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Abstract. The place-names that residents of the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan (today Mexico City) gave to their city were both descriptive of topography and commemorative of history. Largely effaced from the Spanish historical register, Mexico City’s Nahuatl place-names were rescued from historical oblivion by José Antonio Alzate in the eighteenth century and again by Alfonso Caso in the twentieth. However, effacement is not equal to extinction, and this article argues for the continued use, even creation, of Nahuatl place-names into the eighteenth century. It suggests that the scholar’s desire to use place-names as an index to a pre-Hispanic past has obscured the vital presence of the city’s Nahua people, and their language, in the colonial period.

If we were to take a bird’s-eye view of seventeenth-century Mexico City, which was captured in a map of 1628, we would confront few traces of the indigenous sacred architecture that existed in the Mexica city a century before, when it was known as Tenochtitlan (fig. 1). The temple complexes that once dominated the ceremonial life of the city had been torn down to build churches, the trace of them appearing as open spaces: the large atrios, or courtyards, around the churches of San Pablo Teopan and San Sebastian Atzacoalco that replaced earlier pre-Hispanic ceremonial plazas are seen at the upper part of the eastern-oriented map. The great Templo Mayor that once dominated the center of the city had been gone for almost a century, its stones carefully reused in the city’s preeminent building, the cathedral. On the map, this and other monuments of Catholic architecture were carefully rendered by the map’s author, Juan Gómez de Trasmonte (d. ca. 1647), most of them within the grid plan of streets known as the traza of the Spanish city. Trasmonte would be named maestro mayor, or official architect /
city planner, of Mexico City in 1635, and he was one of the designers of the cathedral, whose construction on the Plaza Mayor spanned four centuries and whose state in 1628 can be seen in the map’s center.

In the map, no explanatory glosses or place-names appear within the space of the city. Instead, inscribed numbers appear adjacent to buildings, indexes to the legends set in the map’s two cartouches, one at the lower left and the other dominating the upper part of the map (fig. 2). In this upper banner, the left column lists the proper names of the larger monastic complexes by religious order (Franciscan, Augustinian, Dominican, Jesuit, Mercedarian, Carmelite), whereas on the right, buildings are named by type (convents, hospitals, parochial churches, schools). What we do not see are place-names that have interested scholars because of their ability to “carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings” or to “make sense” of the otherwise undifferentiated spaces of the urban body, points argued by Michel de Certeau.¹

Figure 1. View of Mexico City, seen from the west. Juan Gómez de Trasmonte, Forma y Levantado de la Ciudad de Mexico (view of Mexico City), 1907 (based on 1628 map, now lost). Lithograph published by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, Florence.
city via the proper names of buildings nonetheless reveals how he made sense of the city through the hierarchy of institutions that provided spiritual guidance, intellectual training, and corporeal succor to its residents, their images integrated into the traza’s grid of streets. At the same time, the existence of the indigenous city that once occupied this space as indexed by place-names has been all but forgotten, and upon the body of European architectural forms that we see within the city, Trasmonte has drawn a veil of the Spanish names of Catholic saints.

There is one exception to this linguistic effacement, and that is to be found in the name that stretches like a banner across the top of the upper cartouche, “La Ciudad de Mexico,” which preserves the name its indigenous founders gave to themselves and thus to the island they settled. Mexico, place of the Mexica, is a Nahuatl name whose origin and etymology is poorly understood.² If the proper names on the Trasmonte map register this process of “making sense” by Spanish-speaking residents of the seventeenth-century city, then a full roster of Nahuatl place-names would offer an equivalent window onto how the Nahua who lived in the past really understood the spaces around them. Such place-names would be the historical equivalent of crowd-sourcing: a glimpse into what common (and often illiterate) men and women on the street actually said about the world and how they articulated their sense of place and of belonging to place. Nahuatl place-names would thus be a welcome antidote to the totalizing histories from above, shaped by the interests and the language of the powerful.

This theory of place-names explains why they have held such an attraction to ethnohistorians: they flow from that wellspring of the collective imaginaire that parched archives so frequently deny us. But the example of the Trasmonte map also shows some of the problems of dealing with place-names. While they might be the common argot of the streets, their representation and appearance in the historical record is often as controlled

Figure 2. Legend of names of Mexico City’s landmarks. Detail from Juan Gómez de Trasmonte, “Forma y Levantado de la Ciudad de Mexico” (view of Mexico City), 1907 (based on 1628 map, now lost). Lithograph published by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, Florence
as official histories are by the interests of those in power; in place-names and proper names, we can confront less a story of belonging than a history of dispossession. For instance, the Trasmonte map reveals mostly the proper names of buildings, which were often named for Catholic saints, one of the many legacies of the city’s sixteenth-century conquest. In much the same way, the Codex Mendoza, a sixteenth-century pictorial manuscript created by Nahua scribes, lists the regions that paid pre-Hispanic tribute to Aztec overlords, using the Nahuatl names these indigenous conquerors imposed. In the case of his map of Mexico City, Trasmonte did not include what would be of greatest interest to ethnohistorians: the Nahuatl names of places that marked the urban fabric, other than “Mexico.”

