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Spaces for participatory research, decolonization and community empowerment: working with speakers of Nahuatl in Mexico

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Abstract

This paper focuses on theoretical and practical approaches to decolonizing, participatory research in Indigenous communities and on ways of fostering those decolonizing methodologies in the areas of ethnohistory, sociolinguistics and language revitalization. I discuss the results of several complementary projects involving the Nahuatl language in Mexico, including methods and practices which we developed and implemented, both with regard to ethnolinguistic fieldwork in Nahua communities and to the analysis and usages of historical and modern data. Empowerment and capacity-building of Indigenous participants have been essential aspects of this work; it has also embraced attempts to create spaces for the development of Indigenous research methodology. Another important focus has been the development and promotion of 'participatory historical culture', consisting of jointly reading and discussing Indigenous texts written by ancestors of modern Nahuas. I discuss the possible impacts of these activities on positive language attitudes and historical identities in the context of language revitalization, as well as on the individual and collective capacity to act with regard to their linguistic and cultural heritage.

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1. Decolonization, empowerment and Indigenous knowledge. Approach and considerations[1]

Over the last several decades, research in the humanities and social sciences has been profoundly transformed by decolonizing approaches. They seek to identify emic perspectives of peoples, cultures and communities under study, be they from contemporary or past realities, but also aim at strengthening the agency of minoritized and marginalized groups in the context of research and related practices. In this paper I focus on the potential of distinct disciplinary perspectives for a decolonizing approach: ethnohistory and (socio)linguistics, broadly conceived, with special focus on the creation and uses of ethnolinguistic documentation, historical sources, and language revitalization strategies. By exploring their mutual relationships in the area of 'decolonized research', I argue that their complementary potential can become an important tool for empowering individuals and groups struggling to maintain and fortify their ethnic identities, cultural traditions, and above all, heritage languages. In the first part of the paper I focus on the potential of fieldwork in Indigenous communities; then I discuss the importance of Indigenous research and empowerment of speakers; finally, by presenting the experience and impact of interdialectal encounters and participatory historical workshops, I link all these dimensions to Indigenous research and heritage management. I argue that Indigenous knowledge *can* and *should* be practised and developed in close connection to the emic perspectives expressed in heritage languages and that it can contribute to successful language revitalization activities.

In terms of linguistic fieldwork and research, the strong wave of decolonization and the push to restore the agency of language communities, especially minority/Indigenous groups, arose from the development of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR; e.g. Israel et al. 2008; Wallerstein & Duran 2008; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009) and related research paradigms such as community-driven research (Laurajane Smith, Morgan & van der Meer 2003; Pandya 2014) and empowering research (e.g. Bowes 1996; Ross 2017). CBRP envisions both 'equitable partnerships' that should include the sharing of resources and benefits within collaborative activities at

[1] The research reported here received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC grant agreement n° 312795. It was subsequently continued and significantly expanded within the project *Engaged Humanities in Europe* and benefited from its capacity-building and other activities (European Union Horizon 2020 Twinning Programme grant agreement no. 692199).

every stage of a project, and practical research applications in the community. The basic idea behind community-driven research is the direct involvement of community members as primary agents. This implies not only learning and being heard, but also leading and forming an essential part of decision-making processes. It has been shown that such an approach helps to achieve much better research outcomes and sets in motion processes and procedures in communities that can translate into long-term benefits (e.g. Pandya 2014). Both participatory and community-driven projects engage community members, non-academics, and academics in the initial and subsequent stages of research. While the predominant focus of these approaches has been on health and sustainability issues, they hold particular promise for effective language revitalization programs and for multidisciplinary research on endangered languages. In such a context, these approaches correspond to a postulated switch from non-cooperative (research *on* a community) and patronizing models (research *for* a community) to a more cooperative and equitable paradigm, which empowers local communities (research *with* and *by* a community) (Grinevald 2003: 58-60; Dwyer 2006: 32; Rice 2006: 142; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009; Linn 2014: 53-56). When local stakeholders are included in the process of developing research questions, methodology, procedures and analyses, projects benefit in several ways. They include, above all, achieving community engagement, meeting real goals, assuring long-lasting effects, enhancing methodology by combining emic and etic perspectives, and developing more profound and equitable forms of interaction between researchers and community members. This kind of approach is especially challenging in anthropological (but also in linguistic) research. While recognizing the importance of participant research and the fact that 'the native voice must be heard and respected' (Hastrup 1995: 160), anthropological theory and practice commonly limits the role of the 'natives' to 'knowing' but not 'understanding.' The latter is considered the domain of 'real' anthropologists, while their respective roles correspond to a 'difference between an intimate and implicit native knowledge and an external and implicit expert understanding' (Hastrup 1995: 148). Similarly, in the dominant practices of 'history making', 'professional historians' are only rarely willing to recognize non-academic ways of understanding, interpreting and transmitting historical knowledge.

Despite these systemic limitations, it is hardly deniable that historical and anthropological research have been profoundly transformed over the last several decades. This has resulted from incorporation of postcolonial perspectives opposing the former paradigms which distorted and reduced culturally distinct experiences through the lenses of the modern, capitalist and secular 'Western' world (e.g. Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Chakrabarty 2000; Bhambra 2007; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). The appearance of decolonizing research paradigms aimed at new ways of studying pre-modern and non-Western life has been closely linked to the so-called cultural and linguistic

turn in the humanities, including anthropology and history (e.g. Clark 2004; Sewell 2005; Spiegel 2005). These transformations have ultimately led, among other approaches, to new forms of practice theory that raise questions of agency and the subject (e.g. Desai 2010; Ortner 2006), to microhistorical and macrohistorical studies of the 'colonized' through their own sources in their own languages (Lockhart 1992) and finally, to an 'ontological turn' in anthropology (e.g. Kohn 2013) and in historical studies advocating for exploring 'each past lifeworld in its own metaphysical environment' (Anderson 2015: 790). This has emerged from the well-grounded premise that despite acknowledging 'ontological diversity' across human experience, 'Western research paradigms' are driven by modern materialist, secularist, and individualist worldviews that ignore fundamental aspects of the ontologies of other cultures and societies. This is especially true for studies of past experiences (Anderson 2015: 789).

In exploring possible alternatives to prevalent ways of conducting both historical and linguistic studies related to Indigenous communities, I focus on equitable models of collaboration with Indigenous students and researchers that can lead not only to non-patronizing forms of dialogue between etic and emic perspectives, but also to the empowerment of members of Indigenous communities. Based on the experience of recent team projects, I would like to pose not only the question of how collaborative work with Indigenous people — former objects of research in mainstream approaches — can enrich us as scholars, but also how it can make 'their past' more relevant for the present. In order to do so, I would like to emphasize the fact that Western knowledge-producing paradigms draw sharp distinctions between 'natural' and 'human' sciences, and divide human experience into distinct historical, cultural, political, social, economic, and psychological fields. This scholarly worldview has its own ontological commitments that impact our ways of studying and understanding different realities, including those which are not our own. In addition to distinct ontologies, we should be aware of Indigenous/local ways of generating and transmitting knowledge. Much of this knowledge would be lost if forced into Western systems of classifications and paradigms (Nakata 2007). Therefore, creating spaces for equitable dialogues and, above all, for Indigenous research based on its own methodology and methods, can become an essential force not only for empowering Indigenous researchers, but also for decolonizing the academy and scholars' minds. This approach can also open up new uses of the past in the multi-faceted process of decolonization and community-driven research. Paradoxically, 'all history is 'contemporary history'' (Carr 1984 [1961]: 21), 'an enterprise that takes place in the present' (Clark 2004: x). Hence, it is the present to which the results of historical research must matter and relate. This is especially relevant for Indigenous and minority communities which as a result of colonialism and modern discriminatory or assimilatory policies have often been deprived of their own vision of history, ownership of historical-cultural heritage or a strong sense of

historical identity. Native voices have long been underrepresented and misrepresented (or, in some contexts, even entirely absent) not only in historical research, but also in the cognate fields of anthropology, linguistics, sociology, as well as cultural and heritage studies.

