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Poems and Songs of the Cuicapicqueh, Contemporary Nahuatl Poets

Willard Gingerich

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**Miguel León-Portilla** is a distinguished scholar of the ancient and modern cultures of Mesoamerica. A professor emeritus at the Institute for Historical Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, he is the author of many books, among them *The Broken Spears* and *Aztec Thought and Culture*. He is now Mexico's ambassador to UNESCO in Paris.

**Katherine McNamara** was schooled in the history of ideas at Marywood College and Cornell University, and received a *bourse* from the French government for her research on Marcel Mauss and his theory of magic. In 1976 she left Paris for Alaska. For four years she lived on the frontier and in an Athabaskan village, working as an itinerant poet in the schools. She returned in 1983, remained for several more years, and made her last trip to the North in 1989. She lives now in New York, and is the author of the forthcoming *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a memoir.

**David L. Moore** is now completing a dissertation on contemporary Native American literature at the University of Washington. He taught English at Salish Kootenai College on the Flathead Reservation in Montana through most of the 1980s, after spending much of the previous decade teaching in South Dakota and there studying Indian history, literature, and the Lakota language. He is particularly interested in the pedagogical uses of postcolonial theories of ethnicity for Indian students.
POEMS AND SONGS OF THE CUICAPICQUE, 
CONTEMPORARY NAHUATL POETS

Miguel León-Portilla

Translated, with notes, by Willard Gingerich

Nothing could better serve as introduction to an initial group of modern poets in the Nahuatl language, ancient but still-living tongue of the Aztecs, than the words Miguel Espinosa Barrios, native teacher of Hueyapan, Morelos, affixed by way of introduction to the first issue of a newspaper which, with Robert Barlow, he began publishing on May 12, 1950. Introducing the distribution of Mexihcatl Itonalama, “The Mexican's Newspaper,” he announced with obvious pride and a touch of exaggeration that the paper was directed to the “two million indigenous Mexicans who speak this language.” We know now that the number of persons who kept this language alive in 1950 was slightly less than a million, while at present (1990) they approach one and a half million.

The significance of the words of Miguel Barrios is the manner in which they anticipate the contemporary renaissance among those who, having Nahuatl as their mother tongue, are now studying its grammar and creating its new literature:

Mexihcatl Itonalama has as its purpose the stimulation of reading and writing in Mexican [Nahuatl] among the two million Mexican persons who speak Mexican: To this end it will make use of descriptions of their customs, their traditional fiestas, dances, songs, dramas, and contemporary events—climatological and social. It will also publicize pre-Cortesian customs with the intent of showing that, in spite of the Spanish conquest, there remains an intimate line of relation from the past to the present. It will show that Mexico ought to be Mexico through the Mexicans themselves, since our ancestors gave the name “Mexico” to our country and a coat of arms to the flag that sustains us.

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INITIATION OF THE NEW PERSONAL CREATIONS IN NAHUATL

From among all the songs and poems that began to be composed a little before Miguel Barrios would write the paragraph quoted above, and from other more recent productions, a selection is gathered here. Beginning with the identified creators of songs who wrote prior to 1950, I will adduce several poems from the work of the following.

Enrique Villamil (c. 1890–c. 1960) was also a native of Tepoztlán Morelos. He was a jealous guardian of the traditions of his homeland, among them those of the pueblos of Tepoztécatl. He wrote and published various works, some of great lyrical strength. Reproduced below is Quenin ca in yolli, “What is Life,” and Caxtilteca in Tenochtitlan huan tlacolica yohualii, “The Spaniards in Tenochtitlan and the ‘Night of Sadness’.”

Pedro Barra y Valenzuela (1894–1978), a native of Chicontepec, Veracruz, cultivated historical investigation and the study of the language as well as literature in Nahuatl. The scarcity of the facts concerning Barra y Valenzuela that have come down to us testify to the low esteem which until recently has been accorded anything relative to the language that was once the lingua franca of Anahuac, “the Land by the Seus.” He published a book of poems in Nahuatl with Spanish translation, Nahuaxochmiltl, “Nahua Garden” (México: Editorial Polis, 1939), as well as The Nahuas, History, Life and Language (ed. Bartolomé Brucqu, México, 1953). From among his poetic productions I have chosen several of great sensibility which sing the marvels of the native fauna and flora.

