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Down the Rabbit Hole and into the Moon: Nahua Perspectives in Mardonio Carballo's *Tlajpijketl* (2014)

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze Nahua artist Mardonio Carballo's *Tlajpijketl* (2014) and how this work breaks with a limited Western notion of what constitutes a text. This bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish book/website/CD collection questions traditional conceptualizations of what constitutes "Indigenous literature" by incorporating figures such as Alice from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carballo's *Tlajpijketl* tells the story of a young *tlajpijketl* (guardian of the maize field) and his quest to compose the "maize song." This journey takes him from the wooden platform overlooking his field down a Wonderlandesque rabbit hole into a world replete with plays on perspective, language, and time. One of the most impressive moments from the book is a scene in which the boy's defense against a bird attack on his crop combines with movements against sixteenth-century colonizers and present-day NAFTA. I argue that this work points to new horizons in Nahua cultural production that fight visual and acoustic colonialism through a diverse array of media. For my analysis, I employ Mapuche literary critic Luis Cárcamo Huechante's concept *acoustic and visual colonialism* and the Nahua perspectives *ixtlamatilistli* (knowledge with the face), *tlaixpan* (that which is in front), and *yoltlajlamikilistli* (knowledge with the heart). Acoustic and visual colonialism identifies pervasive settings within mainstream media where only voices of a dominant elite in the State-sanctioned national language are heard. In contrast, the Nahua perspectives mentioned displace media colonialism. Carballo employs these concepts within *Tlajpijketl* to highlight the contemporary Nahua artistic and knowledge production that acoustic and visual colonialism attempts to silence and relegate to prehistory.

Keywords

Representation; Indigenous Knowledges; Colonialism; Mexico; Huasteca; Nahuatl; Children's Literature

There were only three books in my home: the Bible . . . the Divine Comedy . . . and The Quijote. They had somehow wound up lost there. But really the first book that captivated me was *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Mardonio Carballo¹

What is the use of a book . . . without pictures or conversation?

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

“I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth! How funny it’ll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downward! The Antipathies, I think,” Alice pondered as she fell down the rabbit hole (Carroll 5). Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) emphasizes the possibility of seeing the world from different perspectives, such as those from the “antipodes” to which Alice mistakenly refers to as “antipathies.” This text captivated Nahua artist Mardonio Carballo as a youth. He himself felt at times that he transited between two worlds. Carballo grew up in the Huasteca Veracruzana with the Nahuatl language—more popularly known as the ancient language of the Mexica or Aztecs—and also Spanish, the imposed language of the Mexican state. Due to the Secretariat of Education’s campaign to “Mexicanize” Indigenous communities and the linguistic discrimination Nahuas faced, Carballo’s father preferred Spanish and avoided speaking his Native language.² He sought instead to read any print material he could in Spanish—even the newspaper scraps wrapped around products from flea markets.³ Carballo recounts that he himself felt this apprehensiveness toward Nahuatl until 1994, when the Zapatista uprising inspired him to reclaim his family’s history and language. This change also has led him to question the State’s use of a lack of literacy in Latin graphemes since the 1950s as a mode to typecast Indigenous communities as uneducated and backward. Such a stigma is what pressed Carballo’s father to search for textual scraps in Spanish. Through his works, Carballo questions who is truly illiterate. There are other kinds of texts—pictures and conversations—that those who pride themselves in being literate are unable to read, such as Indigenous textiles, the landscape, and orality itself as writing on the air.⁴

In this article, I analyze Carballo’s *Tlajpijketl / Guardian of the Maize Field* (2014) and how he breaks with a limited Western notion of what constitutes a text, inculcated by the Mexican Secretariat of Education in its push to reach Huastecan Indigenous communities during the 1950s and 1960s. I begin with references to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* because *Tlajpijketl* uses images from Lewis Carroll’s adventure. This bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish book/CD/website collection questions traditional conceptualizations of what

constitutes “Indigenous literature” and “Indigenous children’s literature” by incorporating figures such as Alice.⁵ Carballo’s *Tlajpijketl* tells the story of a young *tlajpijketl* (guardian of the maize field) and his quest to compose the “maize song.”⁶ The journey takes him from a wooden platform overlooking his field down a Wonderlandesque rabbit hole into a world replete with plays on perspective, language, and time. One of the most impressive moments from the book is a scene in which the boy’s defense against a bird attack on his crop combines with movements against sixteenth-century colonizers and present-day NAFTA. I argue that this work points to new horizons in Nahua cultural production that fight visual and acoustic colonialism through a diverse array of media and Nahua perspectives. Carballo seeks to inundate media with Indigenous voices, as reflected in the multimedia format of *Tlajpijketl* and the Noachian flood symbolic of the resurgence of these worldviews depicted in the book.

