

## PRIMER FOR A NEW WORLD: Fr. Pedro de Gante's *Cartilla para enseñar a leer*

**ABSTRACT:** The *Cartilla para enseñar a leer* (1569), attributed to Flemish Franciscan Pedro de Gante, was one of the most important primers from the early years of the viceroyalty of New Spain. Nevertheless, the primer's importance during the process of cultural contact has been largely ignored. As did other primers of the period, the *Cartilla* contained the most important prayers, but what sets the *Cartilla* aside is that its selection of prayers is presented in a trilingual version, in Castilian, Latin, and Nahuatl. The content of the *Cartilla* invites the question as to why Gante, a missionary focused on writing doctrinal works in Nahuatl, would compose a primer that is trilingual, but raises another that is perhaps more perplexing: Why were most of the prayers in Castilian? In this article, I intend to shed a light on Gante's decision to create a complex tool that could be employed by a mixed audience of Castilian, creole, mestizo and Nahuatl children. By doing this, Gante unwittingly started a process of cultural contact in which language played a pivotal role. The *Cartilla* thus presents itself as a multifaceted tool that helped shaped the culture of the Basin of Mexico during the early years of the viceroyalty.

**KEYWORDS:** Nahuatl Christian texts, trilingual primers, Franciscans, cultural contact, language dissemination

**F**r. Pedro de Gante (ca. 1480–1572) was one of the most important figures in the early years of evangelization in the viceroyalty of New Spain. Gante's work is fundamental for our understanding of the processes of cultural contact shaping the new viceroyalty: he was not only one of the first Franciscan missionaries to arrive in New Spain, but also started a series of institutions and pedagogical endeavors that would help to establish and shape missionary work in the center of Mexico. From his arrival in 1523 onward, Gante dedicated his time to learning the language of the inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico: Nahuatl.<sup>1</sup>

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1. There were other languages spoken by other ethnic groups in the Basin of Mexico, such as Otomi. However, the most widely spoken language of the area was Nahuatl.

Gante's work was profoundly influenced by this formative period, and it is reflected in his later pioneering pedagogic work. He not only paid attention to the language of the people he intended to convert, but he also thoroughly analyzed their traditions and mentality in order to hone the educative tools he employed to introduce Christianity in the area. It was while working as chaplain of the chapel of Saint Josef in the Convent of San Francisco in Mexico City that his work and approach crystallized. In Saint Josef, which served as a school to evangelize Nahua children, he started a series of pedagogical endeavors, such as creating songs, theater plays, and doctrinal writings in Nahuatl to communicate the Christian message. His work was possible only because he worked closely with the Nahuas. Thus, Saint Josef became a liminal place in which Nahua students and missionaries shaped and influenced each other. Nahua children in this school were not only educated in Christian matters—they were taught a new way to comprehend the world while being given tools to insert themselves in the new society that was being created by the Spanish. In this way, Saint Josef and Pedro de Gante were producing cultural mediators: individuals with the knowledge of two cultures.

Gante did not work as a solitary agent; his work was embedded in the wider Franciscan mission in New Spain. According to Kobayashi, the Franciscans, in order to accomplish the evangelization of the newly conquered land, developed four programs of education that involved every segment of the Nahua population.<sup>2</sup> The first program focused on teaching the young children of the Nahua nobility (in Nahuatl, *pipiltin*). Through a boarding school system, missionaries aimed to impart a thorough Christian education with the dual goal of converting the children and training a selected few to become future aides in church-related activities. This type of education was very successful, as noble children were able subsequently to indoctrinate their peers, backed up by the traditional Mesoamerican power structures that survived the conquest.

The second program was the education of the commoner children (in Nahuatl, *macehualtin*). These students attended school only during the mornings, sharing classes with the *pipiltin*. However, as they were deemed to have lower intellectual capabilities, they would require only a very superficial teaching of the Christian doctrine. This type of education was based on songs that eased memorization. The third program was the school of European trades, offered only to Nahua students who had already learned the catechism. The subjects were vast: Nahuas could become cobblers, painters, engravers, and other skilled

2. José María Kobayashi, "La conquista educativa de los hijos de Asís," *Historia Mexicana* 22:4 (April–June 1973): 437–464; José María Kobayashi, *La educación como conquista. Empresa franciscana en México*, (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1996), 180.

tradesmen, making them sought after in a society in need of European-style artisans.