But as we shall see, many historians of the city remembered and recorded indigenous place-names, including others who lived in the city at the same time that Trasmonte did, like Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc and Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin. In this short essay, I trace the history of both the erasure and the recovery of Mexico City’s Nahuatl place-names. In a broad sense, this microhistory of place-names in a single city tracks the larger contours of the historical effacement and then rediscovery of indigenous histories in the New World. I will end by introducing the problematic of place-names for indigenous history, that is, the necessity of their conservative nature, which presents a double-bind for the indigenous agent.

The Lure of Nahua Place-Names

For Mexico-Tenochtitlan’s pre-Hispanic residents, the world around them was never just undifferentiated space—the kind of space defined by Euclid and, more recently, by René Descartes. Instead, space was always a place. Its placeness, or “emplacement,” is made clear in the narrative of the creation of the world found in the *Histoyre du Mechique*, a history of the origins of the earth written down in the sixteenth century (and surviving through a French translation). In it, the creation of the habitable world is made possible only through the violent dismemberment of Tlaltecuhtli, the female earth deity.

Many others say the earth was created in this way: Two gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, carried the earth goddess, Tlaltecuhtli, from the sky to below [the lower sky]. All her joints were full of holes of eyes and mouths, with which she gnawed like a savage beast. . . . Those who saw the gods said to each other, “They need to make the earth”; this said, the two changed themselves into huge serpents, and one grabbed the goddess by the right hand and left foot, the other by the left hand
and right foot, and pulled so they broke her down the middle and the half above the shoulders was the earth, the other half the sky, and this made other gods very angry. After it was done, to repay this earth goddess for the damage that the two gods had done to her, all the gods descended to console her, and they commanded that from her all the fruits of the earth necessary for mankind should come.

The history continues by identifying all the topographical features of the world—its lakes and rivers, caves and mountains—as places upon Tlaltecuhtli’s body. As such, these places did not exist within the category of indeterminate space before they became habitable named places; instead, their preexistence was as part of the earth deity. Despite its divinity, this violated body was a disordered one—disorder to the Nahua like sin or evil to their European contemporaries—and it was through social processes that Tlaltecuhtli was ordered to make habitable space. On a Nahua manuscript from outside the Valley of Mexico, the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, this socializing process is revealed on a map of the territories claimed by the leaders of Cuauhtinchan, whose sixteenth-century descendants were authors of the manuscript (fig. 3). The center of the map shows the military conquest
of towns in the region, the autochthonous leaders shown executed; on the boundaries, the triumphant conquerors from Cuauhtinchan show the path of their footprints as they walked the boundaries of their newly conquered territory, this space defined by the large inscribed place-names that frame their itinerary. Thus conquest, habitation, and naming go hand in hand.

In addition, Nahuatl names have a refreshing reportorial directness: when translated and their etymology laid bare, they tell of geographic features, of the commercial activities of residents, of foundational circumstances, and, sometimes, of events in myth or history. Focusing on Tenochtitlan, we can see many of these phenomena at play. The linkage the Mexica made between foundation and naming in the early colonial period can be seen in the well-known image of folio 2r of the Codex Mendoza. Within a frame of blue-painted canals, ten of the city’s original leaders gather within the marked quadrants. At the crossing of the canals is set a rendering of the city’s name in the iconic script used in the pre-Hispanic period. Its central component is a nopal, or nochtli in Nahuatl, and this great cactus tree is the central axis of the folio. The nopal rises from the glyph for tetl (stone), which provides the initial te- of Tenochtitlan. To emphasize that this is indeed a place-name, the scribe has written the city’s name in the Roman alphabet below. Not merely a place-name, the stone and tree are also part of an image of Tenochtitlan’s historic foundation. As recorded in histories written in the sixteenth century, Huitzilopochtli, the tutelary deity of the Mexica, led his people on a great peregrination out of Aztlan. In 1325 he sent a sign in the form of an eagle alighting on a nopal cactus to tell his peoples to found their city on that location, a rocky island rising from the western part of the great lake of Tetzcoco. In the Codex Mendoza, the toponym created by the nochtli cactus is dominated by an eagle, Huitzilopochtli’s avatar. The nopal cactus thus serves a double function: it is both toponym (combining glyphs for nochtli and tetl) and symbol; in the latter case, a tree-topped-with-bird refers to a world tree, one of those great cosmic pillars holding up the sky, seen in pre-Hispanic codices such as the Fejérváry-Mayer and the Borgia. Its presence here, in this image of historic foundation, establishes Tenochtitlan within the framework of the passage of time, seen in the sequence of blue squares that name years at the outer edge of the page, as well as in cosmic space. The central image of folio 2r of the Codex Mendoza is echoed in the low relief carvings of a sculpture of circa 1507, commonly known as the Teocalli of Sacred Warfare (fig. 5). The back is dominated by the image of an eagle atop a nopal cactus, thus showing us a consistent rendering of history on manuscript and on imperial monument alike. As Emily Umberger has convincingly argued, the sculpture was meant to serve as the throne of the huei tlatoani (great leader) Moteuczoma.
Figure 4. The foundation of Tenochtitlan in the year 2 Reed or ca. 1325. Unknown creator, Codex Mendoza, fol. 2r, ca. 1542. The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Ms. Arch. Selden A1.
Figure 5. Drawing of the Teocalli of Sacred War, back, also known as Moteuczoma's Throne, by Emily Umberger. Courtesy of Emily Umberger
The city’s history, specifically its mythic foundation by Huitzilopochtli, was clearly linked to place-names by the creators of pre-Hispanic and early colonial works like the Codex Mendoza and the Teocalli. Indigenous chroniclers writing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries continued to make such connections between place-name and historic event, often depending on the etymology of names to do so. As told in Tezozómoc’s Crónica mexicáyotl, right before the vision of Huitzilopochtli’s eagle, a woman named Quetzalmoyahuatzin gave birth (mixihui) at this locale and, following the custom for postpartum women, was then bathed in a nearby sweat bath (temazcalli). Following this, Tezozómoc tells us that the places in the city he knew named Mixiuca (Place of Parturition) and Temazcaltitlan (Place of the Sweat Bath) commemorated this history of foundation. Tezozómoc’s use of place-names to index an early, primordial history of the city was carried forward into the twentieth century by the archaeologist Alfonso Caso. For instance, Caso argued that the first wave of settlement of the island city happened in its southeast corner, given the number of place-names found in that quadrant that appear in early accounts of the city; he singled out names like Huehuecacin (or Huehuecaltzin), or “Little House of the Ancestors,” as indicating that the founders of the city had once lived here, and Teopan, or “Upon the Gods,” as marking the zone of the initial temple to Huitzilopochtli.

