

Living Languages as the Acoustic Ecologies within the Contemporary Literatures of Anahuac

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Indigenous nations will spearhead a change, a seism. We will do away with the exacerbated racism of the middle class. They tell us, your language sounds so pretty, so exotic, so poetic, so ancestral. But languages do not sound poetic. They sound like they do, because they are living.

—Mardonio Carballo

In personal interviews, Nahua writer Mardonio Carballo comments on how annoyed he gets when people say that Nahuatl, the “language of the Aztecs or Mexicas,” is a “pretty language.” He criticizes this adulation as a demeaning, veiled misrepresentation of Nahuas and other Indigenous nations as exotic rather than sources of present-day knowledge production. Carballo views Indigenous languages as part of a strategy to fight racism and enable social change. With his admonition ever present, I give a brief overview of contemporary literary production’s role in performing the permanence and continuity of Nahuatl and its importance within social activism.

Carballo recently underscored the significance of this literary production as part of a wider campaign on social media to strike down Article 230 in Mexico’s Federal Telecommunications Law. If approved, this law would have prohibited Indigenous languages on national media. Indeed, Article 230 clearly constituted a form of linguistic discrimination, excluding Indigenous voices from mass media and amplifying the hegemony of what scholar Luis Cárcamo-Huechante (2013) calls “acoustic colonialism.” In turn, Nahua authors like Carballo have promoted an acoustic ecology that thrives on a multiplicity of perspectives. They share

a common goal to create an environment in which Indigenous languages are treated as equally as valuable as hegemonic languages, and Nahuas are viewed as nothing less than full-fledged knowledge producers.¹



No al art. 230 de la
Ley Federal de Telecomunicaciones y Radiodifusión

Image published on Mardonio Carballo’s Facebook wall. Printed in *La Jornada*, January 20, 2016. It reads “I vs. linguistic discrimination: No to article 230 in the Federal Telecommunications and Broadcasting Law.”

In order to point toward the influence of that language in Nahua authors’ activism, I would like to share concrete examples of the Nahuatl they use.² One case in point is a growing resistance to the term “revitalization” (*revitalización*). In part, this opposition emerges from a perception in Nahua communities that outside organizations champion “revitalization” and use Nahuatl studies to gain academic prestige with little or no benefit to Nahua communities. Moreover, “revitalization” erroneously suggests that the language is in

its final death throes and must be resuscitated. Instead, Nahuas increasingly use *kiyolchikaua* or *yolchikaualistli*.

Kiyolchikaua literally means “to strengthen [use of Nahuatl] with the heart.” This term relates to corn metaphors, as it can also mean “to make hard like a kernel of corn.” With the notion of *kiyolchikaua* in mind, in this article I want to highlight authors’ diverse efforts to strengthen use of the Nahuatl language. Nahua literary production surged in the 1990s after the Zapatista rebellion and protests against the 1992 quincentennial celebrations of Christopher Columbus. Nonetheless, Contemporary Nahua literature by no means began with these events. A key moment is the publication of Nahua author Luz Jiménez’s narratives in the sixties and seventies. Jiménez helped to shift academic focus from colonial Nahua documents to contemporary Nahua production—although not without its problems, as Jiménez was viewed more as a carrier of oral tradition and not recognized as the author of her narratives. In a trickster story, she shows the importance of plays on language between Spanish and Nahuatl. A Spaniard sees a Nahua scraping the ground, and the Nahua tells him “minax” (they sting) because bumblebees are there. The Spaniard misinterprets this word as “minas,” a gold or silver mine (Jiménez 1979, 166-167). In appreciation for the Nahua supposedly informing him where a mine was located, the Spaniard gifts his horse and pistol and orders him to move along since the mine now belongs to him.

Similar plays on language appear throughout other texts, as well as in daily life in communities. For example, Nahua writer Natalio Hernández, from the Huasteca Veracruzana, tells the story of a government leader who visited a Nahua community and wanted to know if the community members felt Mexican. The people replied that they indeed were because they spoke Mexican (*mejicanoj*), and rather the outside leader was the one who was not truly Mexican (Hernández 2009, 59-60). While the term *nahuatl* has gained use particularly in recent decades, within Nahuatl communities it was (and in many instances still is) more common to refer to the language as *mejicanoj*. As literary critic Kelly S. McDonough observes, turns of phrase and trickster tales like

those described by Jiménez and Hernández “win small victories in a chronically unjust society” (2014, 141). In many instances they provincialize Spanish and those who consider themselves superior or model citizens for speaking it.