The fourth program was the education of noble girls. This was a short-lived program, as the Colegio de Niñas, established in the Convent of Saint Francis, did not have enough personnel to sustain it. Also, noble Nahuas were not interested in marrying women educated in the European way. All of these programs, with the exception of the education of noble girls, were delivered in the chapel of Saint Josef, and it is quite likely that they were developed by Gante and his colleagues working in the chapel.<sup>3</sup>

From Gante's pedagogic endeavors only two written works remain: the *Doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana* (1547, 1553) and the *Cartilla para enseñar a leer* (1569). Both works are written in alphabetic script in Nahuatl and showcase Gante's ingenuity in finding alluring ways to capture Nahua attention.

This research note will focus on the *Cartilla para enseñar a leer*, the first textbook printed in Spanish America. The primer was made with a spirit of innovation, as it was trilingual: in Nahuatl, Castilian and Latin. However, only the most important prayers of the *Cartilla* were translated into Nahuatl; the others appeared in only Castilian and Latin, which makes the *Cartilla* an unusual work by Gante. As a missionary involved in Nahua education, his language of preference was Nahuatl and not Castilian. This begs the question as to why Gante, who was focused on educating Nahua children, would compose a primer with most of its contents in Castilian. This research note will try to shed light on Gante's decision to create a tool that could be employed not only by Nahuas but by the different ethnic segments of New Spain's society.

## A VERSATILE TOOL

During the Early Modern period, reading primers were popular pedagogical tools. Their small size (generally smaller than 25 cm, and with content presented in no more than eight pages) made them a cheap and practical tool to educate children. In primers, Christianity and literacy were deeply intertwined. Although diverse in both structure and content, they generally included the alphabet, the numbers, and the basic prayers.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of

3. Kobayashi, "La conquista educativa de los hijos de Asís," 437–464; Kobayashi, *La educación como conquista. Empresa franciscana en México*, 180.

4. Victor Infantes, "De la cartilla al libro," *Bulletin Hispanique* 97:1 (1995): 40–41, 48, 55; José Sánchez Herrero, "Alfabetización y catequesis en España y en América durante el siglo XVI," in *X Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra*, J.-I. Saranyan, P. Tineo, A. M. Pazos, M. Lluch-Baixauli, and M. Pilar Ferrer, eds. (Navarre:

the evangelical efforts in New Spain, primers were imported from Europe in large quantities as there was a dire necessity for pedagogical Christian material to indoctrinate children. For this reason, the archbishop of New Spain, the Basque Juan de Zumárraga, petitioned Habsburg monarch Charles I of Spain to establish a printing house in the viceroyalty of New Spain.

The presence of a printing establishment in New Spain allowed a large amount of material to be printed in Mesoamerican languages for indoctrination purposes. Doctrines, grammars, vocabularies, and primers were readily printed. The first exemplars of bilingual and trilingual primers in Mesoamerican languages come from this period.<sup>5</sup> The *Cartilla* is one example of the earliest catechisms and of the rarer trilingual ones.

The *Cartilla*'s only extant copy, printed in 1569 by Pedro de Ocharte, is in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. This is not the first edition, however. The title that appears on the frontispiece is *Cartilla para enseñar a leer; nueuamente enmendada y quitadas todas las abreviaturas que antes tenia*, highlighting that this edition was an improved copy from which mistakes and abbreviations had been removed.<sup>6</sup> Victor Infantes, in his study of primers from Spain and New Spain, based on García Icazbalceta's *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI* (1886) and the work of Emilio Valton, mentions two other possible editions of the primer, one from 1568 and the other from 1572, but copies of neither survive.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Gante's *Cartilla* was a subsequent edition implies that this was a popular work, and it is quite likely that the primer was not only used by the students of Gante in the chapel of Saint Josef in Mexico City, but was also sent to other missionary schools of the Franciscan Holy Gospel Province. It is even possible that the *Cartilla* was employed by other mendicant orders, as was the case with Gante's *Doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana*, which was employed by Augustinians and Jesuits, as well as Franciscans.<sup>8</sup>

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Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 1990), 1:246, 249; Victor Infantes, "La educación impresa," *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna* 3 (2004): 233–234; Lorenzo Rodríguez, "Un capítulo de la historia de la escritura en América: la enseñanza de las primeras letras a los indios en el siglo XVI," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 56:1 (1999): 52; P. F. Rueda Ramírez, "Las cartillas para aprender a leer: la circulación de un texto escolar en Latinoamérica," *Cultura Escrita & Sociedad* 11 (2010): 21.