2. The potential of fieldwork: the case of Nahua communities

The case study on which I draw to illustrate the main theses of this paper focuses on modern Nahua speakers and communities in Mexico. Their heritage language is Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan), one of the most widely known and amply documented Amerindian languages. Nahuatl has had a long trajectory in Mexico, going back at least to the first millennium A.D., to the times of the powerful empire of Teotihuacan and then the Toltec state. In the last centuries before the Spanish conquest it was spoken in numerous, often multilingual communities and polities in Central Mexico and beyond, commonly referred to under the general term of the 'Aztecs' or 'Aztec culture'. In the final part of this period, Nahuatl flourished as the dominant language of the multilingual Aztec empire (ca. 1440-1521), drawing on its status, probably established much earlier, as a *lingua franca* in many regions of Mesoamerica. After the arrival of the Spaniards, it became the main Indigenous tongue used by the Europeans in New Spain, sometimes also in communication with non-Nahua groups. Friars and other ecclesiastics used it as a common tool of Christianization. It was also widely used in legal communication and procedures with regard to some of the linguistically and ethnically distinct groups. In response to this situation, in 1570 King Philip II decreed Nahuatl the 'universal tongue of all Indians', recognizing it as the second language of New Spain.

The spread of the language during the colonial period resulted from administrative and church policies, the role of Nahua warriors and settlers as allies of the Spaniards in the northern and southern peripheries of their colonial domains in North and Central America, as well as the strong position of Nahua towns ruled by semi-autonomous municipal governments. The situation changed drastically after 1821 when an independent Mexican state was created and Indigenous languages were not envisioned as part of the process of state and nation building. Nahua communities, along with all other Indigenous groups, were subjected to strong Hispanization and discrimination, which became especially pervasive through the expansion of the educational system in the second half of the twentieth century. A dominant monolingual ideology and racism toward Indigenous people have been promoted by the independent Mexican state, its educational and legal systems, and the Catholic church. The most visible and obvious markers of *indios* were their languages, hence their role as the main sources of stigma. The spaces that existed for the use of Nahuatl earlier in the colonial period

(municipal government and community life, school, courts, church, alphabetic writing, trade markets) have been drastically reduced or closed in the independent Mexican state. During the second half of the twentieth century, this change also started to affect individual households in originally Nahua-speaking communities. Parents and grandparents who had been habitually communicating among themselves in Nahuatl, began to speak to their children in Spanish. In general, they succumbed to the widespread ideology associating Indigenous identity with shame and backwardness; more specifically, teachers were instructed to admonish them to stop speaking Nahuatl to their children (e.g. Hill & Hill 1986).

Although today a large number of communities have shifted to Spanish in response to these pressures, according to the most recent national census (INEGI 2010), there is still a large number of native speakers of Nahuatl: 1,544,968. However, most are over the age of 50, while intergenerational transmission has been broken or severely reduced, and communities are increasingly becoming isolated from each other. Bilingualism with Spanish is relatively recent (in most of the communities only going back to the second half of the twenty century) and not stable. It usually leads to rapid shift within one or two generations. Since the arrival of Europeans on the scene, contact with the Spanish language has been the dominant factor in the evolution of Nahuatl. Accelerated contact-induced change, including massive, substitutive borrowing and diminished proficiency in the heritage language have further contributed to negative language ideologies and attitudes of speakers (e.g. Olko 2018).

This historical and modern context determined some of the goals of our multidisciplinary team project *Europe and America in Contact. A Multidisciplinary Study of Cross-Cultural Transfer in the New World* (CultureContact 2012-2017, European Research Council Starting Grant;) and the subsequent project *Engaged humanities in Europe. Capacity building for participatory research and linguistic-cultural heritage* (ENGHUM 2016-2018). Our initial plan in the *CultureContact* project, focusing on cross-cultural exchange affecting Nahua language and culture over the last five centuries, has evolved into more holistically-oriented research dealing with this endangered language embedded in its historical and modern sociocultural setting, combined with practical activities aimed at its reinforcement and revitalization. From the very beginning, the goal has been to work with Indigenous students as research partners, through the inclusion of the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas (IDIEZ), a Mexican non-profit institution working with Indigenous students and researchers. Throughout the project, we developed, questioned, refined and implemented research methods and practices embracing both ethnolinguistic fieldwork and analysis of historical and modern data. These actions were embedded within a broader context of capacity-building and language revitalization activities that we have come to

see as a necessary complement to the research itself. We also developed this revitalization work in other parallel and complementary projects, especially ENGHUM.

Archival work on Nahuatl[2] texts, which constituted the major part of the project, was combined with ethnolinguistic fieldwork in several modern Nahua communities in Veracruz, Tlaxcala, and Puebla. We included both more isolated, rural communities in the Huasteca (Veracruz; east2538 NHE) and Sierra Negra (Puebla, sier1248 NHN), where a number of core elements of traditional beliefs, rituals, social relationships and economic life have survived, and where transmission continues, with more urbanized municipal localities in Tlaxcala (cent2132 NHN) that face the imminent threat of language extinction. The latter show rapidly diminishing intergenerational language transmission, an increasing number of passive speakers, vastly reduced domains of use, and strongly varying language competence among members of the speech community.

In accordance with the CBPR approach, our project has been searching for non-patronizing ways of uniting the two approaches described as *with* and *by*, in order to develop a methodological framework for combining external and internal perspectives of research and related practices. This requires not only respect and acknowledgment for the system of knowledge production on both sides, but also, at a practical level, the search for enriching and complementary ways to combine Western/academic and Indigenous methodologies. Therefore, all the practically-oriented activities (see below), were parallel and complementary to our research focusing on Nahua language and culture, an important part of which has been carried out in direct collaboration with Indigenous communities. Responding to challenges as they appeared and constantly refining our methods and awareness has been part of this process. It was not enough to acknowledge the fact that the motivations, priorities and aims of fieldwork are not the same for academic researchers and community members, and that the ways of thinking of one are not immediately clear to the other (Mosel 2006: 68; Austin 2010: 47-49), or that, to date, dominant practices in ethnolinguistic documentation and fieldwork have usually been determined by 'the needs and goals of the community of (external) linguists, with less attention given to the needs of communities of language users and potential speakers. The result is a mismatch between the materials produced by linguists and the needs of communities' (Grenoble 2009: 61). During our work we have become aware that sometimes the source of difference does not merely consist in the fact that the community is interested in different kinds of

[2] Glottocode clas1250, (Hammarström et al. 2016) (https://glottolog.org) (Accessed 2018-11-19). Where possible, three-letter ISO codes are also provided.

results (e.g. teaching materials or a dictionary rather than specialized research works), but rather that the community members might not have a clear or agreed upon vision about language products, their internal language policy, language ownership, or what can be considered a legitimate voice of the community. Some would deny that the local language is being lost, or that language shift is something negative, and that revitalization efforts are desirable or even necessary. Getting to know each other's interests, goals, code of ethics, and concepts of respect, can be very complicated when the researcher is an outsider to the community, perhaps coming from a different country or not speaking the language.