The vital link to a pre-Hispanic past that place-names like Mixiuca, Temazcaltitlan, and Huehuecaltzin have been seen to offer is particularly important given the historical effacement of this past by the Spanish following the city’s 1519–21 conquest, whose broad effects are registered in the Trasmonte map, where we see Spanish names dominating the colonial urban landscape. Since pre-Hispanic sacred architecture was destroyed in the course of the sixteenth century, place-names like Teopan have also served as some of the few indexes to the vanished cityscape of Tenochtitlan, preserving memory of architectural complexes once part of the urban body, like scars. We know little of the place-names of the ceremonial urban core, but it is worth recalling that Tenochtitlan boasted not only the Templo Mayor at its center but also four ceremonial precincts pertaining to the city’s four pre-Hispanic sectors, Moyotlan, Teopan, Atzacoalco, and Cuepopan. Each was once a distinct altepetl, that ideal human community of the Nahua, and they combined into the composite altepetl of Tenochtitlan. These four parts survived as political entities into the colonial period. So did districts within each that were once named either teocalli or teocaltecpan—Nahuatl names meaning “temple” from teotl (divinity), calli (house), and tecpan (palace). It is thought likely that in these areas the now lost altepetl temple complexes were to be found.
In addition to the historic events and the religious spaces of the pre-Hispanic city, place-names in the city also promise to reveal actual usage and perception of urban spaces, like Acallhuaacan, the “Place of the Canoes,” for a docking station, or “Tollan,” “Place of Reeds,” for a swampy locale. Adding to this important aspect is the way that urban residents themselves, in their entry into the historical records, used place-names, offering the fine texture of experience that ethnohistory chases as its quarry. On a removed and abstracted historical level, we understand that residents of the sixteenth-century city lived within social hierarchies that had their roots in the pre-Hispanic arrangement of the city. The four parts of Mexico-Tenochtitlan (Moyotlan, Teopan, Atzacoalco, and Cuepopan) were called parcialidades (wards) by Spaniards after the conquest, and nested within each of these were dozens of smaller units called tlaxilacalli (neighborhoods) by the Nahua, units that are called calpolli in other places and, like calpolli, had both a social and a spatial dimension. Place-names reveal something about how residents of the city identified themselves within the hierarchies of the urban system. To choose an example from Mexico-Tlatelolco, Mexico-Tenochtitlan’s sister city and once an independent altepetl, we find one Balthazar Tlilancalqui writing about himself in terms of both his altepetl and his tlaxilacalli thus: “ca yn nehoatl don Balthazar Tlilancalqui yoan nonamic Juana Tlaco tichaneque yn inpan ciudad Mexico Sanctiago Tlatulco totlaxilacaltia Santa Ana Xopilco” (I, Don Balthazar Tlilancalqui, and my wife, Juana Tlaco, residents of this city of Mexico–Santiago Tlatelolco, our tlaxilacalli being Santa Ana Xopilco). Place-names, presumably those of tlaxilacalli, are consistently appended to personal names; they are often linked by the word chantli, whose translation from the Nahuatl is “home,” used exclusively, according to James Lockhart, in the possessive form chane. Thus chantli suggests something more than simply “a home,” instead a place that one is connected to. In documents we find phrases like “nehoatl Y saber Ana nican nichane San Juan Tlatilco” (I, Isabel Ana, my home here in San Juan Tlatilco), from a document of 1587, or “Agustin Tecpanecatl chane Toltelac” (Agustin Tecpanecatl resident/citizen of Toltelac). Some documents transcribe first-person identifications and thus suggest the contours of actual speech, as in “Martin de Lazaro Moyotla nochan” (Martin de Lázaro, my home Moyotlan). At least in their encounters with the administrative system, the residents of the city thought about themselves as belonging to specific places, many of them likely to have been tlaxilacalli, this idea of adhesion expressed by the possessive form of chane.