5. Lorenzo Rodríguez, "Un capítulo de la historia de la escritura en América," 52; Pedro Rueda Ramírez, "Las cartillas para aprender a leer," 21.

6. Pedro de Gante, *Cartilla para enseñar a leer* (Mexico: Casa de Pedro Ocharte [1569], Academia Mexicana de la Educación, 1959).

7. Infantes, "De la cartilla al libro," 52.

8. Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1966), 48–49; Luis Resines Llorente, "Los agustinos y los catecismos para los indios en América," *Coloquio Traducción Monacal: La Labor de los Agustinos desde el Humanismo hasta la Época Contemporánea* (2005), <https://docplayer.es/82367576-Los-agustinos-y-los-catecismos-para-los-indios-en-america.html> (accessed November 19, 2019), 3;

Gante's authorship has been generally assumed, since Valton's work (1947). The similarity between the types of the *Cartilla* and the already-mentioned *Doctrina*, expanded on by Valton, is indeed remarkable.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the similarities between the translations of the Pater Noster, Ave Maria, Salve Regina and the Articles of Faith in the *Cartilla* and the *Doctrina* indicate that both works were quite likely penned by the friar.<sup>10</sup>

The *Cartilla* has 30 woodcut engravings accompanying the text, including the one on the frontispiece. The engravings have several dimensions. They depict biblical scenes in a European fashion and show very little Mexican influence.<sup>11</sup> Whether the engravings that illustrate the *Cartilla* were made by Nahua or missionary hands is difficult to determine, but it is quite likely that they were made by the Nahua students of the school of trades of Saint Josef, who must have copied original engravings brought by the missionaries in their journey to Mexico. The incorporation of engravings in the primer was particularly important, as they had a double role of illustration and mnemonic tool, ensuring that the content was understood. Engravings such as these were not only useful tools to introduce the European imaginary to the Nahuas, but also introduced new and different ways to represent and understand the world.

The *Cartilla* contains the abecedy and the vowels and the consonants forming elemental syllables, but it does not include the numbers like other primers of the time. The basic elements of literacy are followed by the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Creed, the Salve Regina, the Articles of Faith, the Decalogue, the commandments of the Church, the venial sins and mortal sins, the forgiveness of sins, the corporal senses, the corporeal works of mercy, the spiritual works of mercy, the enemies of the soul, the confession to help during Mass, the blessing of the table, and finally the *Confiteor* (I confess). The *Cartilla* concludes with a list of abbreviations. Thus the primer puts basic elements of the Christian repertoire such as the Pater Noster and Ave Maria side by side with more complex, nuanced themes, such as the five corporeal senses and the enemies of the soul.

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Luis Fernando Lara, "Para la historia de la expansión del español por México," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 56:2 (2008): 297–362.

9. Emilio Valton, *El primer libro de alfabetización en América: cartilla para enseñar a leer, impresa por Pedro Ocharte en México, 1569, estudio crítico, bibliográfico e histórico* (Mexico City: Librería Robledo, 1947).

10. Estefanía Yunes Vincke, *Books and Codices: Transculturation, Language Dissemination and Education in the Works of Friar Pedro de Gante* (PhD diss.: University College London, 2014).

11. Ignacio Márquez Rodiles, *Cartilla para enseñar a leer de fray Pedro de Gante* (Mexico City: Academia Mexicana de la Educación, 1959), 6; Valton, cited in Gloria Bravo Ahuja, *Los materiales didácticos para la enseñanza del español a los indígenas mexicanos*, (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1977), 19–20; Valton, *El primer libro de alfabetización en América: cartilla para enseñar a leer, impresa por Pedro Ocharte en México*.