In these negotiations between languages, there are often hidden meanings, such as Natalio Hernández’s translation of the Mexican Constitution into Nahuatl. Where the original Spanish declares that the land pertains to the nation, in Nahuatl the text sustains that it belongs first and foremost to *totlalnantzin*, our earth mother (Hernández 2010, 49).³ This translation features an acoustic ecology that includes all living beings and the landscape.

The landscape’s centrality is also evident in *Anahuac* (by the water) for Nahua regions of Mexico, and *altepetl* or *pilaltepetsij* (a word composed of *atl*, “water,” and *tepetl*, “mountain or hill”) to refer to cities and communities. These terms point to natural surroundings and highlight the artificiality of nation-state borders. In this sense, *Anahuac* resembles the Guna term *Abiayala* (“land in full maturity”) proposed as an alternative to “Latin America,” though on a more limited scale.⁴

Natalio Hernández’s book of poetry *Xochikoskatl* (1985) helped set the stage for a stream of publications afterward. Later in the nineties, to describe *interculturalidad* he began to use *ome pamitl*, literally “two furrows,” “two themes,” or “two lines on the page.” This metaphor relates to the furrows in which the corn crop grows and imagines a space in which different knowledges come together, though not necessarily in a romantic, harmonic synthesis. In his versions of poems in Spanish, one can see the difficulties in communicating the worldviews contained within the Nahuatl. Perspectives related to walking, cognition, and ceremonial language are in many instances untranslatable without extensive footnotes due to their complexity. Hernández refused to translate his most recent book of poetry, *Patlani huitzitzilin* (The Flight of the Hummingbird; 2016). The majority of authors who write in English or Spanish do not feel pressured to translate their own works, and Hernández’s refusal reflects an effort to place Nahuatl on the same level as hegemonic languages.

In her unpublished book of poetry *Tlaoxtika in tlajtol / Desgranando la palabra* (2012), Ethel Xochitiotzin Pérez (Tlaxcala) transforms common Nahuatl metaphors involving maize to position women as decision-makers within and outside their communities. In doing so, she subverts traditional objectification of them and reiteration of male dominance. It is difficult to translate the title *Tlaoxtika in tlajtol* into English, as *tlaoxtika* refers to drying out corncobs and then brushing off the kernels. Xochitiotzin translates the title into Spanish as “Desgranando la palabra,” literally “dekerneling the word.”⁵ I choose to translate it as *Grinding Corn* because the kernels are brushed off to grind them and make *masa* (ground up corn for making tortillas). This becomes a metaphor for writing, as writers bring words together, each word like a kernel, to create something new. This in turn is an apt metaphor for Xochitiotzin’s work and Nahuatl women authors in general, as they “grind Nahuatl words” and transform them into a space where women are recognized as agents.

In a recent article, Nahuatl writer Martín Tonalmeyotl (Guerrero) also brings attention to perspectives grounded in Nahuatl by analyzing how the word for “winning” in Nahuatl, *tetlane*, is violent and negative.⁶ The most approximate translation to its positive meaning in Spanish or English is *timoyolkokoltis* (“to make one’s heart ache” or “to make the heart ache to achieve something”). As Tonalmeyotl explains, someone who triumphs has memory of a painful past. Such pain appears in the depictions within his poetry. Tonalmeyotl denounces social injustices committed against Nahuatl communities in Guerrero, Mexico. He recently opened a reading in Tlaxcala of his bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish book of poetry *Tlalkatsajtsilistle / Ritual de los olvidados* (2016) with the question, “How can you talk about flowers when there are people dying in your community?” Within Tonalmeyotl’s *Tlalkatsajtsilistle*, narcotraffickers and state officials are indistinguishable in a massive-scale illegal economy that nulls even the thin promises of neoliberal multiculturalism. He declares that his “songs” seek to “*tenakastlaposkej, / teixtlaposkej*” (open people’s ears, / open their eyes [to these injustices]).