While the Spanish translation of chane is consistently “vecino,” some of its social meaning is lost in this translation as well as the English translation.
lation to “resident.” The root word is chantli, or “home”; for “house,” that is, an architectural space, calli is used.\(^{22}\) Foreigners were called hueca chane, meaning “with faraway homes.” But chantli had an important associated meaning: “to speak home” (channonotza) meant “to come to agreement in legal proceedings.”\(^{23}\) That is, chantli was also embedded in social accord and conveys that one is part of a larger social network. As expressed through the (admittedly formulaic) language of documents, the concept of chane as linked to the tlaxilacalli name suggests close nexus between the idea of tlaxilacalli as a social entity and as a geographic one.\(^{24}\)

This brief survey reveals, I hope, how place-names have been and can be used to reconstruct indigenous history and explains something of their continuing allure to the ethnohistorian of the Nahua and other ethnic groups, both in the past and in the present. But we must be conscious that the study of these names is not without its own history, and like all histories, the past directs future trajectories, including those we encounter in the present day.

José Antonio Alzate’s “Plano de Tenochtitlan”

If we accept that the Trasmonte map was one of a series of cartographic effacements of the indigenous city effected over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the kind of information registered on maps emphasized the expansion of Spanish and Catholic culture over the island space, that particular trajectory met a roadblock in the person of José Antonio Alzate (1737–99). One of the leading Enlightenment intellectuals of New Spain, Alzate created “Plano de Tenochtitlan, corte de los emperadores mexicanos” (“Map of Tenochtitlan, Court City of the Mexican Emperors”) in 1789 (fig. 6). On it, this indefatigable priest recorded all the Nahuatl names of the city’s indigenous neighborhoods that he could locate, a total of sixty-three. Each tlaxilacalli appears outlined in red or green or yellow to distinguish it from adjacent neighborhoods, and its name is written in red block capitals within; on the legend to the left side, these Nahuatl names are listed in dark ink and a translation into Spanish of most is offered.\(^{25}\) The creation of the map was spurred by Alzate’s ambitions that his scientific work be recognized in Europe, and to this end he sent the map to France to support his bid to be elected as a correspondent of the French Academy of Sciences.\(^{26}\) In his scientific writings on a host of topics, Alzate would return again and again to the utility of Nahuatl nomenclature, be it botanical or topographical. For a person of his era, he manifested an unusual sympathy both to contemporary Nahua intellectuals and to the body of Nahua knowledge embedded in place-names. These sympathies would surface in Alzate’s
well-publicized attack on the then new Linnaean system of botanical classification. In a dispute that played out in the pages of Mexico’s periodicals, Alzate objected to the system’s lack of practical utility in New Spain, dismissing the “mad ravings” of Linnaean proponents, who “begged for Greek words forged in Denmark’s snows” to describe the natural marvels of the New World. Instead, Alzate argued, one should follow the example set by ancient Mexicans in naming both plants and places. Long interested in the medical and commercial potential of New Spain’s plants, Alzate argued that Nahuatl names were uniquely useful because they encoded a storehouse of knowledge that could be applied to better the physical existence of humans. He pointed out how the ancient Nahua had often named plants according to their medicinal and practical uses. His praise extended to place-names: “In respect to geography, they used words whose etymologies expressed the territorial situation or circumstances; they would say, for instance, Tezontepac for ‘a hill of tezontle’; Atotonilco, for ‘a place of mineral springs’; Tepeyac, for ‘a hill that juts out in the manner of a nose from a face’; Coatlinchan, for ‘house of the serpent’; and so on. They used similar expressions for their pharmacopoeias.”

Alzate intended that his map be included in a planned Spanish edition of the Jesuit Francisco Javier Clavijero’s Storia antica del Messico, an Italian version of which had appeared in 1780–81. Alzate had undertaken the editing of Clavijero’s notes, and although the Spanish edition finally
received the approval of the Council of the Indies, it was never carried out. Thus the “Plano de Tenochtitlan” exists only in manuscript form. Its production is of interest because, to make it, Alzate needed to exercise his own effacement of one aspect of the city, parallel to what Trasmonte had done a century and a half before. To make the map, Alzate took an engraved map of the contemporary city by Ildefonso Iniesta Bejarano, *Plano de la nobilísima ciudad de México*, printed in 1778. He then transformed the map by cutting and pasting (fig. 7). For instance, he added a long strip to the left edge of the map on which he listed the city’s Nahuatl names, to complement the right-hand vertical section on Iniesta’s original map that recorded the city’s architectural and topographical features, almost all of them with Spanish names. Within the cartographic space, he covered areas containing markers that identified it as a modern map of the viceregal capital. For instance, Iniesta’s map contained an inset that showed a rendering of the cathedral and a legend above it, and Alzate patched over the inset. He also covered the title that Iniesta had given to the map, as well as writing and coloring its surface, as described above. His inserted legend gave a new name to the map and tells us what he attempted to achieve by making it:

**Plano de Tenochtitlan corte de los emperadores Mexicanos.**

Para dar una idea de la población del Antiguo México, me ha parecido muy útil combinar ambos planos esto es los nombres antiguos con los
Modernos, para que en los tiempos venideros se sepan de los Barrios y sus situaciones, respecto á que se van exterminando con prontitud las denominaciones Mexicanas, dichas combinación servirá para la inteligencia de mucha parte de la historia. Dispusolo D. José de Alzate en 1789.32

The map is the most extensive extant register of the city’s Nahuatl names ever created.33 But where did Alzate find these names? The Nahuatl nomenclature on the map is not found on other maps of the city; Alzate’s own masterful creation of 1769 had few such Nahuatl names scattered on its surface. Nor did Alzate read enough Nahuatl to take advantage of Nahuatl-language historical records, and even if he did, researchers today using these sixteenth-century land documents of the city find them maddeningly vague about locations of places within the greater urban plan. Instead, Alzate gathered many of the names as he walked the streets of the city, and he was able to do so because many of these Nahuatl toponyms were still in use, many of them part of the names of the parish churches and chapels that dotted the urban landscapes; a priest himself, Alzate worked on the reform of the parish system and knew these parishes well.34 Firsthand knowledge allowed him to demarcate the neighborhood boundaries within the city, information completely absent from other sources. Alzate’s map shows us, and Alzate himself tells us, that the Nahuatl place-names were real and present in the late eighteenth century—they were on the tongues of both Nahuatl and non-Nahuatl speakers and used when and where Alzate lived, and a number of them appear in a census of the city’s Indians carried out in 1808.35

But despite this presentness, in his 1789 map, Alzate still framed the names of the city’s neighborhoods as a past phenomenon. First is the inserted title of the map itself, which replaced the title of the engraved map: “Plano de Tenochtitlan, Corte de los Emperadores Mexicanos.” “Tenochtitlan” was, of course, the moniker given to the city by its founding residents; it had fallen out of use by the 1540s to refer to the entire city. Instead, the city was known in Alzate’s day as the “ciudad de México.” The second part of the title, “Corte de los Emperadores Mexicanos,” refers to the “emperors” who had been seated in the capital before the death of Moteuczoma in 1520. Thus a present-day map of the city, bearing present-day (albeit Nahuatl) names, was marked as something from the past. But at the same time, the use of corte (court) pulls the pre-Hispanic city into historical parallel with Alzate’s contemporary city. The Spanish term corte is a title used to designate the seat of a ruler, either the viceroy or the king himself, and is prevalent in eighteenth-century documents.36 In the New World in Alzate’s age, only Mexico City and Lima could properly call themselves cortes,
and Alzate himself, who often sought viceregal approbation for his many projects of urban reform, was keenly aware of the value of living in such a corte with the viceroy as its cynosure. To apply the term *corte* to Tenochtitlan was to fashion it as the antecedent to the modern corte of Mexico City, which occupied the same space.

If we turn to Alzate’s better-known map of Mexico City of 1769 (fig. 8), we can see the 1789 map as part of a longer chain of cartographic productions. Both of them are deeply implicated in the question of where the city’s indigenous population *fit in*, a matter less of where they resided than of their place in the city’s social fabric and temporal sequence. In the 1769 map, Alzate did not treat the Nahuatl names as part of the city’s *present*, because this map leaves out most of the Nahuatl nomenclature. Figure 9 is a detail of the map showing San Juan Moyotlan, once the heart of the indigenous city; the names written on the surface of the map designate either chapels
or streets, and the single Nahuatl name on it is “tecpan,” the seat of Mexico City’s indigenous government. One might argue that Alzate had little reason to include indigenous nomenclature because this map was created as part of a project under Alzate’s patron, the archbishop of Mexico, Don Francisco Antonio Lorenzana Buitrón (1722–1804), to dismantle the centuries-old order of the city’s parishes. Since the sixteenth century, the city had a special set of parishes for members of the república de indios (Indian republic), so one’s parish was determined by one’s ethnic affiliation, an assignment that tended to enhance that sense of ethnic identity because of the host of social networks that grew out of parish life. Alzate’s charge was to reorganize parishioners by simple spatial residence regardless of ethnic affiliation, a modernization whose self-imposed blindness to ethnicity would be admirable to many in the twenty-first century. But such reorganization—as simple a bureaucratic affair as it might seem on the surface—proved a difficult project, as Matthew O’Hara has documented, because it went beyond

Figure 9. Detail of Mexico City’s southwest quadrant from Alzate’s 1769 map, with overlay showing nomeclature. José Antonio Alzate, Plano de la Ymperial México con la nueva distribución de territorios parroquiales, 1769. Colección Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City. Author diagram
reorienting where one went to Mass on Sundays. Instead, it attempted to remake the established social order of the city in the name of rational reform. Standing in the way of the seamless transition to Alzate’s proposed new parishes were those very peoples living in the indigenous parishes, who protested vehemently and whose nomenclature Alzate would propose rescuing some two decades later.