Only the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Articles of Faith, and the Salve Regina have a Nahuatl version. The rest of the primer is written in Castilian, except for the Confiteor, which appears in both Latin and Castilian. It is possible that the *Cartilla* presented only a partial translation into Nahuatl because it was targeted to the macehualtin. Presenting only the most basic and important prayers seems to support this. The selected prayers would have provided the commoner student with enough Christian knowledge, without being overly complicated. In addition, by choosing to present only the most important prayers in Nahuatl, Gante was making decisions regarding which elements of Christianity he considered suitable to transmit to the macehualtin, a segment of the Nahua population that was considered at the time intellectually inferior to the Nahua noble children who were being educated closely by the missionaries.<sup>12</sup>

Analyzing the translation of the prayers offers us also an insight into the complexities Gante encountered in his quest to devise a translation that was both easy to understand and free of heretical connotations, and thereby suited to a large macehualtin audience. For example, the syntax in the *Cartilla* was kept simple and the presence of iteration is strong, that is, the first sentence of a paragraph is repeated in the last sentence of the same paragraph. This rhetorical form is reminiscent of one that is strong in Nahua oral traditions, such as the discourses of the elder or *buehuetlatolli*. Iteration served as a mnemonic device of oral transmission. By employing this recourse of Nahua rhetoric, Gante was facilitating the learning of the prayers; they could be easily modified to be sung. Most Christian instruction for the commoners was given in songs to facilitate its dissemination.<sup>13</sup>

However, this does not mean that the children of the Nahua nobility who were being educated in the boarding school system of the Franciscans were not using this primer as well. It is quite possible that the young pipiltin who were learning to read and to understand the basic prayers were also using this booklet in their shared classes with the macehualtin. The pipiltin then would move on to more complex, nuanced texts such as Gante's *Doctrina*. Gante could have employed the *Cartilla* as the best method to evangelize a large segment of the population in a limited amount of time. In this way, the *Cartilla* was a very useful didactic tool employed in two of the Franciscan educative programs already mentioned.

12. Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, 48–49.

13. Antonio Rubial García, *La hermana pobreza: el franciscanismo de la Edad Media a la Evangelización Novohispana*, (Mexico City: UNAM, 1996), 168–169; Manuel Aguilar Moreno, “The Indio Ladino as a Cultural Mediator in the Colonial Society,” *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* 33 (2002): 152–153; Kobayashi, *La educación como conquista*, 192–1903.

Still, there is an unanswered question: why did Gante not translate the whole primer into the three languages? The answer is that the primer was probably also targeted to Castilian, Creole, or mixed-descent children who spoke Castilian. But why, if Gante was mainly dedicated to evangelize the Nahua population, did he write a primer for the other segments of the population? It is quite possible that this had to do with another institution established by Gante; the Hospital Real de Sanct Josef, later called the Hospital Real de los Naturales, a hospital dedicated to the care of the Nahuas.<sup>14</sup> The Hospital Real de los Naturales received from the crown in 1553, and again in 1556, exclusive rights to print and sale primers in New Spain.<sup>15</sup> Quite likely, this was the royal response to a letter addressed by Gante in 1552 to the monarch in which the friar complained that the original building of the Hospital de los Naturales had been seized by Viceroy Mendoza to establish a school for mestizo boys.<sup>16</sup> The crown possibly gave Gante the printing rights of primers so the friar could secure enough revenue to rebuild the Hospital de los Naturales in another location without large extra expenditures by the crown.

The dire need for devotional literature, grammars, and glossaries in Castilian and Mesoamerican languages to be used in teaching created a substantial demand. Licenses and privileges for the printing of devotional material for the Church were highly coveted, as they could generate large revenues. The potential economic profit to support the hospital could have been the stimulus behind Gante's idea to elaborate a primer aimed at an audience as wide as possible, targeting in this case not only the Nahua but also the increasing population of creole and mestizo children. If this supposition is correct, it is possible that there was an even earlier printing of the *Cartilla* than the 1568 edition Valton mentioned in his work, likely dating somewhere between 1553 and 1556.