These kinds of difficulties and challenges, though impossible to eliminate entirely, have been minimized in our fieldwork by assigning key roles to the speakers of Nahuatl. Indigenous students and collaborating community members have not been *informants*, but equal participants in collaborative research (Sullivan 2011: 148-149; Olko & Sullivan 2014: 380-381). Therefore, fieldwork has been carried out mainly by native speakers, preferably coming from a community where research was carried out, in the case of communities from which no project member originated, by a person from a different Nahua community, and usually with additional local collaborators. Sometimes, local collaborators and activists would work together with an external (European) project member who could communicate in Nahuatl. This kind of approach has been called 'activist documentation', embracing the development of language revitalization programs and educational materials production by native speakers themselves (Flores Farfán & Ramallo 2010: 13-14). Thus, team members and collaborators were trained to transcribe using the software tool ELAN, and also to analyze content, e.g. language contact phenomena, and enter the analyzed and classified data into a special online database. Several of our Indigenous team members developed their own MA projects, based on both ethnohistorical materials in Nahuatl and ethnolinguistic fieldwork in their own and other Nahua communities. They selected the documentation themes and interlocutors, managed conversations or semi-structured interviews, and made recordings, transcribing, analyzing and interpreting them for the purposes of their own research. We strongly encouraged them to reflect upon and begin developing Indigenous research methodologies, based on the practices of production, classification, sharing, transfer, and application of knowledge in their communities.

Our approach to field research helped us to avoid, or at least minimize, the so-called *Observer's Paradox,* where the researchers' presence affects studied phenomena and behaviours (Labov 1966; 1971: 171; 1972: 113). It is usually considered adequate and 'ethically sound' when fieldworkers attempt to minimize the intrusiveness of their presence by using discrete recording devices or inviting native speaking 'insiders' to carry out field research (Dwyer 2006: 40). As already pointed out, our preference has been

for project participants from a specific community to select and invite interlocutors in their home community, manage the conversations, take charge of recordings, and then process them. Much documentation consists of recordings of natural conversations on a variety of topics of interest, sometimes on a specific theme. For example, the story of Azohuatl (a mermaid) was planned and staged by our collaborator from Tlaxcalacingo on the local hill of Axocotzin, thus locating it in the local cultural landscape.[3] At one level, it is a love story between the mermaid and a local man. At another level, it is a tale of how the community has lost its wellbeing, under the threat of growing urbanization and changes in the natural environment that is visible in this sacred place. The story was retold by the youngest fluent speaker of Nahuatl in the community, who had been strongly discriminated against at school for having been raised monolingually in the heritage language; he retold it next to what once had been Azohuatl's rock seat and is now the site of a monolingual Spanish school. Although we attempted to record conversations and interactions with audiovisual equipment in as natural a setting as possible, sometimes, for particularly sensitive or personal topics, the project's participants created only audio recordings to protect identities and images. I also decided to rely almost exclusively on audio recordings (with some exceptions, based on the explicit request of a person recorded) while working with Nahua migrants in the United States (many coming from the same Indigenous communities where our fieldwork was conducted in Mexico) because of their precarious legal status and the traumas they had experienced.

Working with insiders as co-researchers has improved our research in many ways. It has better allowed us to better grasp the different patterns, registers, and contexts of language use in a given community. This has been crucial for our study of language contact, considering that specific terms, ways of code mixing or code switching, and even syntactic constructions, may occur only in certain registers (Hill 2006: 114). We have decided not to resort to typical linguistic elicitation procedures based on use of the dominant language because of a strong probability of biased results, especially in the context of language contact. Rather, we have relied on carefully selected visual stimuli, supplemented with necessary instructions or conversations in Nahuatl, in order to assess proficiency and elicit specific grammatical features. Most of this work, too, has been done by Indigenous researchers and students. When community members are agents of fieldwork, the risk of violating local ethics, rules of conduct, protocols and respect is eliminated or significantly reduced. With regard to the content of

[3] http://nahuatlvideos.al.uw.edu.pl/video/azohuatl (Accessed 2018-11-19)

conversations, an Indigenous researcher's emic knowledge and experience is inestimable in directing the flow of narratives or asking appropriate and adequate questions. The participation of Indigenous collaborators has also been invaluable in the difficult task of documenting the continuum of language proficiency, including interactions with semi-speakers, and respectful ways of dealing with interlocutors' linguistic insecurity.

What is the role that we envision for 'Western' researchers, including myself, in the whole process? While we have not been entirely eliminated from fieldwork, we have consciously embraced a secondary role with respect to Indigenous researchers or, depending on the situation, acted as equal partners. There has been one important expectation for participation in fieldwork: the researcher must speak Nahuatl because all spontaneous conversations or semi-structured interviews are carried out entirely in this language. This is crucial not only for creating adequate documentation, but also for understanding and analyzing it, as well as being able to assess the proficiency and/or kinds of speakers in communities undergoing shift. Some field linguists object to this, explaining that sometimes it is extremely difficult or virtually impossible to learn the local language due to the attitudes or practices of a given community. For example Jane Hill, who worked in the 1970s and 1980s in the same Tlaxcalan region where we have been working since 2013, honestly admitted that because of her relatively good Spanish people would prefer to communicate with her in that language, and added that they tended to speak Spanish to *any* stranger or outsider: 'I think it has been shown that gaining a speaking competence in a language under investigation is a prerequisite to truly sensitive description and analysis. But it was very difficult to do that in the Nahuatl communities. I did try, but without much success' (Hill 2006: 118).

I have not experienced this problem in our fieldwork. Even if some people would address me in Spanish, they switch quickly to Nahuatl if I consistently reply in that language. This would happen, of course, because, by continuing to use Nahuatl, I negotiated the *status quo* of using Spanish. Also the participation of Indigenous collaborators was crucial for maintaining communication in Nahuatl. Only people who apparently were insecure about their language proficiency and/or who had not used the language for a long time, or who were 'passive' speakers, would insist on responding in Spanish, and even so, not all of them. The main related challenge I have faced over the course of the project and continue to face is the need to work with and switch between the different variants of Nahuatl spoken by our collaborators or in communities where research and/or other activities take place. Another essential factor was that I carried out research together with native speakers who were personally empowered enough to continue using Nahuatl even if members of a different community, or speakers of a different variant, sometimes treated them with suspicion or reserve when meeting each other for the first time. What has become quite

clear is that if a foreigner makes the effort to conduct a conversation in the local language, the Indigenous participants in that conversation will make the effort to understand and converse in Nahuatl.

I have also become aware of the positive impact generated in the community when an outsider uses the local language whose value and usefulness and even its very status as a self-standing language, is so widely denied by internal and external language ideologies, especially by the school system and younger generations. I could feel quite often that the interlocutors appreciated my efforts to communicate exclusively in Nahuatl; sometimes they would explicitly express it. Some 'dormant' or 'hidden' speakers from the community revealed themselves and began speaking publicly in their language during our capacity-building events held in Nahuatl at the *ENGHUM* project field school in San Miguel Xaltipan in 2017.[4] I believe that these kinds of interactions can directly contribute to, or at least inspire, language revival. After all, fieldwork is an essentially social act, carrying a moral responsibility (Rice 2006: 123; Austin 2010: 49-50). It also contributes to the creation of 'communities of practice' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 89-99), which are of special value in places undergoing vast and rapid shift to Spanish, as is the case of Tlaxcalan communities. Our approach toward fieldwork, along with other capacity-building activities and ways of mobilizing the results of research, corresponds closely to the 'Empowerment Model in Linguistic Fieldwork' (Rice 2006: 129). An essential premise of this approach, as defined by Rice, is that 'empowerment demands respect for people and for intellectual traditions outside of the traditional academic paradigm. […] field linguists have ethical responsibilities not only to individuals and communities, but also to knowledge systems' (Rice 2006: 149). And an Indigenous perspective regarding the use and protection of the community's knowledge may be very different from Western ethical or legal perspectives (Austin 2010: 45-46). As an attempt to respond to at least some of these challenges, our approach extends from the fieldwork itself to creating spaces for the practice and development of Indigenous methodologies within collaborative research projects, which are carried in an Indigenous language (see below).