Santos Acevedo López y de la Cruz (1903– ), a native of Xochimilco, fought in the Mexican revolution and achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. A descendent of Martin de la Cruz, the Nahua doctor who wrote on prehispanic medicine, he has been the chronicler of Xochimilco and author of a sizeable number of works about the city. He has published a volume of poems entitled Macethualcuicatli, “Songs of Common Man” (México: Vargas Rea, 1957). Several of his compositions have also been circulated through Estudios de Cultura Nahua, v. 15, pp. 237–244.

It bears mentioning that other songs and poems were also circulated by the newspaper, fruit of the creativity of the above-mentioned Miguel Espinosa Barrios, who sometimes used the pseudonym of Miguel Xochipapalotl Atezcatl. Also included in the paper were compositions of Macedonia Mendoza, of Xochimilco, author of brief poems characterized by their subtle irony and occasional veiled erotic overtones; María de Jesús Villanueva, of Tuxpan, Jalisco, who must be considered one of the last literary practitioners in the dialect of that region; Zacaria Sánchez, Leandro García, and other cuicapicquis of that fertile town of Tepoztlán; Eloy Alvarez of Cuauhtlinanco, Puebla; Eduardo Rosas, of Acaplixca, D.F.; Victoriano Velasco, of Xochimilco; Marciano González, of San Pedro Actopan, D.F.; and Tomás González of Atlahpolco, D.F. As we can see, the number of those who continue cultivating the art of the cuicatli in Nahuatl is not as diminished as we might suppose.
A YOUNGER GROUP OF NAHUATL POETS

In more recent times a new flourishing of poetry in Nahuatl has occurred, owing to individuals in different regions of Mexico who, with dialect variations, maintain the life of this language. Among the motivations that impel the authors of this poetic activity to seek self-expression, two in particular stand out. One is to reaffirm the cultural identity itself; the other, to make it possible that living speakers of the language have access to a new literature, one near their own sentiments, concerns, and aspirations as felt by others within that same culture. Another characteristic that these modern forgers of song share is having had some form of academic preparation. Just as some have earned the title of Normal Teacher, others have studied at the National School of Anthropology and History or in the School of Philosophy and Letters of the National Autonomous University, Seminar on Nahuatl Culture, or in some of the provincial universities. It is important to note, however, that in every case we are speaking of individuals whose maternal language is Nahuatl and whose profound concern is to strengthen and extend it.

One such author of an already ample and widely recognized poetic corpus is Natalio Hernández Hernández, born in Ixhuatlan de Madero in the state of Veracruz. Since obtaining his title as normal teacher he has dedicated himself completely to the tasks of education as well as to the cultivation of his native tongue, which is Nahuatl in one of its Veracruz Huastec variants. Gifted with exceptional qualities of leadership, he has been one of the promoters and president of the Organization of Nahuatl Professionals, Nechicolistl i len Nahuallajonaj Masehuallamachtianij. Employed in the field of bilingual education under the Secretary of Public Education, he has sponsored the publication of Nahuatl grammars designed specifically for native speakers in a variety of dialects. To teacher Natalio Hernández we owe the following books, among others, in which his poetry is collected: Xochicoscatl “Flower Necklace” (Editorial Capulli, 1985) and Sempoalxochitl “Twenty Flower” (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988). His creations have circulated also in newspapers and journals, including Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl from the National Autonomous University, and Caravelle, University of Toulouse. The acute sensibility to which his poems give testimony, as well as the intensity with which he often affirms the affection and pride he feels for his culture, have awakened a vital interest and appreciation in his ever-expanding circle of readers. We should add that Natalio Hernández has performed readings of his work in indigenous communities as well as in cultural salons, among them the National Museum of Anthropology.

