arcs, and imagery within Nahua texts. The meaning of *tlaixpan*, the altar, signals that this perspective surfaces more in practice than abstract mulling. As research has attested, it is in ceremonies and everyday practices that Nahua views emerge.<sup>37</sup>

Contemporary Nahua literature points to the past in front, in which wisdom is imparted by ancestors but then used in unexpected ways to tackle current challenges.<sup>38</sup> Eneida Hernández’s art incorporates experiential knowledges; she learned textile symbols and how to create them through continual practice alongside ancestors. This communal effort not only weaves the cloth or canvas but weaves and reweaves kinship networks. The various threads can remind one of life events. Some blouses and garments are reserved for ceremonies.<sup>39</sup> Nahuas dress choice cornhusks in miniature versions of their apparel, highlighting a wider kinship that embraces the land and the harvest. Nahuas deploy their perspectives in defense of their Native heritage, within their texts if they are writers, and

through their posts (both in the sense of *cargos* [community governance] and social media such as Facebook).

Carballo's image of the Serpent's Plumes comprises these Nahua perspectives and migrations. He privileges the insights of Indigenous migrants, who in their movement fly like the Serpent's Plumes and yet go unheard on mainstream media. These travelers develop a "heart knowledge" or affective intelligence in their struggles. Their intuition resembles Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* in which oppressed people obtain, through personal experience, a profound understanding of society that the advantaged are unable to comprehend (*Borderlands / La Frontera* 60). Carballo's innovation on Quetzalcoatl or the "Plumed Serpent" also reflects the view of the past in front, as his conceit of the Serpent's Plumes dynamically brings antiquity, Pre-Columbian symbols, to the forefront in unexpected ways. The Serpent's Plumes reminds him of his hometown Maguey Maguaquite, situating it front and center. Taken together, *ixtlamatlistli*, *yoltlajlamikilistli*, and *tlaixpan* undergird Nahua strategies and a Nahua aesthetic within contemporary literature.

Tied to Nahua knowledge production is an aesthetic in which maize operates as a central trope. Cultivation constitutes a metaphor for perspectives that can be described as maize-centric instead of logocentric.<sup>40</sup> To speak of a Nahua perspective poses serious pitfalls, since, like with any population, a multiplicity of viewpoints exists. There are Nahuas who self-identify as Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, and atheist, affiliated with political parties of the right, the alleged center, the left, and none at all;<sup>41</sup> Nahuas who do not speak Nahuatl and Nahuas in urban areas, rural municipalities, and places in-between, Gloria Anzaldúa's *nepantla*. Although not reflective of all, one sees within Nahua literature a general emphasis on maize and worldings linked to corn ceremonies.<sup>42</sup> Human growth, spiritual ceremonies, and writing itself are grounded in maize. The term used in Nahuatl for Native or Indigenous, *macehualli* or *maseuali*, carries with it the connotation of "peasant farmer."<sup>43</sup> The tending of the crop mirrors a Nahua view of who embodies an intellectual, because the harvester must carefully observe and possess experience with the terrain. An alternative time perception stems from the cyclical and dynamic nature of the corn crop itself. Respect for the landscape does not spring from a New Age romanticized notion but instead is rooted in recognition of the earth as the living source of one's sustenance. Situated within a non-anthropocentric worldview, Nahuas venerate ancestors and community.