Fieldwork based on equity and reciprocity should result in benefit sharing. I envision it as a complex, multi-faceted, and unfolding process. But before we become aware of all of its possible implications, we can start with concrete, tangible products. In addition to conducting and writing research in Nahuatl and from within the Indigenous culture, we wanted the results to be returned for use in the communities in the form of popular

[4] https://youtu.be/h1UEX-wvmsE (Accessed 2018-11-19)

monolingual publications, printed in Poland and distributed freely in Mexico. Two of these, *Totatahhuan ininixtlamatiliz*[5] and *Tlahtolcozcatl*[6] were directly based on fieldwork recordings of local stories in the Chicontepec municipality of Veracruz and in San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala respectively, which were subsequently transcribed and edited by native-speaker researchers from these communities. Other publications, oriented toward practical use by community members, include versions of pictorial dictionaries, *Tlahtolixcopincayotl*[7] reflecting local terminology, vocabulary and classificatory systems. The latter publications also contain an illustrated section dealing with pre-Hispanic and colonial Nahua history, written in modern Nahuatl, which is followed by a sub-chapter on the modern community itself, in order to highlight continuity and links with the past. Another product we are currently preparing as part of benefit sharing with a large number of Nahua communities is a multimedia publication *Totlahtol Toihiyo* (Our Word, Our Breath[8]), gathering voices of knowledge-holders, activists, writers and other community members, as well as highlighting different aspects of traditional activities and local heritage. The collection is multi-variant, currently representing communities from Puebla, San Luis Potosi, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, and Estado de Mexico. Multimedia's vast potential not only provides new channels of communication and forms of interaction between researchers and local audiences, but also allows community members to generate new ways of representing themselves and their languages. It is also considered a very efficient means of mobilizing ethnolinguistic documentation and broadening its utility for a community, especially in response to pedagogical needs (Flores Farfán 2002: 225-236; Nathan 2006: 364-367; O'Meara & González Guadarrama 2016: 74-75). Additional aims of our multimedia publication include further increasing interregional awareness of the mutual comprehensibility of variants, and creating a forum for cross-community exchange and collaboration, especially with respect to shared challenges and obstacles to language maintenance and revitalization.

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[5] http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/5/122/tototatahhuan-ininizxtlamatiliz (Accessed 2018-11-19)

[6] http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/5/128/tlahtolcozcatl (Accessed 2018-11-19)

[7] http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl?view=154&categoryID=8 (Accessed 2018-11-19) http://encounters.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/erc---publications--tlahtolixcopincayotlxal (Accessed 2018-11-19)

[8] http://nahuatlvideos.al.uw.edu.pl (Accessed 2018-11-19)

3. Indigenous research and empowerment of speakers

As we were working on cross-cultural transfers, it would have been difficult to ignore the fundamental difference between research carried out in the language of the community and that formulated in English and Spanish. Gradually, we became aware that the language of critical reflection, knowledge processing, and production is of key importance for the results. The questions we had to face were the following: What does it really entail to promote research driven and carried out by Indigenous students? Can it become an autonomous enterprise, and if so, what are the purposes, forms and limits of cross-cultural exchange and collaboration? What are the essential differences in our approaches and methods? As we quickly became aware, an integral view of a given theme or problem is an inherent part of Indigenous methodology, whereas the compartmentalization of knowledge is a major handicap of the Western academic traditions in which we were raised, despite declared inter-disciplinarity or multi-disciplinarity. As a researcher, I understand the need to cross-disciplinary boundaries and I have attempted to do so in my work. However, on the very practical level of specific research themes and tasks, I have learned much from our Indigenous collaborators and partners about how to view things more holistically or, translated into academic terms, how disciplinary lines, rigid and often artificial, can be erased.

Our work drew upon the ideas and initial experience of a non-profit organization, our research partner in Mexico, the *Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas* (IDIEZ). IDIEZ was created by John Sullivan in 2002 as an Indigenous research and teaching institution. It has worked over the years with Indigenous students from the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas who come from Nahua communities in the Huasteca region, mostly from Chicontepec Veracruz (Sullivan 2011). The founding idea of IDIEZ was to empower Indigenous students by training them in Nahuatl to teach and conduct research in their language and culture. Over the years, the IDIEZ team has prepared curricula and materials that it uses to teach classes in modern and colonial Nahuatl in summer and winter intensive courses, as well as academic year courses in Mexico and at a large number of universities in the United States. The team's major academic product, the result of more than ten years of collaborative research, has been the first fully monolingual, contextual dictionary of Nahuatl (ca. 12,000 entries), based on the modern Huastecan variety of the Chicontepec region (Sullivan et al. 2016). This huge enterprise entailed the creation of a requisite corpus of grammatical terminology, as well as definitions for each headword, forged from within the language and not as calques of Spanish terms or typical Western definitions of lexical entries. By working on the dictionary, the Indigenous students began to reflect in and on their language, to reassert their ownership of it, and reevaluate the cognitive possibilities it

provides. The result is not only a rich lexicographical reference for all readers of Nahuatl; it will also be crucial for raising the prestige of the modern Chicontepec variety in the eyes of its speakers. Because of the way in which it was created, it provides a true reservoir of collective knowledge and linguistic-cultural heritage for Indigenous communities which have just started to experience language shift over the last three decades (Olko & Sullivan 2016). The dictionary work was completed and published within another collaborative project, *Endangered languages. Comprehensive models for research and revitalization* (2013-2016[9]), focusing on the revitalization of Nahuatl and two minority languages in Poland: Lemko and Wymysorys[10]. It has enabled us to expand our ethnolinguistic documentation and sociolinguistic fieldwork, publish language resources on a multilingual website dealing with the three endangered languages, and launch two editorial series in Nahuatl and Wymysorys – *Totlahtol* and *Ynser Sproh* (both meaning 'Our speech') – supporting language use, teaching, and literacy.[11]

The books published in Nahuatl are products of the collective work carried out within all our team projects between 2013 and 2018, and are being distributed free of charge in Indigenous communities. Each Nahuatl-speaking author worked closely with us as editors of a specific publication in order to apply a standardized orthography to their variant. We inaugurated the Totlahtol Series with Refugio Nava Nava's book of local customs and traditional activities in San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, entitled *Malintzin itlahtol* (2013).[12] Although it was published in the subseries *Toconehuan* (Our children), we recognize that such collections of stories and accounts of cultural practices are not age-specific, but are destined for groups of readers or listeners spanning several generations within the extended family groups typical for the community. The next publication was a volume of poetry, *Chalchihuicozcatl*, by the Nahua poet Gustavo Zapoteco Sideño (2014).[13] It was followed by two literary adaptations of local myths and stories:

[9] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl, accessed 2018-11-19.

[10] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/RevitalizationModels/3/166/integral-strategies-for-language-revitalizati, accessed 2018-11-19.

[11] www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4X02NJJeN4, accessed 2018-11-19.

[12] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/30/29/malintzin-itlahtol; www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-eq4ab-p3E, accessed 2018-11-19.

[13] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/29/75/chalchihuicozcatl, accessed 2018-11-19.