Delfino Hernández Hernández, brother of Natalio, was also born in Ixhuatlan de Madero, Veracruz. He also earned the title of Normal Teacher and has followed a career parallel to that of Natalio. In addition to having worked for the Secretary of Public Education, teacher Delfino Hernández gives classes in Nahuatl at cultural centers sponsored by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes throughout Mexico. (As a student in the Seminar of Nahuatl Culture of the National Autonomous University, he has approached the under-
standing of Nahuatl literature, in its classical form, with attention and zeal.) In his poetry and narratives, both exhibiting deep sentiment and a magisterial style, he stands out as one of the most distinguished creators of contemporary Nahuatl literature. His work has won him honors in a variety of literary competitions. Through the circulation of this work in newspapers and journals, including *Estudios de Cultural Náhuatl*, as well as through readings he has given in various places, he has become one of the most widely recognized of all authors who write in Nahuatl. We also owe to him several grammatical works, some for use in primary schools and others for advanced students of the language.

A native of Xalitla, in the state of Guerrero, Alfredo Ramírez, who holds a master’s in ethnology from the National School of Anthropology and History, dedicates a part of his time to poetry. In his productions, where one feels the beat of inspiration from the ancient songmakers, the cuicacique, feelings, images, and ideas flourish, reflections of his own ambiance and way of life. In comparison to other contemporary poets for whom Nahuatl is the maternal tongue, the poetry of Alfredo Ramírez conveys what one might call a more personal tone. No small number of his compositions are songs of sadness, modern ienocuicat, “orphan songs,” new jades that prove that the capacity for original literature endures even today in the cultural world of the Nahuas. Alfredo Ramírez, a former member of the Seminar of Nahuatl Culture, has published various of his works in *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* and in other journals and papers.

Many will be surprised to learn that, in addition to these three conspicuous contemporary Nahuatl poets, there are others—not a few—who are beginning to be recognized. I refer not to the well-known and already recognized masters of Nahuatl writing such as Librado Silva Galeana and Carlos López Avila, natives of Santa Ana Tlacotenco in the Federal District and known especially for their narratives, but to various others also from the Huastec region of Veracruz. I will limit my mention here to a small anthology titled *Xochitlajololokskatli: Poésie Náhuatl Contemporánea*, compiled by Joel Martínez Hernández, a teacher, and published by the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala in 1987. From its riches of nearly one hundred poems, I offer below a small sample. Looking upon such a rich stream, which grows by the day, one can only think of the prophetic words of that prehispanic songmaker who said, “My songs shall not cease, nor my flowers die; singer, I raise them up.”

Of the new treasure of “flowers and songs” in Nahuatl those presented here in the original language and translation are only a sample. The history of modern Nahuatl literature and its rich universe of poetic expression awaits further study.

**Enrique Villamil**

**Caxtilteca in Tenochtitlán Iluan Tlacoctica Yohualli**

Cuauhtemoc in aztecatl,
Telpochtli yolchicactic.
Tlatelolco Tlacetecatl,
Ca itlaquen pehepeltactic.

Iheuac Cortes oacico,
Altepepa Tenochtita,
Mexihca oquinchanhuicle,
Moctezuma tzacualtitla.

Huan ocachtin tlaceteca,
Teulipoyan oquintiali,
Cuauhtemoc ihuan azteca,
Iciuhqui oquincentiali.

Man Cortes oltamihmicti,
In teopa Huiztizlopochtli,
Cenca oquitlahuelmichti,
In yochoacuac telpochtli.

Oyec ompa in choquitzli,
Heut in yeztli ototocac.
Pampa open yaohuiztli,
Huan yehua omocenmacac.

Man Cortes ocholohuaya,
Ca Popotla nahualtica,
Huan tlaxcalteca oyaya,
Oquinchiato nahualtica.

Ompa miac oquinmihmictibque,
Caxtilteca huan tlaxcalteca,
Cortes oquimohecamictibque,
Huan ocachtin tlaceteca.

Ahuehuetontli itzinlta,
Campa Cortes in chocac,
Huan mimique tlatzintla,
Tlapal yeztli ototocac.

Nochi ian oquihuicaya,
In chalchiutl in Mexihco,
Iman in oquintocaya,
Oquicatehque Mexihco.