If we accept that Gante was targeting with the *Cartilla* a mixed audience of Castilian, creole, mestizo, and Nahua children, he unwittingly started a process of cultural contact in which language played an important part. This singularity makes the *Cartilla* an important text for understanding cultural contact during the early years of the evangelization: the primer can be seen as a reflection of the emerging society of New Spain.

14. Josefina Muriel, *Hospitales de la Nueva España: fundaciones del siglo XVI* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1990), 116–117.

15. This was a very common financing method and saved the crown added costs. Completing this task, however, was not easy for the administrators of such places as the Hospital de los Naturales. They did not print the material themselves, but needed to enter into agreements with the printers regarding the publishing of their material and the resulting financial implications. Pedro Rueda Ramírez, “Las cartillas para aprender a leer,” 23; Fermín de los Reyes Gómez, *El libro en España y América: legislación y censura (siglos XV–XVIII)* (Madrid: Arco/Libros, 2000).

16. Gante, petition, February 15, 1552, cited in Ernesto Torre Villar, *Fray Pedro de Gante, maestro y civilizador de América* (Mexico City: Seminario de Cultura Mexicana, 1973), 46–55.

## LITERACY, LANGUAGE DISSEMINATION, AND CULTURAL CONTACT

Were the Nahuatl commoners able to read the *Cartilla*? Did the friars instruct them on how to read and write, as they did with the noble children? Little is known regarding literacy instruction for macehualtin children. According to Jorge Klor de Alva, colonial records show that Nahuatl notaries employed a vernacular form of written Nahuatl that probably evolved from the *macehuallabhtolli* (or common speech spoken by the macehualtin), rather than the more elegant and elaborate speech of the pipiltin.<sup>17</sup> Grammars and doctrines composed by missionaries, such as the *Doctrina* by Gante, employed the speech of the pipiltin. It is logical to think that if the notaries were taught to read and write at mendicant schools they must have written their documents in pipiltin Nahuatl. The existence of notarial documents in a vernacular form of written Nahuatl, however, seems to suggest, according to Klor de Alva, that the missionaries did not have complete control over the literacy development of all Nahuas.

According to Klor de Alva, it is quite likely that literacy was passed from peer to peer rather than only through teachings at missionary schools, thereby reaching other layers of society. This indicates that literacy was much more widespread than previously thought and not restricted to pipiltin.<sup>18</sup> Although the author agrees with Klor de Alva's argument, Gante's primer could indicate that the macehualtin, or at least some of them, did learn the basics of literacy with the help of primers such as Gante's own during morning school.

There is another question related to the language acquisition uses of the *Cartilla*: Was it intended to be used by missionaries to teach Spanish to the Nahuatl population? It is interesting to note that missionaries successfully employed Nahuatl in most of their evangelical endeavors, resulting in the extensive dissemination of Nahuatl to other geographical areas and reinstating it as the official language of colonization. However, policies regarding the language of instruction in Christian matters were never static.<sup>19</sup> During the sixteenth

17. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Nahuatl Colonial Discourse and the Appropriation of the (European) Other," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 37:77 (January–March 1992): 27–28.

18. Klor de Alva, "Nahuatl Colonial Discourse," 27–28.

19. Amber Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico: Colonial Subjectivity and the Circulation of Native Knowledge," *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and painting Spanish colonialism*: 124–143 (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 282–283; Victor Infantes, "La educación impresa," 231; G. Payas Puigarnau, "The Role of Translation in the Building of National Identities: The Case of Colonial Mexico 1521–1821" (PhD diss.: Ottawa University, 2005), 7–8; Elena Irene Zamora Ramírez, "Los problemas de traducción del catecismo en América en el siglo XVI," *Lingua, cultura e discorso nella traduzione dei francescani* (Perugia: Pubblicazione dell'Università per Stranieri di Perugia, 2011), 567–568; Mark



century, the crown published several edicts related to language, often contradictory in nature. In 1550, the king signed two warrants, one for the viceroy and the other for the Dominican General of the Province, regarding the substitution of Nahuatl for Castilian for the evangelical instruction of the Nahuas. The crown considered Nahuatl less suitable to transmit the Christian message.<sup>20</sup>