Tototatahhuan ininixtlamatiliz (2015)[14] by Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz from the region of Chicontepec; and *Tlahtolcozcatl. In tlapohual tlen mocaqui nican Tlaxcallan* (2015)[15] compiled by Refugio Nava Nava and Beatriz Cuahutle from San Miguel Xaltipan in Tlaxcala. We also published two books that are the fruits of collaboration between ethnohistorians and modern Nahua writers. *Nahui Tonatiuh* (Four Suns),[16] a narrative derived from an ancient Aztec myth of four creations, recorded anonymously in several sixteenth-century sources. These accounts provided the basis for the narrative developed in Spanish by Isabel Bueno Bravo, which in turn was rendered in Tlaxcalan and Chicontepec Nahuatl by Refugio Nava Nava and Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz respectively. This myth was still vivid in the early colonial period, but its memory has not survived in modern Nahua communities. We believe that composing this fundamental creation story in modern Nahuatl has returned an aspect of native speakers' cultural heritage to them.

Authors, sometimes with our assistance as series editors and distributors, have been organizing book readings with Nahuatl speakers in their homes and with children and teenagers in local schools. Most of the participants of such events had never before seen anything written in their language; nonetheless, the readings usually provoke vivid comments, jokes, laughter, and discussions in Nahuatl. Traditional storytelling is an intergenerational practice in Indigenous communities; for this reason we believe that collective book readings in Nahuatl have the potential to become a long-term family and community-based tradition that may contribute to the extension of spaces for language use. In 2015 we experimented with a 'paper theater' (*amatlamahuizolli*) performance based on the Japanese *kamishibai* tradition, an initiative of Alejandra Rodríguez Bravo who illustrated some of the *Totlahtol* publications.[17] Alejandra created the first *amatlamahuizolli* in connection with the already-mentioned story of the Four Suns, and we engaged native speakers in reading the story, displayed with the images in front of Indigenous audiences.

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[14] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/5/122/tototatahhuan-ininizxtlamatiliz, accessed 2018-11-19.

[15] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/5/128/tlahtolcozcatl), accessed 2018-11-19.

[16] www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/5/126/nahui-tonatiuh-la-huasteca, and www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/5/125/nahui-tonatiuh-tlaxcala, both accessed 2018-11-19.

[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SuXKezlpf0&t=18s, accessed 2018-11-19.

Since oral performance is crucial for Indigenous culture, we have also promoted 'revitalization theatre' in Nahuatl, dealing with cultural continuity and survival.[18] The first play, *Cinteotl ihuan Chicomexochitl imamacuetlaxxo* ('The paper skin of Cinteotl and Chicomexochitl'), combined older and modern Nahuatl language and culture. It was directed by Antonio Guerra and written by collaborating Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of our team. The performance revives the fundamental myth of the birth and life of the Nahua maize god, threading together pre-conquest and contemporaneous accounts and rituals into one mythical narrative. It was first staged at the University of Warsaw in November 2014 and videotaped. The video, later shown to Indigenous audiences in Mexico, can now be viewed on our YouTube channel.[19] Theatrical performances in Nahuatl are an important activity of the revitalization group in San Miguel Xaltipan (Tlaxcala, Mexico), under the direction of our close collaborator, Beatriz Cuahutle Bautista, who was also one of the actors in the *Cinteotl ihuan Chicomexochitl* play. She and her mother Constantina Bautista Nava teach the language to children from the neighborhood and engage them in performing Nahuatl songs and plays. The last play was prepared and staged in August 2017 within the collaborative field school organized as part of the activities of our ENGHUM project.[20]

4. Fostering interdialectal communication and historical identity

The isolation of communities and individual speakers, and the widespread belief that the numerous variants of Nahuatl are mutually unintelligible, are among serious obstacles to revitalization and raising prestige of this language. Therefore, one of the fundamental aims of our collaborative activities has been to facilitate contact and joint initiatives between speakers from different communities, often very distant from each other. This began in December 2011, when IDIEZ, within a project funded by the United States National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by Stephanie Wood (University of Oregon Eugene), carried out an experiment of bringing together twenty

[18] We have not restricted this approach to our collaboration with Mexican communities: we also support the Wymysorys community in carrying out their theatrical performances (Wicherkiewicz, Król & Olko 2018).

[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dhyUERkfn0 (Accessed 2018-11-19)

[20] The members of our team who work with Wymysorys, and are already experienced revitalizers, participated actively in the Tlaxcala field school. By that time, they had already developed and performed several amateur plays in Wymysorys, two of which were staged in the Polish Theatre in Warsaw in 2016 and 2017.

native speakers representing approximately ten variants of Nahuatl for a five-day workshop in Zacatecas. After the success of this first meeting, John Sullivan and I organized the second *Interdialectal Encounter of Nahuatl*, supported by the Mexican National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) in January 2014 in Cholula. This time we hosted over 60 native speakers, and 13 non-native speakers. The event was broadcast by XECARH, an Indigenous radio station affiliated with the CDI. One of major innovations of these encounters was encouraging native speakers to present and discuss topics entirely in Nahuatl, without the mediation of Spanish, which is highly unusual in Mexican public contexts. Many participants found this experience empowering and motivating, and reported continuing this practice in their communities or in professional events, such as meetings of bilingual elementary school teachers of Nahuatl. Our archival workshops in 2015 and 2016 (discussed below) were converted into interdialectal meetings, thanks to the participation of speakers of different variants. The subsequent encounter took place in August 2017 in the Nahua community of San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala as part the *Engaged Humanities* project, gathering 60 native speakers of Nahuatl and some new speakers of the language. Many of them stayed during the entire language revitalization field school that we organized in collaboration with several local communities. All these meetings have revealed both to us and to the Indigenous participants that interdialectal communication is indeed possible. Varietal differences pose no major obstacles to vivid and fluid monolingual discussions covering a wide range of themes from daily, professional, and social contexts. Many participants have continued the exchange in Nahuatl on a regular basis by forming and participating in social media groups for this purpose. Many have taken part in the subsequent encounters that we have sponsored. Most importantly, some have decided to initiate language projects and revitalization activities in their home communities.

Another critical obstacle to a successful language revival in Nahua communities is the weak sense of historical identity and lack of pride in cultural heritage among native speakers. As an ethnohistorian working on the long tradition of Nahua colonial writing and attempting to understand Indigenous history though its own sources, I find this situation particularly challenging. Any historian who believes in the broader social impact and commitment of their research work would probably find it very difficult to accept the ways in which history is present, or rather absent, in the awareness of the modern descendants of the Aztecs. In Mexico, knowledge about Indigenous cultural and sociopolitical continuity in the colonial period is restricted to a narrow spectrum of scholars, and it is not part of the broader educational system. Lamentably, Mexican museums compound this problem by offering the groundless vision of a striking and unbridgeable gap between the glorious pre-conquest past of Mesoamerican cultures and the impoverished cultural traditions of modern communities. These institutions,

including the National Museum of Anthropology, are visited by countless Indigenous children each year. As a result, very few Nahuas identify themselves as descendants of the Aztecs or feel pride because of their ancestry. Restoring modern Nahuas' access to their historical memory and legacy seems of the utmost importance if they are to succeed in (re)constructing their historical identity and challenging the low esteem associated with their language and their roots. Given the enormous dimension of this problem, we proposed an initial, practical activity aimed at re-evaluating and strengthening Nahua historical identity. We feel a moral and professional imperative to share with modern Nahuas the fact that their ancestors had a tradition of alphabetic writing that continues to this day, spanning almost five centuries. It was used prolifically to defend their autonomy and integrity, to conduct their legal and economic affairs, to perpetuate their own oral traditions, and at the same time enter into dialogue with European culture.