The cartographic silence, the near absence of indigenous nomenclature in the 1769 parish map, can be bluntly related to the overarching aims of the modernizing project of parish reform. No longer would these indigenous social affiliations matter, and the language that expressed them, Nahuatl, would be purged from the map of parishes. While Alzate’s actions on this earlier map of 1769 (the erasure of Nahuatl nomenclature) might seem counterpoised to his actions on the later map of 1789 (the cutting and pasting and effacement of the colonial city and the restoration of Nahuatl names), they are, in fact, of a piece. That is, the indigenous place-names in the 1789 map indexed a history that Alzate claims was on the verge of being forgotten (“respecto á que se van exterminando con prontitud”), at the same time that his ability to retrieve them is proof positive that they were a lived, social experience in the late eighteenth-century city. But these names, as emblems of indigenous social organization, were roadblocks to the city’s participation in a rational, modern moment. Alzate’s renaming of the map as “Plano de Tenochtitlan,” along with his various cuttings and pastings to efface architectural markers of the present-day map, served to put the Nahuatl place-names under the sign of history. Safely ensconced in the past of Tenochtitlan (the name no longer used for Mexico City), and slowly eclipsed in the present by the weakness of human memory, Nahuatl names and the troublesome social affiliations they signaled were not to be set under the sign of the future.

There is another thread present in Alzate’s “Plano de Tenochtitlan” that will prove important in the twentieth century and is worth emphasizing. In recovering the Nahuatl names of the tlaxilacalli found in the eighteenth-century city and using them within a space that he proclaimed as “Corte de los Emperadores Mexicanos,” Alzate assumed a conservatism of Nahuatl place-names. Nahuatl names that he found in the eighteenth-century city of his day could, in his view, be reliably assigned to the pre-Hispanic city. The possibility that Nahua residents of the city were creating place-names through the colonial period never seemed to enter his mind. This conservatism assigned to place-names was consonant with his argument that Nahuatl names preserved ancient knowledge, but its implication is somewhat malignant: during the same period that Spanish speakers were blanketing the city with new names, whose results are seen in the Tras-
monte map, Nahuatl speakers stopped creating names for the changing city around them, simply acting to preserve what already existed.

But their ongoing agency in giving new names to the city is suggested by comparing some of the information on the Alzate map to other sources. Figure 10 shows us a detail of the right-hand side of the map, which corresponds to the southern portion of the city. On it, we see the straight horizontal causeway of San Antonio Abad (known as the Ixtapalapa causeway...
in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), and beneath it, to the west, the land is labeled as swamp (sienaga). Above it, to the east, however, it is filled with tlaxilacalli: Acatlan, Ateponazco, Tlaxcuititlan, Otlica, Tultenco, Macuitlapilco. The causeway of Ixtapalapa was the conduit for an ambitious aqueduct to supply the city with freshwater built under the Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl in 1499. The sixteenth-century chronicler Diego Durán, whose Historia de las Indias de Nueva España is a prime source for the aqueduct project, took careful note of its course, telling us that it passed over the lake that surrounded the city and along the causeway of Ixtapalapa before entering the city and that water poured into a deposit at “a place now called San Antonio [Abad].”

He then continues, “The people of the barrios of San Antonio and San Pablo [which lay to the east] could come along the lake in their canoes and collect water here.” In other words, the lake abutted the causeway to the east; instead of the lake, Alzate’s map shows us the tlaxilacalli of Macuitlapilco and the southern extension of Acatlan. Comparison to the plan created by Luis González Aparicio of the pre-Hispanic city confirms the presence of the lake at this location. For both Durán’s account and Alzate’s map to be true (and I think that they both are), it means that the landmass of Mexico City needed to have grown, extending farther into the southern lake, between the time that Durán wrote and the time that Alzate created his map, and this growth of reclaimed land and correlative shrinking of the lake is attested to in other sources.

New lands meant new naming opportunities, and “Tlaxcuititlan” and “Ateponazco” and “Macuitlapilco” may very well have been creations of the Nahua in the sixteenth century or beyond. This small example suggests that the Nahua, rather than being just guardians of past names pertaining to the “Corte de los Emperadores Mexicanos,” were also shaping the colonial city, but this role, as agents beyond the moment of their conquest, is denied them on the 1789 Alzate map.

Tlaxilacalli and Mexico-Tenochtitlan

Alzate’s 1789 map lay dormant for over a century—never engraved or published during his life or in the nineteenth century. And despite the suggested historical closure that it offered for the Nahua city when he created it at the end of the eighteenth century (the names being extinguished from history), his map was taken up anew in the twentieth century and again in the twenty-first. It is fair to say that Alzate’s map, despite its effacement of continuing indigenous agency, brought the Nahua city back to life. Its first rebirth to date occurred when Caso encountered the single known version of it in Paris and redrew and published it in 1956 as part of his study “Los
Figure 11. Detail of Caso’s map of “Los barrios antiguos,” showing the indigenous neighborhoods in the city’s southeast quadrant, corresponding to Figure 10. Alfonso Caso, “Los barrios antiguos de Tenochtitlan y Tlatelolco,” Memorias de la Academia Mexicana de la Historia 15 (1956). Photograph courtesy General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Republished courtesy of the Academia Mexicana de la Historia, Mexico City.

barrios antiguos de Tenochtitlan y Tlatelolco.” He also authored for that study a new map based on Alzate’s, reproducing the tlaxilacalli names and boundaries established in “Plano de Tenochtitlan” and adding a few more place-names he had discovered by cross-checking and augmenting these with other historical sources (fig. 11). An important new source was a 1637 list of indigenous parishes that he found in the British Museum and which allowed him to establish the temporal depth of Alzate’s eighteenth-century
identifications; land documents his collaborator found in the Archivo General de la Nación did the same. Like Alzate, Caso assumed a conservative character for the place-names, so that Nahuatl nomenclature belonged to the city’s pre-Hispanic past, and the place-names were a key to reconstructing the social, economic, and political organization of the Aztecs. The study of the etymology of the place-names for linguistic ends was of lesser interest to him.