Araceli Tecolapa Alejo (“Araceli Patlani” or “Astronauta de Tlaltipaktli”) similarly addresses the corruption within her municipality of Zitlala, Guerrero. In “Ni choka kentla siuatl / Lloro como mujer,” Tecolapa begins “Ni choka kentla siuatl / pampa kox niueli kox ninauatis, / kox nineki kox ninauatis” (“I cry like a woman / because I cannot stay silent, / I do not want to stay silent”).⁷ She highlights the importance of an affective intelligence in the face of the injustices in her region. Tecolapa calls for *chikaualistli* (strength), repeated in the verse *niyolchikauas* (I will become strong of heart), the term described earlier as an alternative to “revitalization.” She criticizes government leaders as indifferent: “Xkeman oniktak tla uan trato tech tlayekana tla yaka ki chokiltokej” (I have never seen a governor cry for his people). As part of her efforts in the social media campaign #Defensoras, una semilla del cambio (#Female Defenders, a seed for change), Tecolapa aids Indigenous women in contexts of violence to help them feel empowered.

Ateri Miyawatl (Guerrero) is a cultural promoter who recently published a trilingual Nahuatl-Catalán-English book of poetry entitled *Neijmantototsintle / La tristessa és un ocell / Sadness Is a Bird* (2018). Similar to Tonalmeyotl and Tecolapa, Miyawatl represents the poetic word as a cathartic outlet to articulate the sorrows in her region, which the poetic voice describes as a quivering bird set upon her heart. Miyawatl uses the word *xochiameya* (water springs up like flowers) to describe this catharsis. This word describes the tears pouring down one’s face, and then the healing that comes by putting words on the page. *Xochitl* (flower) is the principal metaphor to describe poetry itself, *xochitlajtoli* (flowered words). Miyawatl currently leads the project Originaria, which is touring different regions of Mexico and aims to publish women writers in all 68 Indigenous languages.

Yankuik Metztl (Isabel) Martínez Nopaltécatl spurns the mythologization by Mexican national discourse to which Mardonio Carballo alludes in the epigraph. Martínez Nopaltécatl focuses on creating poetic images using the linguistic tools from the Nahuatl of her own community in the Sierra of Zongolica, without feeling a need to turn to supposedly prestigious forms of classical Nahuatl.

From the municipality of Zongolica, Veracruz, she uses the pen name Yankuik Metztlí (New Moon). She also is the songwriter for a Nahuatl heavy metal band. The genres of rap, hard rock, and heavy metal have attracted a number of Nahuatl artists because of their unabashed quest to expose hypocrisy with harsh sonorities rather than, according to these artists' descriptions, singing of nonexistent idyllic images that the privileged class and official government discourse attempt to inculcate into the public. In her poetry Martínez Nopaltécatl uses *yolosewía* (extinguish my heart), which can signify both to extinguish and to calm. Heavy metal serves as a cathartic mode of expression giving voice to these plights often obscured in public discourse. These compositions subvert numerous stereotypes tied to Nahuatl, among them the idea that it is not a modern language. Audiences are often surprised to hear, within a contemporary music genre, lyrics composed by a Nahuatl woman in what the general public considers an extinct language.

Mardonio Carballo performs with a "prog rock" group that likewise gives voice to plights through combining multiple musical styles. Carballo is from the Huasteca Veracruzana, where there is the largest Nahuatl population. He has nonetheless spent most of his life outside this region. In his teens, he moved to Mexico City to complete his high school studies and has lived there since, joining a large pan-Indigenous urban population. Among the most innovative artists of contemporary Indigenous cultural production, Carballo works with many types of media, including radio, poetry, documentary, short stories, television, and progressive rock. He uproots stereotypical and patriarchal misrepresentations of First Peoples. This is evident in his multimedia (book/CD/DVD) text *Las horas perdidas* (2014), which vies for an affective space in which the gender of the poetic voice and their lover is ambivalent, and on Facebook with Carballo's participation in LGBTQ movements. Acceptance of a gender spectrum connects with the work's aim to defend linguistic diversity against Article 230 and convene large groups in street protests. The poetic voice in *Las horas perdidas* describes a practice that consists of a person retracing their steps before they die, in Nahuatl literally "to gather one's feet," as Carballo code-switches from Spanish into Nahuatl: *moijxipejpena*

(*ijxi* or *ikxi*, "feet," and *pejpena*, to "collect" or "choose").⁸ The poem then quotes Gil Scott Heron's song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and emphasizes that Nahuatl perspectives are for the most part not being televised and, as Carballo denounced in his campaign against Article 230, are being actively suppressed. He accentuates an affective space that values Nahuatl knowledges as part of a revolution—this *moixipejpena*—as the word "revolution" itself means a return, a rolling back, a retracing of steps. Through his works, Carballo seeks to retrace the steps of Nahuatl knowledges and perspectives and underscore their importance in a dynamic present and future.