Therefore, our team has began to organize workshops in which native speakers can read the colonial Nahuatl documents written by their ancestors and discuss them, with each participant speaking in their modern variant of the language. These activities were initiated in 2014 during our Winter Nahuatl Institute in Cholula, and were continued at the first and second *Nahuatl Document Analysis Workshop (XVI-XVIII Centuries) for Native Speakers* held in the Mexican National Archive (AGN) between 2015 and 2018, with the close collaboration and support of the archive authorities.[21] Quite aptly, archival power has been compared to prison: 'archives often resemble prisons or fortresses. […] The records are imprisoned (for their own security, of course), but under vigilant surveillance' (Jimerson 2008: 6-9). In fact, the Palacio de Lecumberri, which today houses the Mexican National Archive was a penitentiary from 1900 to 1976, before taking on its current function in 1980. Indigenous documents are literally stored in former prison cells and access to them is monopolized by professional researchers. The activity that we carried out in 2015 was probably the first time in the history of the AGN that its monumental halls were filled with the language of the modern descendants of the authors of the colonial Nahuatl manuscripts that it holds. Thirty speakers of Nahuatl from diverse communities in Mexico City and the states of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Veracruz took part in the workshop activities, which were conducted entirely in Nahuatl. They not only worked collaboratively on the transcription, translation, and interpretation of the texts, but also, in what turned out to be a deeply emotional experience, personally examined the original documents.

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJZwZTZxuA0&t=15s, accessed 2018-11-19.

When planning these reading activities, we intentionally attempted to select texts from the regions or places that specific groups of native-speaking participants originated from. As has been convincingly argued, Indigenous place-based education and transmission of knowledge is a decolonizing practice in multiple ways, while 'language immersion can be one of the tools that gives people that feeling of *remembering*' (Rorick 2018: 232, 235). Connecting to the past through places allows Indigenous people to personally experience the degree of continuity between older and modern heritage tongues and culture. We have also discovered that using modern lexical resources and concepts allows us to better understand certain historical terms and concepts, which we, as scholars, had been unable to explain. Conversely, while reading a colonial petition from Chicontepec, Veracruz, the participants could identify many terms and structures typical for the variant of Nahuatl spoken in this area today, but absent from colonial Central Nahuatl. These texts also contain many words and structures that have fallen out of use, but can be employed as rich resources if reincorporated into the modern language. In fact, during the encounters, Nahuas from different regions often compare their vocabulary and joyfully experiment with terms unknown in their own variant. This is yet another source of the kind of linguistic exchange and innovation that was drastically reduced as Nahua communities gradually became isolated islands of speakers across Mexico, and began communicating with members of other Nahua communities exclusively in Spanish. One of the participants, a young man from a village in the mountains of Puebla who works as a professional engineer in Mexico City, expressed the following:

> *Pero cuando ye otipeuhqueh ticcaquih inintlahtol occequin toicnihuan tlacah huitzeh de miaccan, amo zan de nican ma ce quihtoh Mexco, huitzeh de Veracruz, de Oaxaca, Tlaxcalan. Huan teipan timoahcicamatqueh, otipeuhqueh timoahcicamatih, huan peuhqueh tiquittah amameh*
>
> But when we began to listen to the speech of our other brothers, people who come from many places, not just from here, what one calls Mexico [city], they come from Veracruz, Oaxaca, Tlaxcala, then we understand each other, we began to understand each other and we began to examine the documents.

Yet another aspect of language use that these sessions stimulated was reevaluation of the purist attitudes shared by many speakers of Nahuatl today. Even among uneducated users of the language there is a common belief that Spanish has had a negative impact on Nahuatl, converting it into a deteriorated, impoverished version of an original good Nahuatl, which has now either vanished or is only preserved by the oldest speakers (Hill & Hill 1986: 97-9; Flores Farfán 2003; Bergier & Olko 2016: 307-8). Some purists

participating in the workshops argued that the colonial Nahuatl seen in the documents is even more 'corrupt' than the modern variants, and that the way that they (the purists) use the language – eliminating all possible loanwords – is more 'pure'. Other participants recognize that Spanish influence goes back many centuries and that some loanwords have become part of their language. As this is also one of the main aspects of our project focusing on five centuries of language change – but also continuity – we hope such discussions can positively influence language ideology for extreme purists in Nahua communities. The latter often hinder, rather than stimulate, the use of Nahuatl: purists sometimes claim 'language ownership' and criticize local ways of speaking (even of elderly community members) that include many Spanish loanwords, which is discouraging them from using the language, especially in the case of not very secure speakers.

In addition, historical contexts contained in colonial texts often reveal Indigenous forms of agency; for example, defending local autonomy, confirming rights to land, questioning excessive tribute demands, petitioning for removal of Spanish officials, etc. Such situations can become an important source of empowerment and agency for modern Indigenous activists, students, and community members. These texts allow Indigenous readers to experience a degree of continuity with the past by giving them the opportunity to see their ancestors' actions as examples for their own present-day individual and collective agency. In other words, it makes it possible for them to 'empower themselves to come to grips with the conditions of their living' (Kalela 2012: 164). This kind of collaborative and participatory history reading reveals the possible impact of our work as historians with regard to the modern descendants of the people we study, for whom the message can be especially empowering. As Rosenzweig aptly expresses it, 'the most powerful meanings of the past come out of the dialogue between the past and the present, out of the ways the past can be used to answer pressing current-day questions about relationships, identity, immortality, and agency' (Rosenzweig 1998: 178).

Thus, participatory history workshops with contemporary members of Indigenous or minority communities carry the potential of actively involving them in the social process of history reading and history making. But this will only occur if they participate as protagonists and not as passive recipients of knowledge. Access to the past can inspire Indigenous people to reflect on their identity and their values, and can significantly enrich academic historians' understandings of the past and its bearing upon the present. This is especially important considering that many Indigenous communities today demonstrate symptoms of continued oppression (e.g. Rorick 2018: 233) and often lack the tools needed to deal with them. As has been shown convincingly in a comprehensive study of modern American society, history plays a variety of roles in the lives of individuals and groups who hold a close affinity with the past; however, this relationship is particularly strong in the case of Black Americans, and especially Native Americans, because the past enables them

to maintain a collective identity in the present, helping them to live in an oppressive society and struggle for cultural survival (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998: 147-76; Rosenzweig 1998: 187). Similar initiatives have been undertaken in collaboration with Indigenous Mixtec/Ñuu Dzahui people in Mexico. In this case, reconnection with the past is established through Mixtec pre-Hispanic and early colonial pictorial manuscripts, and their interpretation in modern Mixtec (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez 2011). Workshops in reading colonial Zapotec texts in modern communities and on modern literacy in Zapotec were also carried out by Lillehaugen (2016).

Empowering reconnections to the past can also be facilitated with the use of other historical 'sources,' such as landscape sites and places of memory. The local Indigenous women who led the *Waanyi Women's History Project* in Australia identified and documented artefact scatters, burials, middens, art sites, cave deposits, and places of sacred significance, along with their own oral histories. In this case, 'heritage management' ran contrary to 'Western' practices: the experiences generated by visits to the specific sites included such intangible aspects of heritage as emotional responses to specific places, as well as retelling histories and sharing knowledge linked to them. The reaffirmation of links with the past became for the Waanyi women 'a useful event to assert their authority as stakeholders' (Laurajane Smith, Morgan & van der Meer 2003: 72-6). It is extremely important that such activities and resources be experienced in the heritage language and from within the unique cultural perspective of a community. The use of the Indigenous language opens a different viewpoint, a distinct lens for understanding and explaining reality. As noticed by a Hawaiian heritage immersion program professor, a Hawaiian history text that had been translated from English needed to be profoundly modified to speak from a Hawaiian perspective and not used as a 'translation' of an English-language curriculum (Hawkins 1999).