Ica iyolo in cocoltic,
Cuauhtemoc in yaohic,
Iyezmihmil oquipalehui,
Huan inquion omoyolchehui.
The Spaniards in Tenochtitlan and the Night of Sadness

Cuauhtemoc, the grand Aztec,  
young man of warrior spirit,  
Lord of Tlatelolco  
 splendidly arrayed.

When Cortés arrived here  
at the city of Tenochtitlan,  
he seized the Mexica homes  
and imprisoned Moteuczoma.

And other warriors also  
he imprisoned as well;  
Cuauhtemoc and the Aztecs  
quickly assembled.

When Cortes led a slaughter  
on the temple of Huitzilopochtli,  
great anger rose up  
in the valiant young man.

On the battleground  
blood was scattered and sown;  
commotion sounds  
and they surrendered themselves.

When Cortés escaped  
with all his Tlaxcalans  
to Popotla by night,  
they fell on him furiously.

Spaniards, Tlaxcalans  
there they killed many,  
terrified Cortés  
and all the Spanish lords.

Under the ahuehuete tree  
there Cortés wept,  
seeing the dead laid out  
and so much blood running.

So much fine Mexican  
jade they carried,  
but pursuing them without quarter  
the Mexica recovered it all.

For strong was his heart  
Cuauhtemoc, the warrior;  
his race he sustained  
and his people he pacified.
Pedro Barra y Valenzuela

In Huitzitzillī

Xochic molinia ce chalchiuyoyoli:
quiclejtoc huitzitzili ihuehue tapazoli.

The Hummingbird

In and out of the flower flits
a living emerald;
the hummingbird forgets its old nest.

In Ocotl

Ixtlahuatl quipotonia,
tlapechtzotzolīc techmaca
tla izonalīc mocelia.
Centle cihuatl tlapanca
ocotla itzinlia, [Zen cualli]
Itonaluica temaca
ipan iteno ameyalli.

The Pine

The fields fill with fragrance,
it gives us soft beds
when its hair renews.
A woman washing, washing
under the pines—so good:
she gives away her day-song
on the bank of the spring.

In Cacalotl

Ehecatlīc pac tzahtzi ica cualantli,
quipolotoc iozo
ipan yaxactepel ixilantli

The Crow

On the wind he squawks with irritation;
can't find his cave
in the mountain's grey belly.
In Zolli

Zacatlic nehemi, nel mahmahui,  
sinachili tlapepeta pan tlazollii  
Huíhuítóni, tleho, quen tlahuítollii,  
huan ichoquiliz, pan ehecatl quiahui

The Quail

Through grass it goes, full of fright,  
picking out seeds among the garbage.  
It starts, it rises arrow-like  
and its chirring on the wind rains.

Santos Acevedo López

Ixtelolotli Capollin

No níe itoa quenin mo ixtelolotli  
Hueltitiliz ome capolme,  
qui no hueltitaliz amaxocotl,  
yohualli ihuan huel cemixquic dampaat huiloni,  
¡Amo mo no nitla xoloxoatzintli,  
mo nitla tlapochiuia, teetched acyohuac!

¡Ihuan quenin nocihui qui nitla chihua,  
ihuan quenin tlahui nitla neltoca;  
necnuzo manel ce nitla ciepa,  
nit enanamiqui ocequi chuual! . . .

Meztla yquac tlahuizcalehua  
mo nite chia tezalal nopaln  
ihuan nepa mo nite ma no quiteotl  
quenin no tehuatl inic Nogales  
zambe oncan nitla tehualta caztila hemilli  
qui nahuia yeica macuilli tomín.

Eyes of Cherry

They tell me your eyes  
are like two cherries,  
or like blackberries  
in the night and any other hour;  
Don’t you scowl, little thing;  
I’ll carry you off in the morning!

And what do you know, what do you do,  
and what do you think—
just as I turn and spin around
here’s another lady before me!

Tomorrow at dawn
I’ll wait for you in the nopales
and give you my farewell;
I’m off to Nogales, where
the toasted beans go
at four for five reales.”