In this article I have shared specific examples of Nahuatl used by a wide array of authors and its prominence in their activism. This overview is necessarily incomplete due to space constraints as well as the abundance of contemporary works in Nahuatl.⁹ This panorama is even more incomplete because it focuses solely on Nahuatl, when there are 67 other Indigenous languages in Mexico. Language activism as a strategy against racism is evident in authors' works in those languages too, such as those from Mixe writer Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil and Mè'phàà writer Hubert Matiúwàà'. Nahuatl writers seek to open a space for these many languages, as evidenced for example in Mardonio Carballo's fight against Article 230 and Ateri Miyawatl's project to publish women writers in all 68 languages. To refer to the Indigenous nations that speak them, *maseuali* or *macehualli* has become the common term. In the past, *macehualli* was employed to humble Indigenous peoples (roughly equivalent to "peon"), but Nahuats have reappropriated it as an overarching term within Indigenous movements that remember a shared history of colonial oppression and propose "decolonizing" strategies.¹⁰ As the authors in this survey of Anahuac signal, *kiyolchikaua*, strengthening the use of Indigenous languages, constitutes an integral part of those strategies.

Notes

Epigraph original in Spanish: "Los pueblos originarios van a ser la punta de lanza de un cambio, de un sismo. Vamos a acabar con el racismo exacerbado de la clase media. Nos dicen, qué bonita, qué exótica, qué poética, qué ancestral suena tu lengua. Pero las lenguas no suenan poéticas. Suenan como suenan, porque están vivas." Quoted in Andrea Rodés, "Las lenguas suenan como suenan, porque están vivas," *Al Día*, October 25, 2017, <http://aldianews.com/es/articulos/culture/mardonio-carballo-las-lenguas-suenan-como-suenan-porque-est-n-vivas/50394>. Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

- ¹ See Jesús Aranda, "Gana el poeta Mardonio Carballo amparo contra discriminación lingüística," *La Jornada*, January 20, 2016, <http://semanal.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/2016/01/20/ampara-corte-al-poeta-mardonio-carballo-para-radiodifusion-en-nahuatl-3593.html>.
- ² For a survey of contemporary Nahuatl literature that explores heated debates regarding orthography, generational tensions, and the exclusion of women writers, see Adam Coon, "Introduction to Contemporary Nahuatl Literature," Revitalizing Endangered Languages, October 19, 2013, <http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/28/31/introduction-to-contemporary-nahuatl-literature>, and "To In or Not to In: The Politics Behind the Usage or Disavowal of Classical Nahuatl within Contemporary Nahuatl Literature," Revitalizing Endangered Languages, October 19, 2013, <http://www.revitalization.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/Nahuatl/31/30/to-in-or-not-to-in-the-politics-behind-the-us>.
- ³ Hernández also translates "national territory" as *Anahuac*.
- ⁴ For a detailed discussion of *Abiyala*, see Emilio Del Valle Escalante, "For Abiyala to Live, the Americas Must Die," *NAIS: Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association* 5, no.1 (2018).
- ⁵ "Shelling" is technically the correct term, but this word has fallen out of use for corn along with the practice of drying out maize in the United States and Europe.
- ⁶ See Martín Tonalmeyotl, "¿Qué ganamos los pueblos originarios? Ante el triunfo de López Obrador," *La Jornada: Ojarasca*, no. 255, julio 2018, <http://ojarasca.jornada.com.mx/2018/07/14/que-ganamos-los-pueblos-originarios-ante-el-triunfo-de-lopez-obrador-8789.html>.
- ⁷ Published in *Sinfin*, no. 21.4 (January 2017): 34-35.
- ⁸ *Pejpena* as a loanword in Spanish, *pepenar*, has negative connotations—to scavenge for trash—that are absent in the original language. In Nahuatl, *pejpena* refers to the gathering precious corn kernels from off the ground.
- ⁹ For a more extensive list of writers, see Coon, "Introduction to Contemporary Nahuatl Literature."
- ¹⁰ Here I echo Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) use of *decolonizing* to refer to a conceptual cartography of struggle mapped around on five dimensions: critical consciousness, reimagining the world, the joining of disparate ideas, disturbing the status quo, and the concept of structure.

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