Links with the past are of vital importance in Indigenous communities: ancestors are conceived of as the source of knowledge and strength for the living. Severing links with a past more distant and broader than a family's or a community's recent memory has profound consequences for identity, self-esteem, and self-awareness. The Nahua people possessed mechanisms, which were still operating throughout the colonial period, for assuring the constant flow of collective experience, memory, and relived and re-constructed visions of the past. They nourished, explained, and informed contemporary realities in accordance with the inherent notion of 'the past-in-the present'; however, these are no longer in place. They have been dissected and dissolved in the era of the Mexican state when the tradition of community-based Nahua writing eventually waned, and especially under the racist policies of the twentieth century. Therefore, opening a dialogue with the ancestors and the testimonies they left can provide an empowering stimulus to reclaim historical identity, question the *status quo*, and inspire social change in the present. In other words, the Indigenous past can become a powerful 'vehicle for social justice',

as proposed by Rosenzweig (1998: 188). The impact of historical archives and sources can extend to 'social memory, social cohesion and public opinions' and embrace 'larger social groupings and give them the tools needed to work towards social justice' (Duff et al. 2013: 23). Thus, access to historical heritage has the power to transform Indigenous and public knowledge, as well as actual *behavior*, especially that of discriminated, marginalized, or disadvantaged individuals and groups. A participatory historical culture also entails a dynamic and reciprocal cooperation between historians (including both majority and Indigenous researchers) and non-academics, requiring a profound attitudinal change among scholars (Kalela 2012: 162-163). Such self-reflective, informed collaboration should in fact embrace all disciplinary fields involved in projects with Indigenous and/or minority communities.

5. Discussion: from fieldwork to Indigenous research and heritage management

There has been a strong surge of interest in decolonizing methodologies and developing Indigenous ways of generating knowledge over the last decade or two (e.g. Chilisa 2012; Kovach 2009; Tuhiwai Smith 2012; Wilson 2008). However, a huge gap still exists between the theorization of Indigenous research methodology and its practice. Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars often use dominant languages, such as English and Spanish, to advocate for the decolonization of research. However, Indigenous languages are crucial for conducting decolonizing research. Chuutsqa Layla Rorick, a member of the Hesquiaht Tribe on Vancouver Island (British Columbia, Canada) has expressed it in the following way (Rorick 2018: 231):

> An immersive, extended educational effort is required in order to process understandings in the context of their place(s) of origin. Indigenous knowledge is not something that can be understood while maintaining an outside perspective that can only imagine from a look at the surface of Indigenous cultural beliefs.

Therefore, recognizing that Indigenous knowledge should be practised and developed in close connection to the emic perspectives expressed in a heritage tongue, we invite Indigenous researchers and participants to become agents in the research process, including fieldwork carried out in Indigenous communities (Olko & Sullivan 2016). We encourage them to design, perform, and reflect on their work in their own languages. And we have made efforts to practise this on our own, despite our background as 'mainstream' researchers.

Practicing and promoting research in Indigenous tongues has resulted in public and conference presentations of its outcomes, carried out entirely in those languages.[22] This occurred in the Nahuatl session during the 2016 Ethnohistory conference in Nashville, a large Ethnohistory panel in 2018 with three Indigenous languages present, the 2016 ENGHUM field school in the minority community of Wilamowice (Poland) where Juan Carlos Reyes delivered his research paper entirely in Ayuuk, and in the 2017 ENGHUM field school in the community of San Miguel Xaltipan, Tlaxcala, Mexico.[23] In the latter and other events, Western academics engaged in Nahua studies, including John Sullivan, Adam Coon, Alison Kaplan and myself, delivered conference and workshop talks in Nahuatl to an Indigenous and international audience.

The impact of this way of working includes, on the one hand, the empowerment of Indigenous researchers and community members, and on the other hand, an increased value of ethnolinguistic documentation and generated knowledge created within, and more genuinely reflecting, local patterns of language use and understanding. Understood in this way, 'empowerment' has the potential to abolish inequalities in researcher-participant relations, for it creates spaces where Indigenous people assume greater control over their role in research endeavors and relationships with external researchers. The activities and practices that we have developed embrace significant *moments of empowerment* and *empowering methodologies* (cf. Ross 2017). This is clearly manifest in our collaborative work with Nahuatl speakers that entails not only participatory workshops, but also combining older/historical and modern data in studies of language and culture. The potential of this approach has also been noticed by Indigenous researchers in other parts of the world who emphasize that a decolonizing approach should strengthen and recover precolonial knowledge, 'connecting the past with the present and the future' and root modern practices and teachings in 'ancestral continuity' (Rorick 2018: 233). And while it is important for researchers to share benefits and bring the results of fieldwork back to the communities in the form of books and other materials, these cannot simply be translations of Western theory, methodology, and content. As argued in recent studies, Indigenous knowledge is relational, based on many forms of mutually complementary and interlocking relationships with the heritage language, other people,

[22] Presentations were accompanied by a translation, projected via Powerpoint, in the mainstream language for those in the audience who were not conversant in the specific native tongue.

[23] https://youtu.be/h1UEX-wvmsE (Accessed 2018-11-19)

concepts, practices, and the natural world. These relationships have to be maintained and renewed (e.g. Rorick 2018: 230; Wilson 2008: 73-4). This knowledge becomes disintegrated and profoundly transformed when it is equated with 'not science', disembodied from the people who are its agents (Nakata 2007: 9) and forced into categories of classification, databases, or methodologies developed to reflect 'the hierarchies, linearity, abstraction and objectification of Western knowledge'.

In accordance with these considerations, our aim has been to contribute directly to the development of methods and results of Indigenous research, expressed through academic writing in the local languages. Among the first outcomes of this strategy are two MA theses written, presented, and defended entirely in Nahuatl by Abelardo de la Cruz de la Cruz and Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz.[24] A similar initiative has been undertaken at the College of Hawaiian Language of the University of Hawaii where the first PhD dissertation in Hawaiian was presented in 2008. In the case of the two Nahuatl MA theses, essential data for the studies was gathered during fieldwork in the authors' communities of origin. The internal structure and organization of the data followed local ways of classifying and explaining knowledge, with special regard for a holistic, not-compartmentalized view of the phenomena studied. At this point, the depth and breadth of our collaborative work and its dialogue of perspectives is coming sharply into focus. Those of us raised in the Western scholarly tradition, a strongly compartmentalized academic world of artificially created boundaries, vehemently defended against unauthorized trespassers from other disciplines, have been given the unique opportunity to understand more about the Nahua knowledge system, and, thereby, to more productively challenge and cross disciplinary boundaries. It has been clearly shown that Indigenous knowledge, its cultivation, and the development of its methods can benefit non-Indigenous people, and that Indigenous research should be considered an equally valid notion of science to guide modern research practices (e.g. Kelman, Mercer & Gaillard 2012; Massey & Kirk 2015; Mercer et al. 2010; Rorick 2018; Walter & Andersen 2013; Wilson 2008). While the validity of such knowledge has been recognized to a limited

[24] The titles are: *Tlayancuiliztli huan tlacencuiliztli ica macehualli itlaneltoquiliz iixtenno yancuic tlaneltoquilli* (Continuity and transformation in Nahua attitudes toward their religion with respect to Christianity) and *Mocencuiltihualtoc mopatla tequitiloni, campeca huan tlaneltoquilli tlen quimanextia toquiztli pan macehualtlallamiccayotl* (Continuity and change in the techniques, customs, and concepts related to the cultivation of corn in the Nahua world; see: Cruz 2017 (http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/4/167/cenyahtoc-cintli-tonacayo) (Accessed 2018-11-19). The theses were developed at the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas under the supervision of John Sullivan. Their presentation and defence was carried out entirely in Nahuatl, in March 2016.

degree in life sciences and environmental studies, I believe it is still strongly under-recognized and under-explored in the humanities and social sciences, despite some, usually superficial, ideological posturing and declarations. In terms of documenting languages and creating opportunities for revitalization, this approach empowers native speakers, preparing them to perform different roles inside and outside their communities, and situates them as agents of research, free to pursue Indigenous ways of generating knowledge. It can hopefully plant seeds in the communities where the value and utility of an Indigenous language has been put into question or openly denied. In the context of Mexico, considering that extra-community involvements and partnerships easily acquire political overtones or suspicions, I believe that working with native speakers as research protagonists has demonstrated respect for community autonomy, and has prepared fertile ground for language reclamation and revitalization.