**Natalio Hernández Hernández**

**Nomaseualchinanko**

Axtka: nimiitsilkaauas nomaseualchinanko
nochipa nimiitsilgalki iska noyolo
nimiitsikokajis iska nomaseualtlajtol
“Tlaltolontipaj” ijkinoj nomaseualtokaj.

Noyolo mokuessoua kemaj nitlajlamiki
kemaj nikitlamiki kalpolmej tlen onkayaya:
Tsapoyoj, Reyistlaj, Tlapani uan Mankoyoj
i tlen totatauaj ijkinoj tlataktolalalijtejkej.

Axtka: nikiilkaauas kampa san nooxipaj ninemiaya
kuajojmej kampa nionkuajkuauuiyaya,
ojmej kampa niouiyaya mila,
ueyoyejm Kemaj niouiyaya no:tantiyisoua.

Kuali nikiilamiki kenikji nimopapaleuiyaya
Inuaya sekinok telpokatatlamej,
impan se tonatjy se uayi tili tijmeuyayaj
ika miak pakililistli titokayayaj,
ika miak pakililistli tokiatslakujiaj tijmeuyayaj.

Melauaj yejyejtsiej kenikji nimoskaltiyiakl
papamej ika kualkaj nex ixitkoj,
akuajmej ika tiotlak nechuiakatikoj,
kayochi ika tiotlak nech mujmatiko,
sakamisti nojka ika tiotlak piomajmatiko
uan kemaj piochitejko.

Ika miak pakilistli nikintlacchilaya
xochimej tlen mojmostla ual kupejona,
chimalxo:chitl tlen iuaya tonatij ual kauaniyaya;
tsatakkoxohitl, kuetlaxo:chitl, xilo:chitl,
tekuitlaxo:chitl, olo:chitl, sempalaxo:chitl
uan miak sekinok xochimej nikiilamiki,
tlen onkaj hasta kemajaj ipan nomaseualchinako.
My Native Town

I'll never forget you, my native pueblo,
always my heart will remember you.
I will liberate you in my Indian voice.
"Tlaltolontipa" I will call you.

My heart saddens with the memories
when I imagine again the barrios that were:
Tsapoyo, Revistla, Tiapani, el Mangal—
culpulis founded by our grandfathers.

I will never forget walking barefoot
two miles to bring firewood,
two to go to the fields,
long miles to the market.

Remembering well how I assisted in the labor brigades
together with other young men;
In one day we could clear a large field,
and with great delight we planted,
with the same delight we shared the crops.

The truth is I grew in rectitude and grace.
Toucans woke me early,
the akuaatomej sang to me in the afternoon;
the kasochi came in the afternoon to scare me,
the sakamisiti also came in the afternoon
to frighten the hens
and sometimes stole them away.

With great contentment I observed
the flowers that bloomed day by day;
the chimaxochitl* that turned with the sun,
tlatocaxochitl, cuetlaxochitl, xiloxochitl,
tecuitlaxochitl, olaxochitl, cempoalxochitl
and many other flowers I remember now,
which even today still adorn my native town.

Delfino Hernández Hernández

Kauitl Ixayil

Yalunya nimoiitl ipan teshkatl
kauitl kiiitlakojtok.
uaika mokajti teipokayotl.
Yolik ismiktiakije se uan se
nochi xochitl tlen ipan noyolo kueponiyan.
¿Nelia ueuekisa ni kauitl?
Amo, amo neli. Kauitl amo pano.
Tojuantij kena ax oui' tipanoj.
Tlaj ti'neki tikitas ken tipanoj ipan kauitl,
xipoua kepxa tepejtok xiuitl,
xipoua kepxa momextijtok sitalkueyitl eluikak,
kepxa istak astamej panotokej eluikak,
kitemouaj kanij momanauijip ej ipan sekuistlaji,
ouamili san kej ipa yaluayx uan namaj,
onkaj tipatskilisti.
Yese ayok tlen tlamantl mo'kauaj kej ipa.
Ichpokamej ueniyak intsonkal tlen nechhauajkej
kemaj nipili nielihyay, namaj nozka tlaiskaltjikelya.
Ontlanese, ontlanes, sekinok tlakamej ualouj totepotsko,
nochix moyaua'xuoua uan teipaj nochi moixpatla.