For readers of the day, Caso’s article revealed a heretofore unknown social order and complexity of the pre-Hispanic city that existed within the framework of the known four-part division. In correlating the boundaries of these “barrios,” as he called the tlaxilacalli, to the modern streets of the city, he affirmed the spatial expanse of a hundred or so subdivisions. As the title of his article suggests, his interest was in the pre-Hispanic period; of less interest to him was the names’ survival, attested to by the fact that all the names were taken from colonial documents from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the richest source being Alzate's eighteenth-century map. When read today, the article, like the Alzate map, ends up offering strong evidence for the colonial presence of Nahua spatial and social categories in the city, and perhaps a more apt title for it, rather than the past-oriented “Los barrios antiguos de Tenochtitlan y Tlatelolco,” would be “Los barrios indígenas de la ciudad de México.”

More recent research underscores that “indígena” is not necessarily interchangeable with “antiguo” in Mexico City. Scholars such as Luis Reyes García have established that the units Caso called barrios endured but were better known in the sixteenth-century city as tlaxilacalli. The masterful history of Andrés Lira González traces indigenous government into the nineteenth century. And in the twenty-first century, Jonathan Truitt took up the names again, working even more extensively with the Nahuatl corpus of documents from the city, to expand and refine the number of tlaxilacalli names. But even more important is Truitt’s finding that the tlaxilacalli were not extinguished by the conquest or at any time after but rather, like the larger parcialidades they constituted, took on the names of Catholic saints and endured into the nineteenth century.

Conclusions

The place-names of Tenochtitlan have long been considered one of the few remaining traces of the earlier, pre-Hispanic city; indeed, all indication is that they have a deep ancestry. In this essay, I have traced their allure, their promise to tell us something about the city expressed in everyday currency, of that collective enterprise of making sense of the world around. We have
also seen how their framing, first by Alzate and later by Caso, emphasized their connections to the Aztec city, their pre-Hispanic past rather than their colonial present. This temporal placement of indigenous peoples as peoples of the past is a well-known phenomenon in the writings of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologists and a target of anthropological critiques of the later twentieth century. But in the genealogy of Caso’s map of the “barrios antiguos,” which reproduced Alzate’s 1789 map, we can see that the roots of this ambivalent temporality lay in eighteenth-century projects to modernize and rationalize social orders (parish reform) whose success depended upon overriding earlier social (parish) affiliations, as so tellingly revealed by O’Hara’s work. In Alzate’s day, the tlaxilacalli names represented this “old” order and the city’s modernization depended upon them being erased, and one method of erasure was to force them into the past, to forget them as living, spoken names, and remember them only as historic appellatives preserved by being set upon the surface of a map, as the social order they represented on the ground was reconfigured in Alzate’s well-intentioned modernizing project.

For ethnography today, place-names are an attractive resource but a tricky source. De Certeau anticipates one pitfall of reading too much into place-names: “those words . . . slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them,” which is to say that even mosquito-bitten residents of Moyotlan (from Nahuatl, moyotl [mosquito]) might have never connected their afflictions with the name of the place. And the impulse to follow Alzate’s footsteps is always there, setting place-names as inert artifacts from the past and overlooking that place-names, like the Nahuatl speakers who created and used them, responded flexibly as the world around them changed.

Notes

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2 Even today, whether the ethnic name gave its name to the place or vice versa is unclear. The Codex Aubin states that the Mexica had taken the name of their
deity “Mexitli.” Charles Dibble, ed. and trans., Códice Aubin: Historia de la nación mexicana; Reproducción a todo color del Códice de 1576 (Madrid, 1963). To date, no explanation is universally accepted by linguists.

3 Edward S. Casey, Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN, 2009).


7 José Ignacio Paulino Dávila Garibi, Toponimias nahuas, normas para la interpretación de toponímicos de origen nahuatl y análisis etimológicos de trescientos de ellos, Pan American Institute of Geography and History 63 (Mexico City, 1942), 9; Ursula Dyckerhoff, “Mexican Toponyms as a Source in Regional Ethnohistory,” in Explorations in Ethnohistory: Indians of Central Mexico in the Sixteenth Century, ed. H. R. Harvey and Hanns J. Prem (Albuquerque, NM, 1984), 229–52.

8 An early study of Tenochtitlan’s place-names is by Manuel de Olaguibel, La ciudad de México y el Distrito federal, toponimia Azteca (Toluca, Mexico, 1898). Olaguibel, who also published a map, was interested in re-creating a forgotten Aztec landscape.

9 See Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen, Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, Ferdinand Anders, and Luis Reyes García, Códice Fejérváry-Mayer (Codex Fejérváry-Mayer) (Graz, Austria, and Mexico City, 1994); and Eduard Seler, Comentarios al Códice Borgia (Commentary to Codex Borgia) (Mexico City, 1963). Discussion of the central image as such a world tree can be found in Alfonso Caso, El teocalli de la guerra sagrada: Descripción y estudio del monolito encontrado en los cimientos del Palacio nacional (Mexico City, 1927).


