

Gifting Knowledges Beyond the Lettered City

Rachel Spaulding

Emporia State University

Amber Brian. *Alva Ixtlilxochitl Native Archive and the Circulation of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt, 2015. 208 pp. ISBN. 978-0-8265-2097-5.

Amber Brian's book brilliantly traces the provenance, compilation, and significance of the "Códice Chimalpahin", a collection of manuscripts that, as she effectively illustrates, were purposefully configured to document pre-Columbian *Mexica* "original histories." Her book offers a methodology to reconsider the construction of shared cultural knowledge between creole and mestizo communities. Her work fleshes out the role of the bicultural intermediary; significantly, her book challenges Ángel Rama's concept of the *Lettered City*. She extends the intertwining relationships of the colonial *letrados* to include more peripheral indigenous persons. Importantly, Brian's work illuminates the interconnected and overlapping ways in which mestizo and creole historians collaborated to collect and circulate what she terms the native archive. Specifically, her book meticulously underlines and convincingly details the intimate nature of the intergenerational relationships between don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, his family and Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora. At its heart, this book contextualizes the multilayered significance of what it meant for don Fernando Alva Ixtlilxochitl to make a gift of this native archive and, more importantly, what it meant to gift it to a creole historian like Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora.

Chapter one tracks the provenance of this gift, the "Códice Chimalpahin". It operationalizes what Brian terms the "native archive" and "original histories." Moreover, it outlines Alva Ixtlilxochitl collaborative effort to record and compile these original histories, or dialogues with "networks of Indian intellectuals" (28). Brian suggests that native elites, like Alva Ixtlilxochitl, worked in collaboration with other elite mestizos, like don Constantino Bravo Huitzimengari, as well as, interviewed many elder indians so as to gather "original histories." Furthermore, she illustrates that these histories were authenticated by various indigenous personages.

As stated, her chapter disrupts Ángel Rama's closed-off notion of the *Lettered City*, suggesting that *letrado* social circles were not so concentric, rigidly segregating certain kinds of peoples and knowledges. In contrast, with respect to native authors, like Alva Ixtlilxochitl, knowledge construction was a fluid process of collecting, exchanging, and, eventually, gifting stories and scripts to other indigenous, as well as, mestizo and creole

intellectuals. This gifting process becomes the focal point for her work in that the totality of the book works to underline the multiple interrelated reasons as to how and why Alva Ixtlilxochitl's work -- configuring the native archive -- came into Sigüenza's possession. In this first chapter, Brian briefly discusses the authorial life and debated corpus of Sigüenza's works, and, significantly, makes a compelling argument as to the types of works that Sigüenza would have preferred to write and publish if he were to have had more economic resources. Importantly, in the latter part of the book, this discussion serves to bolster her analysis of why Sigüenza "pursued and represented relationships with members and segments of the Indian community" (115).

Chapter two provides a close analysis of Sigüenza's role in defending Alva Ixtlilxochitl's son's claim to the cacicazgo of San Juan Teotihuacan. Brian takes to task the contouring of the intertwined histories of Alva Ixtlilxochitl's family and Sigüenza who worked as its executor, power of attorney and *capellán*. Followingly, she contends that Sigüenza's role in the transference of native knowledge was more than that of a mere conduit (75). She destabilizes the divide between the *República de indios* and the *República de españoles* by looking into the impetus for this gift. She focuses on the context and the "unfolding" nature of these historical peoples' actions overtime. In so doing, she responds to the demands of her discipline to "undertake a more rigorous historical practice in colonial and postcolonial studies" (76).

Chapters three and four each focus respectively on the ways in which both Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Sigüenza constructed their historiographical projects. In chapter three, Brian asks: How can Alva Ixtlilxochitl have known what he said? To answer this, she posits what it means to be mestizo and surmises that mestizaje extends beyond the biological or ethnic composition of the author to also encompass the hybrid nature of the text itself. She makes a compelling argument to frame Alva Ixtlilxochitl as a colonial subject who wielded humanistic rhetorical strategies so as to subversively present Indian stories within a Hispano-Catholic framework. Chapter four turns to Sigüenza's writing process and tackles the contradictory nature of his corpus in which, in true baroque fashion, he both idolizes and disparages the image of the amerindian. However, that is not her main interest for this chapter. This chapter specifically considers "the emergence of the Guadalupe textual corpus as a moment in which the native archive . . . becomes the creole archive" (111).

It is in this chapter that Brian, at least in the estimation of this reader, overcomes the significant critique of her work. Throughout the text, Brian asserts that this unique relationship between Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Sigüenza was representative of the myriad of ways in which native stories and knowledges flowed from individuals who remembered pre-Columbian oral stories through intermediaries like Alva Ixtlilxochitl to various creole authors of the seventeenth century in Mexico. While her work clearly illustrates how the native archive was configured and circulated with regards to this specific relationship between Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Sigüenza, the text initially seems to fail to show how this case could be generalized to other examples of the circulation of native knowledges. At first, it was hard to see how this specific gifting process was much more than anecdotal.

Chapter four is circumspect in detailing the transformation process of the "original" Guadalupe stories. Specifically, in this chapter Brian "explore[s] the genealogy and significance of Alva Ixtlilxochitl's association with the Guadalupe legend as an example

of the colonial economy of letters” (128). She convincingly argues that mestizo historians “served as the point of exchange between the Indian and Hispanic cultural and intellectual spheres with regards to the Guadalupe cult” (135). Brian illustrates the collaborative nature of various texts, which she terms “the colonial economy of letters”, and demonstrates the ways in which these texts “were constructed through a complex series of interactions among diverse but not always divergent intellectual communities” (135). Here, she proves that Rama’s closed circuit of *letrados*, in fact, opens up to include more marginalized voices.

Overall, Amber Brian’s work provides a thorough analysis of her primary source documentation and offers a fresh perspective to contemplate the ways in which native knowledges and the compilation of those knowledges cannot be extricated from their colonial context. It explores the symbolic transaction of gift giving between disparate but not separate social classes in colonial Mexico.