**Time's Face**

Yesterday I looked in the mirror,
time has destroyed it,
my youth lies far off.
Slowly they lost their faces,
the flowers that bloomed from my heart.
Is it true that time grows old?
No, no, not true. Time doesn't pass;
We are the ones who pass through time.
If you wish to observe our passing
count the falls of leaves
count the appearances of *Sitalkueyitl*, the star
count the passages of white cranes searching
across the winter sky for shelter.
The cane breaks look the same, but
nothing is the same.
The girls in heavy braids who once carried me
as a child already have their own fresh plants.
The sun rises and rises again; other beings
appear walking behind us.
Everything turns, and turning, all faces change.

**Alfredo Ramirez**

**Zan Ce' Otli**

Nocniuhitzin,
¿tin topan nochiuah?
xniau, nanunca
uan xniaznequi'.
quemantica'
cazonyatiaz.
¿Quemanon?
xnicmati'.
Amantzín
niau, ninenemí 'uan ninenemi'
ipan ce' oti' ueyac uan patlauac,
¿uan tla quemantica' nipoliui 'quen teua'
ipan un oti' ueyac uan patlauac?,
juan tlaquemantica' tinechelnamiqui'
xnechtetemo' umpa niez.
Umpa nimitzchixtoz.
xniaz umpa ninemiz.
Cuac teua' taziz campa ninemiz,
umpa timoyecnottazque
campa neua' nitlayocoxtinemiz.

Only One Road

Friend,
What happens with us?
I'm not moving, I'm here
and don't desire to move.
But one day
perhaps I'll be going somewhere.
When?
I don't know.
Right now.
I go, walking and walking along
on a broad and long road.
And suppose one day I get lost
like you, on this broad, long road—
and if one day you think of me,
look for me, I'll be there.
I'll be there waiting for you;[^1]
I won't leave, I'll be walking around.
When you arrive where I'll be walking,
there will be clean conversation between us,
there, where I'll be waiting in imagination.

Joel Martínez Hernández

¿Keski Nauamasenalmé Tiltstoke?

Sekì koyomej kijitoua
timaseualmèj tipoliuisej
timaseualmej titlamisej
totlajtol ayokkana mokakis
totlajtol ayokkana motekiuis
koyomej ika yolpakij
koyome ni tlamanli kitemojtokej.
¿Kenke, tle ipampa,
kitemojtokej matipoliuiikan?
Ax moneki miak ticknamisej
se tsontli xiiuitil tekmachte
tlen kineki koyotl.
Koyotl kieleuia totlal
kieleuia tokuatitla
kieleuia toateno
kieleuia tosiouilis
kieleuia toitonalis.
Koyotl kineki matinemikan
uejueyi alpetel itempan
nupeka matixijipetsnemikan
nupeka matiapismikikan
nupeka matokamokajkayauakan
nupeka matokamauiltikan.
Koyotl kineki matimochiuakan tiitlakeualuan.
Yeka kineki matikaualan
tokomontal
tokomonteki
tomaseualtekki
tomaseualtlajtol
yeka kineki matikilkauakan
tomaseualtakan
tomaseualnemilis
tomaseuallnamikilis.
Koyotl acho techkoyokuepa
uan teipa techtlachtekilis
nochi tlen touaxka
nochi tlen titlaelilita
nochi tlen mila tlaceli
kichtekki tosiouilis
kichtekki totekipanolis.
¿Tlen kichiuas maseuallit?
¿Monenkausej?
Moneki se ome tlaotolli
tiktlalisej pan toyolo
timoyoliluisej
tiixpitanisej
tonejmachpan tinemise.
Miak pamitl tekilt likixinamikisej
aman axkan san se pillatolli tikijtojej
sen kamati immonakastitlan tikaxiltisej.
¿Kanke uan keski tمالك allimej
titstokej pan ni Mexko tlalli?
Tōjantli tinhaimacualimej
axkana san sejko, amo san sikan, titstokej
tixitintokej, titepejtojek
pan kaxtolli uan se Estados
titstokej pan ontsontli uan chikueye alteperne
Yeka moneki tikkumachilisej
axkana san tochinanko
axkana san toalepeko titstokej
tojantli tinhaimacualimej
nouīyan Mexko tlalli titstokej.
Kemantika tikitaj tikakij
tمالك almej tilmajtikej
tha tikitaj tlaqalalais ni tikitasej;
pan 1895 xiiutl titstoyaj 659,650
pan 1910 xiiutl titstoyaj 516,410
pan 1930 xiiutl titstoyaj 664,293
pan 1960 xiiuítl titstoyaj 842,239
pan 1970 xiiutl titstoyaj 935,290
ok tikitasej keski titstokej pan 1980 xiiuti.
Yeka kuál tijkijtojek
mekatsa kinekiskia matipoiuik
nauamacualimej axkana tipoluij
nauamacualimej tlimomiakilihjtojek.