11 Gordon Whittaker argues that the name of this place around the time of its foundation was Cuauhnocitltlan, and thus the eagle (cuauhtli) that alights on the top

12 Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicáyotl*, trans. Adrián León (Mexico City, 1992), 61. Tezozómoc understands Mixiuca to combine mixihu(i), a verb meaning “to give birth,” with ca(n), or “place of.” This combination of a verb stem (rather than a noun) with -can is unusual but not unheard of. The Codex Mendoza presents us with Cacalomaca, or “Place Where They Hunt Ravens,” where -can combines with ma (to hunt); Tuluca (fols. 10v, 12r, 33r) combines -can with toloa (to incline the head). See Frances F. Berdan, “The Place-Name, Personal Name, and Title Glyphs of the Codex Mendoza: Translations and Comments,” in *The Codex Mendoza*, 4 vols., ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt (Berkeley, CA, 1992), vol. 1, 175, 221; and Frances E. Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Austin, TX, 1983), 149. While we can never be sure whether Tezozómoc was correct in his understanding of the word’s meaning (the Codex Mendoza suggests that place-names in other languages may have been given false etymologies by Nahuatl speakers), what is important for the purposes of this argument is that Tezozómoc made the historical link.


17 See Pizzigoni, *Life Within*. This illuminating new study seeks to reach beyond the tlaxilacalli into the smaller orbit of the household. Pizzigoni also reveals that colonial-era tlaxilacalli were not hierarchically stable and could transform into units more like altepetl over time.
Place-Names in Mexico-Tenochtitlan

18 Transcribed in Reyes García, Celestino Solís, and Valencia Ríos, Documentos nahuas de la ciudad de México, 187, 201; Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN), Tierras, vol. 49, exp. 5.
20 Transcribed in Reyes García, Celestino Solís, and Valencia Ríos, Documentos nahuas de la ciudad de México, 201, 81.
21 Transcribed in ibid., 93.
22 Karttunen, Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl, 46.
24 The spatial character of tlaxilacalli would be better understood if we had evidence of public rogations, or circumambulations, which would have defined the boundaries of the tlaxilacalli within the urban fabric, but I do not know of any.
25 The first neighborhood named is written in lowercase letters, with an initial capital.
27 “Pero mendigar voces griegas forjadas entre los hielos de la Dinamarca es un desvarío.” José Antonio Alzate to Gaceta de México, 14 June 1788. This letter, and the larger dispute, is reproduced in Roberto Moreno de los Arcos, Linneo en México: Las controversias sobre el sistema binario sexual, 1788–1798 (Mexico City, 1989), 19–32; quotations on page 25.
28 Moreno de los Arcos, Linneo en México, 25.
31 An unmodified copy of the Iniesta map is held by the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G4414.M6 1778; thanks to Anthony Mullan for bringing this to my attention.
32 On the map, see Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz and Yolanda Teràn Trillo, Atlas histórico de la ciudad de México (Mexico City, 1996), 334–35. Translation: “Map of Tenochtitlan, Court City of the Mexican Emperors. To give an idea of the population of Ancient Mexico, it has seemed to me very useful to combine both maps, that is, the ancient names alongside the modern, so that in future eras, one would know of the [indigenous] neighborhoods and their locations, given that
these Mexican [i.e., Nahuatl] denominations are being rapidly extinguished, [and] this combination will serve toward an understanding of much of the history. Laid out by Don José de Alzate in 1789.”

Another such register might have been created following the 1692 popular uprising in the city, when urban administrators made attempts to return members of the república de indios back to their designated neighborhoods in the parcialidades. I know of instructions to compile such records of “linderos, terminos y solares” (boundaries, borders, and lots) but have not seen their result. See, e.g., AGN, Indios, vol. 32, exp. 44.


Diccionario de la lengua castellana compuesto por la Real Academia Española (Madrid, 1780), 284.


This temporal shifting can be connected to a larger historical pattern, as eighteenth-century Creoles constructed a history for their emergent nation that set present-day Indians—often cast as the unruly plebe encountered in the unrefined and chaotic streets of the Enlightenment city or as irrational participants in excessive and baroque celebrations—as something separate and apart from their ancestors of three centuries prior. See Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, Property and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico, trans. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala (Wilmington, DE, 1999).


Ibid.


British Museum, London, MSS Cat. Add. 13994. Many place-names were written down as part of the names of different chapels in the city by the religious chronicler Agustín de Vetancourt, whose interest was in documenting Catholic
parishes in his contemporary city. That he knew so many of them, as recorded in a book published in 1698, signals their endurance two centuries after the conquest. Agustín de Vetancourt, *Teatro mexicano: Descripción breve de los sucesos exemplares, históricos, políticos, militares, y religiosos del Nuevo Mundo Occidental de las Indias* (Mexico City, 1982 [1698]), pt. 4, tratado 2, 42–43.


Andrés Lira González, *Comunidades indígenas frente a la ciudad de México*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City, 1995).

Truitt, “Nahuas and Catholicism.”