An essential aspect of this approach includes the possible roles and kinds of involvement of outside scholars. Research collaboration with Indigenous communities is becoming an expanding subject of discussion and reflection. In Australia, for example, local community groups have strongly criticized archaeologists for usurping the position of guardians over the Aboriginal past, which they attempt to legitimize and maintain by resorting to academic claims of unchallenged expertise and scientific objectivity. The response of professional archeologists participating in the already-mentioned *Waanyi Women's History Project* was to take on the role of 'facilitators' who relinquished their positions as decision-making experts (Laurajane Smith, Morgan & van der Meer 2003: 78-79). A similar approach has been developed by the *Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centers* where community-external researchers become 'informed and principled allies'. This approach recognizes the potential of combining etic and emic perspectives if it is based on the key principles of equitable partnership fundamental for CBPR and community-driven research. According to (OFIFC 2016: 7):

> Many research endeavors may benefit from creative fusions, inventive 'assemblages of thought', and inspired blends of ideas. These, however, must be rooted in genuine respect and careful balance of authority where invited allies never assume positions of 'benefactors' or 'patrons' of a shared research project.

While the fundamental principles of fair partnership and empowering forms of collaboration with local communities should be respected in different research scenarios and kinds of collaborative projects, I believe that the exact role of an external researcher cannot be envisioned *a priori*. Rather, it should be carefully developed for each specific project or activity by and with a specific community of stakeholders.

Another essential dimension of the proposed decolonizing approach to Indigenous research and its focus on community history and linguistic-cultural heritage embraces possible understandings and definitions of historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage and related resources. Since most Indigenous and minority communities face problems of language endangerment, shift, and loss, the resources already available in their heritage tongues for exploring local history and traditions in relationship to present-day agency, empowerment, and linguistic and cultural survival are of the outmost importance. One of the categories in this context that is useful, although clearly not in itself sufficient, is the 'language archive', which embraces any possible holdings relevant for language documentation materials kept at archives, museums, or libraries (Linn 2014: 53). Such materials can be exploited for language learning or study, for promoting participatory historical culture, and for situating communities as agents in exploring their history. In fact, there are a number of projects and initiatives in which Indigenous people themselves extend, explore, and identify elements of 'language archives'. The *Breath of Life Language Workshop*, which goes back to the early 1990s, helps Native Americans to learn how to localize and study archival materials and explore ways of using them for language learning and teaching (Hinton 2011). In Australia, the project *Rediscovering Indigenous Languages* aims to connect Indigenous people to resources related to their languages and heritages in libraries and archives. It highlights possible roles such institutions can play, not only in language and cultural revitalization, but also in equitable collaborations with Indigenous communities for management of such collections (Thorpe & Galassi 2014: 81-83).

Questions emerge, however, concerning the ownership of the history of neglected, discriminated, or marginalized groups. One response was *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, developed in 2006 by a group of librarians, archivists, museum curators, historians, and anthropologists. It explicitly recognized the primary rights of Native American communities to all culturally sensitive materials related to them (Jimerson 2008: 15). Nevertheless, in many other cases, such as Indigenous communities in Mexico, such protocols and awareness of ownership of historical legacy remain absent or very limited. As I have pointed out, this is the case for the Nahuas, despite the fact that their ancestors have created the biggest preserved corpus of colonial texts written in an Indigenous American language. In some instances, however, such as Australia, access to colonial history sources has been instrumental for Indigenous people to address many historical and modern contexts of colonial and postcolonial oppression. It has also helped to reconnect them with the knowledge contained in archival records that aids in the retrieval and restoration of specific elements of their languages and cultures. There has also been digital return or digital repatriation of collections to the Indigenous communities to which they historically belong (Thorpe & Galassi 2014: 92), providing an extremely useful model for other communities

elsewhere. Information technology can also enable Indigenous communities to include their own local cultural protocols and intellectual property rights into the systems of storage and management of digital cultural material. Such initiatives have facilitated appropriate inter-community and extra-community sharing of resources, and have situated community members in the position of active agents in the management and development of their language and cultural documentation (Thorpe & Galassi 2014: 93-94). A similar approach is the *Community-Based Language Archive* model, where a relevant community is actively engaged in conducting all levels of documentation: creating descriptions, engaging in their maintenance, and disseminating their content (Linn 2014: 61). Historic literacies and historical sources have also been instrumental in reviving 'sleeping' languages, such as Wôpanâak, an Algonquian language in the northeastern United States. Although its last person who acquired it as a child died in 1908, there are important resources, including letters and diaries composed by speakers, and a seventeenth-century Bible. Similar material has been used in the revitalization of Miami, another Algonquian language, whose important written historical documentation was only rediscovered in 1999 (McCarthy 2012).

It should be emphasized, however, that there can be multiple ways of returning heritage documentation to the speakers and community. While my proposal has focused on access to historical texts and their collaborative reading, as well as on fieldwork and related research performed by Indigenous researchers themselves in their mother tongue, we should be much more open to what actually constitutes local heritage, its preservation, and its management. It goes far beyond the notions of material culture or places of importance to the community, and may extend to oral histories that reveal their relevance when reenacted in specific points of landscape, activities, experiences, and culturally-meaningful acts (Laurajane Smith, Morgan & van der Meer 2003: 75). The identification of relevant historical sources, collaborative explorations, restoration of ownership, and harnessing of historical heritage for the benefit of local communities, can result in favorable tangible outcomes, such as claims to land and rights that have been achieved in successful court cases in different parts of the world (e.g. Christen 2011; Jimerson 2008; Moore & Vilacy Galucio 2016: 35). As Duff et al. (2013: 342) argue, it also extends to 'intangible, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and cultural outcomes'.

Although such experiences may remind Indigenous people about oppressive systems that have deeply influenced their past and present, they can also provide the comfort that derives from finding historical answers and reconnecting with the past. Archivists and scholars should therefore be instrumental in revealing and addressing not only historical injustice, but also continuing marginalization (Christen 2011: 208-209). I argue that a group's history can become a source of its empowerment and inspiration, reinforcing

its present agency, contributing to its sense of historical, cultural and linguistic identity, and deepening its feeling of belonging, which is rooted in the past.

I believe this approach will become much more feasible and successful if we give recognition and validity to contemporary Indigenous perspectives that are manifest in people's life worlds, languages, and cultures, and if we contribute to fostering spaces for their own research and reflection. These proposed spaces, which include 'participatory historical culture' (Thelen 1998; Kalela 2012) and participatory history-reading and history-making, recognize the non-exclusive legitimacy of many 'pasts' and their relevance for the present and for addressing its needs and challenges. In much the same way that we, as Western researchers, may struggle to uncover, unveil, and understand the pasts and cultures of Indigenous people 'on their own terms', we should also recognize the importance of their uses of the past, their heritage and their languages 'on their own terms'. This, subsequently, should hopefully lead to 'participatory research practices' that are oriented toward the empowerment of Indigenous communities, and stimulate their individual and collective capacity to act with regard to their linguistic and cultural heritage in accordance with local beliefs, practices, and goals.

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