How Many Native Nahuas Are We?

Various "coyotes" (not native) have said that we native people will disappear, we native people will be extinguished, that our words will no longer be heard, our words will no longer be in use. The heart of a coyote delights in this, the coyotes pursue this goal. Why, and for what cause should they desire our disappearance? It doesn't require much pondering. Four hundred years have taught us what the coyote wants: Coyote covets our land, covets our forests, covets our rivers, wants our exhaustion,
wants our life-sweat.
Coyote wants us to live
in the margins of great cities
and to live there naked,
to die there of hunger,
to be made the token of his manipulations,
and to be made the butt of his jokes.
Coyote wants to make us over into his wage laborers.
For this he wants us to abandon
our common lands,
our common labors,
our native labor,
our native language.
For this he wants us to forget
our native dress
our native mode of life
our native mode of thought.
First Coyote transforms us to coyotes
and then robs us
of everything that is ours:
of everything we produce,
of everything the fields produce;
he steals our weariness,
he steals our work.
What is a native man to do?
surrender himself without a fight?
It requires that we place
a few words in our hearts,
that we speak to ourselves,
that we let the light fill our faces,
that we live in consciousness.
We must confront many tasks;
for now we say only one noble word,
we fit a phrase for your ears.
Where, how many native people are we
living here in the lands of Mexico?
We Nahua people are not found
in one place, we are dispersed,
we are scattered in sixteen states
in eight-hundred-and-eight towns.
And so we must recognize
that we exist not only in our hamlet,
not only in our own town;
we Nahua people live throughout all
the lands of Mexico.
Sometimes we hear or we see
that we native people are diminishing;
but if we observe the census we see:
In the year 1895 we were 659,650
in the year 1910 we were 516,410
in the year 1930 we were 664,293
in the year 1960 we were 842,239
in the year 1970 we were 935,290
and we shall see how many we are in 1980.
So we can say confidently,
even though they wanted us to disappear
we Nahua people are not disappearing,
we Nahua people are flourishing.

NOTES

1. This song is written in the traditional ballad meter of the corrido.
2. The last native ruler of Tenochtitlan, who at age eighteen inherited the last desperate
defense of the city against Cortés when his uncle, Cuilihuac, died of smallpox. He would not
surrender or even meet with Cortés and was captured on the lake attempting to flee when the entire
city had been flattened around the last defenders. Coming before Cortés, he handed him his dagger
and said, "Here, now kill me."
3. Site of the final defense of the city.
4. This haiku-like piece is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's description of the humming-
bird in #1463: "A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving wheel— / A Resonance of Emerald— / A Rush of Cochineal..." 
5. One-eighth of a peso.
7. Ancient Nahua name for the ethnic/religious/clan neighborhoods of which the Nahua
   cities were composed in pre-Columbian times.
8. Perhaps truer than even the poet knows: modern names of barrio neighborhoods in
   several villages in the state of Puebla have been identified in early sixteenth-century native land
   record codexes for those villages—records far more precise and carefully measured, by the way,
   than anything created by contemporary Spanish surveyors.
9. Sunflower; lit. "shield flower"
10. Reminiscent of Yeats's "Wild Swans at Coole."
12. This Mexican "coyote" is quite different from the trickster of western U.S. stories
    and has his own tradition.