

## **To *In* or Not to *In*: The Politics Behind the Usage or Disavowal of Classical Nahuatl within Contemporary Nahua Literature**

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In preparing this overview of contemporary Nahua authors' attitudes toward "Classical Nahuatl," I recalled a Nahua friend of mine telling me that his father, very proud to be Nahua, had said: "Na ni mero macehualli pampa nizaniloa ica puro Nahuatl" (I am indigenous through and through, because I speak only Nahuatl [pure Nahuatl]). As my friend noted too, this was ironic because his father used *mero* and *puro* from Spanish to boast of speaking just Nahuatl, authentic Nahuatl, without Spanish loan words.

Similarly, I remember, while living in a Nahua community in Mexico, another friend who said, "Nimomacac cuenta." / "I realized that." His wife quickly corrected him, especially because he was constantly getting on her case for using Spanish loan words: "Xihentendero, axcanah moihtoa *nimomacac cuenta*, moihtoa 'niquittac.'" / "Understand this, you don't say *nimomacac cuenta* for 'I realized,' you say *niquittac* 'I saw.'" Again, this was ironic because she used *xihentendero* ("understand"), a very blatant loan word from the Spanish *entender*, to correct her husband for using a loan.

Quests for "authentic" Nahuatl have a significant influence on contemporary Nahua literary production. In May of this year I was present at the organization of a collective of Nahua women writers in Tlaxcala. The meeting was going smoothly until the end when we attempted to write the name of the collective. A debate ensued as to whether to use the word *cihuatl* or *zohuatl* for *woman*. *Cihuatl* is more common, and one of the authors, from Puebla, argued that it was better to use *cihuatl* because it is used in most regions today and also comes from Classical Nahuatl. The other authors from Tlaxcala, where *zohuatl* is used instead of *cihuatl*, consider *zohuatl* an emblematic word from the Nahuatl of their region. The argument about what constitutes Classical Nahuatl is interesting, because actually both forms, *cihuatl* and *zohuatl*, can be found in colonial documents.

In both contemporary Nahua literature and everyday conversations, I often hear debates as to whether to say *horah* or *cahuitl* for time, *veinte* or *cempohualli* for the number twenty, *pesoh* or *tomin* for money, and, related to this, debates about writing systems—whether to write *cahuitl* with k, c, hui, or just ui, or even hieroglyphs, and denunciations of

imperial k's from U.S. neoliberalism or q's from Spanish colonialism. I share these anecdotes to underscore the importance, and fascinating and intriguing aspects, of these debates over Classical Nahuatl or "authentic" Nahuatl in contemporary Nahua literature.

In my current research I argue that contemporary Nahua authors who use forms perceived as loyal to Classical Nahuatl highlight a continuity of Nahua intellectualism, while writers who instead eschew these classical forms seek to underscore present-day Nahua knowledge production. In doing so, both groups of authors seek to break with the stereotype of the vanquished or backward "Indian" represented within traditional Mexican nation-state discourse. References to Pre-Columbian deities and linguistic components, such as the particle subordinator *in*, are employed by Natalio Hernández and Juan Hernández to underscore the continuity of a millennial Nahua intellectual tradition.

In contrast, other writers, such as Mardonio Carballo and Yankuik Metztlí Martínez Nopaltécatl, spurn this appeal to a past mythologized by national discourse. Carballo purposefully uses structures that break with stereotypical re-presentations of Nahua literature, using *nahuañol* (Nahuatl mixed with Spanish) and innovative poetic images. 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 ancient or prestigious forms of Nahuatl.

Debates over different Nahuatl variants, if guided with the right attitude, can be a source of enriching speech with words from various regions and time periods. They can also be deadening to literary production and come off as condescending if conducted with the wrong attitude, an attitude in which people make normative judgments about others' speech and inhibit their expression. Imagine if you will a group of English speakers who say that we should start speaking like Shakespeare (hence the title, "To *in* or Not to *in*"). You would say, "the sun is out", and they would stop you and say it should be "What light through yonder window breaks?"

Pressuring Nahua authors to use structures such as the subordinate *in* is comparable to telling English speakers to use *thou* instead of *you*. As you can imagine, this creates a very frustrating context for authors who do not want to use this language—especially frustrating because avoiding it significantly reduces their chances of being published if they ignore it. To *in* or not to *in*; to be published or not to be published. Rather

than be bound by this restrictive framework, authors with differing viewpoints regarding how to write Nahuatl should be recognized for enriching the current textual landscapes of literary production.