We cannot discard the possibility that the missionaries employed Gante's primer to address these royal warrants. However, missionaries' reaction to the crown's measures generally was to disregard them, favoring instead preaching in indigenous languages. It was probably the missionaries' reticence to introduce Castilian that forced Philip II to issue a royal warrant in 1570, in which he declared Nahuatl to be the official language of all the indigenous peoples of New Spain. However, by 1596 another royal warrant found a middle ground; it restated that clergymen were required to know Mesoamerican languages, but at the same time ordered that Castilian be implemented in convent schools in case indigenous peoples were interested in learning Castilian.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, a trilingual primer in Latin, Castilian, and Nahuatl could have helped Castilian children to learn some Nahuatl vocabulary. Indeed, Amber Brian, in her article regarding the learning of indigenous languages by Spaniards in New Spain, observes that few studies have centered on Nahuatl language acquisition by non-missionary Spanish residents.<sup>22</sup> This could be the result of the limited number of sources that reflect Spaniards' fluency in Nahuatl and how they might have acquired the language. Despite their scarcity, these sources show that there was more fluency in Mesoamerican languages on the part of the Spanish than scholars previously thought. Spaniards in New Spain had several incentives to learn Mesoamerican languages, especially as the largest part of the population was indigenous. By 1570, only 0.5 percent of the population was Spanish or creole, and Spanish communities were surrounded by large indigenous communities. Added to this, Spanish towns required a large indigenous workforce, making communication with indigenous peoples

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Christensen, "The Use of Nahuatl in Evangelization and the Ministry of Sebastian Assumption College," *Ethnohistory* 59:4 (Fall 2012): 692.

20. Bravo Ahuja, *Los materiales didácticos*, 33; Pilar Máñez, "Los primeros registros alfabéticos en la Nueva España," *Boletín del Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas* 8:1–2 (2013): 14; Richard Konetzke, *Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de Hispanoamérica, 1493–1810*, vol.1 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1953), 272; Justino Cortés Castellanos, *El catecismo en pictogramas de Fr. Pedro de Gante*, (Madrid: Publicaciones de la Fundación Universitaria Española, Biblioteca Histórica Hispanoamericana, vol.10, 1987), 50.

21. Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 282–283; Payas Puigarnau, *The Role of Translation*, 7–8; Infantes, "La educación impresa," 231; Christensen, "The Use of Nahuatl in Evangelization," 692.

22. Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 279.

essential for the Spanish landowners who needed to deal with their workers on a daily basis.<sup>23</sup>

However, how Spaniards learned Nahuatl is still unclear. As Martin Nesvig observes, creoles were born into a multiethnic society with profound interaction with Nahuas, and it is probable they learned Nahuatl by immersion, as there does not seem to have been a formal way for Castilian-speaking people to learn Mesoamerican languages.<sup>24</sup> Intensive contact must indeed have helped. Spaniards were in constant contact with their indigenous servants, and creole children must have been raised by Nahua domestic servants, allowing the children to become bilingual.<sup>25</sup> Francisco Cervantes de Salazar highlights, for example, that during the second half of the sixteenth century, Spanish women were fluent in Nahuatl, probably because they needed to be in close contact with servants of Nahua origin.<sup>26</sup> Nesvig suggests that Nahuatl was becoming the second language of many Spaniards, reflecting a popular vernacular culture.<sup>27</sup>

It is probable that material such as Gante's primer was, without being intended to do so, employed by Castilian-speaking people to learn some basic Nahuatl words and vocabulary. It is also possible that it targeted a new generation of creole or mestizo children who would grow up bilingual. Some of these children even became translators and interpreters, for example, Alonso de Molina (1515–85). The story of this Franciscan missionary is perhaps one of the success stories of the transculturation process. Molina, who was the son of a Spanish conquistador, learned Nahuatl as a child by playing with Nahua children. By 1524, he was sent on Cortés's request to live with the Franciscans, and in 1528 he became a member of the Franciscan order.<sup>28</sup> Molina went on to become a prolific missionary author whose work for the evangelization was indispensable. He composed the first printed grammar in Nahuatl, the *Arte de la lengua mexicana y castellana* (1571) and worked in close collaboration with the Nahuas, in particular with the Texcocan Ribas, one of the attendees of the

23. Solange Alberro, *Del gachupín al criollo: o de cómo los españoles dejaron de serlo*, (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2006), 55; Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 280–281.

24. Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 286–287; Martin Nesvig, "Spanish Men, Indigenous Language, and Informal Interpreters in Postcontact Mexico," *Ethnohistory* 59:4 (2012): 747.

25. Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 286–287.

26. Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, *Crónica de la Nueva España*. No. 97. Hispanic society of America, (1914):33, cited in Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 286.

27. Nesvig, "Spanish Men, Indigenous Language, and Informal Interpreters in Postcontact Mexico," 747.

28. Roland Grass, "America's First Linguists: Their Objectives and Methods," *Hispania*, vol. 48, No. 1 (March 1965), 60; Asunción Hernández de León-Portilla, "Fray Alonso de Molina, lexicógrafo e indigenista," *Caravelle, Cahiers du Monde Hispanique et Luso-Brazilien* 76/77 (2001): 236; Jerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (Mexico: Antigua Librería [1596] 1870), 220, 551, 685.

Colegio de la Santa Cruz, who was exceptionally fluent in Latin and who helped Molina write the *Arte y vocabulario mexicano*.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The *Cartilla para enseñar a leer* is one of the most complex pedagogic tools produced by missionaries during the beginning of the evangelic enterprise. Gante's primer represents in many ways the ultimate device for the introduction of the European Christian mentality. The *Cartilla* was an abridged exposition of Christian subjects, presenting briefly the key prayers of the Christian repertoire in three languages, whereas more complex subjects such as the enemies of the soul, and the corporeal senses appear only in Castilian, or in Castilian and Latin. The fact that only the principal prayers were translated into Nahuatl, and not the most complex content, would suggest that the primer was targeting the large population of macehualtin.

Introducing more complex subjects to the Nahua macehualtin probably was seen as difficult, as most of them were deemed to have very basic intellectual capabilities not suitable to comprehending the intricate concepts of Christianity. However, it is probable that by means of the *Cartilla* Gante and other missionaries employing it taught the macehualtin children basic literacy skills, in this way starting a vernacular cultural undercurrent. Such a sequence of events would help to explain the vast amount of Nahuatl writings recorded not in the elaborate writing style of the pipiltin employed in missionary devotional texts, but in the everyday language of commoners. In this way, Nahuas were able to articulate the conquest and incorporate themselves into the new society, acquiring thereby a voice in a context and a society in which the book and the written word had become the primary communication vehicles.

As already stated, having the majority of the text in Castilian and Latin suggests that the *Cartilla* was targeted at a mixed audience of Castilian, creole, mestizo and Nahua children. Unwittingly, however, by addressing a mixed audience, several processes of cultural contact were kick-started. The primer was employed to educate children who would have been acquainted with two languages, highlighting the complexity of the cultural context in which they were living. As mentioned previously, it has been difficult to discern the ways in which creole children learnt Nahuatl. The author agrees with Brian, who

29. Federico Beals Nagel Beililcke, "El aprendizaje del idioma náhuatl entre los franciscanos y los jesuitas en la Nueva España," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 24 (1994): 424; Brian, "Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Narratives of the Conquest of Mexico," 289; Roland Grass, "America's First Linguists: Their Objectives and Methods," 62.

argues that they must have learned the basics of Nahuatl through close contact with the Nahua population. In addition, it is quite likely that some children picked up some basic vocabulary from this primer. It is interesting to note, that by the same means Nahua children could have also learned Castilian, thus creating new channels of communication. We do not know the extent of the primer's influence but it is not difficult to imagine that it was quite important, given that it was deemed necessary to produce a reprint and suggesting that the primer was employed widely by the Franciscans in their educative programs.

The *Cartilla*, as the available evidence suggests, was a cheap but very successful device made available to the various sociocultural groups that made up New Spain. It was the ultimate multifaceted tool of evangelization; it could have been used by Nahuas, Castilian, creole, and mestizo children alike. In this way, the primer can be seen as a multivectorial transculturation tool that served to integrate the various layers of the composite society, and thus as an embodiment of the spirit of the early years of New Spain.

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