For my analysis, I employ Mapuche literary critic Luis Cárcamo Huechante’s concept *acoustic and visual colonialism* and the Nahua perspectives *tlaixpan* (“that which is in front”), *ixtlamatilistli* (“knowledge with the face”), and *yoltlajlamikilistli* (“knowledge with the heart”). “Acoustic and visual colonialism” refers to pervasive settings within mainstream media where only voices and images of a dominant elite in the State-sanctioned national language are heard and seen.⁷ While “colonialism” most commonly refers to the seizure of land by force, colonial practices also surface in the takeover of airwaves and screens. In part because of this silencing, there are media tropes—stock images and sounds—that persist in depicting Indigenous people as violent, limited to manual labor, relegated to a distant past, and exotic.⁸

The three Nahua perspectives mentioned oppose media colonialism. *Tlaixpan* communicates that the past is situated “in front” of the subject within a dynamic present. Carballo employs this concept within *Tlajpijketl* to highlight the contemporary Nahua artistic and knowledge production that media colonialism attempts to silence and relegate to prehistory. *Tlaixpan* denotes altars upon which one places pictures of deceased relatives. Those ancestors and their knowledges are not located “behind” as *past* and *pasado* suggest in English and Spanish, but rather stand in front and guide a person into an unpredictable present and future. *Ixtlamatilistli* (“Knowledge with the face”) emphasizes personal experiences, and displaces the idea that Nahuas are static and unable to offer knowledge production for the present. It constitutes a different view of who constitutes an intellectual. *Yoltlajlamikilistli* (“Knowledge with the heart”) underscores an affective intelligence in which

cognition is regarded as conjugated with emotions. This perspective challenges the representation of Nahua ceremonies and practices as “folklore” and the disregard for the affective connection to those practices. The heart is a locus of cognition and feelings. By emphasizing the heart, Nahuas do not reiterate the stereotypical depiction of Indigenous peoples as led by instincts, but rather the ability to exercise an affective intelligence that recognizes emotive and cognitive responses as intimately interwoven. The numerous references to the heart in *Tlajpajketl* can seem repetitious without taking into account the wider ramifications of this metaphor. In this article, I analyze how the aforementioned perspectives of *tlaixpan*, *ixtlamatlistli*, and *yoltlajlamikilistli* help unpack the images, sounds, and accompanying verses in Carballo’s text.

One of the main objectives of *Tlajpajketl* is to view Nahuas as producers of meaning. The cornfields are like a schoolbook from which the protagonist reads and learns. With its incorporation of figures like Alice and Zapatistas hidden in the fields, the book distances itself from idyllic representations of a pristine culture in rural Indigenous communities. In the next section, I give a general background of the Nahuatl language, Mardonio Carballo, and the overall organization of *Tlajpajketl*. I then proceed to explore the wider significance of *text*, such as readings of the landscape, found within this work in the section “*Oralitura / Oralitura: The Wider Meaning of Text*.” The section “Papameh Pirates Attack: The Past as Present” explores the concept of *tlaixpan* (“that which is front”), which ties into the topic of what constitutes a text and highlights the value of ancestors’ wisdom and writings. I then consider the implications of *yoltlajlamikilistli* or an affective intelligence in “Writing Out the Maize Song: Intelligent Affectivity and Kinship.” I conclude by pointing to how *Tlajpajketl* opens up innovative paths in Nahua cultural production and invites the reader/viewer/listener to take Nahua perspectives seriously.

In Con-Text: Mardonio Carballo and the Non-GMO Maize Song

Mardonio Carballo has lived in Mexico City for over twenty years. His positionality in Mexico City highlights the value of *Tlajpajketl* outside of the Huasteca. Corn and the furrows in the field are a prime metaphor for ways of life in general. *Pamitl* (furrows) is the same word used for lines on a page, as well as a metaphor for philosophies and projects (*tekipamitl*). The land is a reference point in a dialogue with all walks of life, regardless of whether one lives in a city or on a farm.

Mardonio Carballo is from northern Veracruz, the Huasteca, where the largest Nahua population resides. He has nonetheless spent most of his life outside of this region. Carballo is one of the most innovative artists of contemporary Indigenous cultural production and he works with many types of media, including radio, poetry, documentary, short stories, television, and progressive rock. He uproots stereotypical and patriarchal representations of First Peoples. His written work challenges the privilege often attributed to the written word especially in Latin America. This approach to writing is rhizomatic—in the sense that the written word is not central but rather his works like *Tlajpijketl* form part of a larger project of introducing Indigenous perspectives and aesthetics into every medium possible, particularly mass media such as television and social networks.

While *Tlajpijketl* is classified as a children's book, it is really a text for all ages with complex word plays similar to those in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The plot is deceptively simple. A boy goes to the maize field to protect it from animals, such as coyotes, birds, and rabbits. He lays on a raised platform made to watch over the field. While there, he gets bored and begins to compose what he calls the maize song. The book progresses with him in something of a dreamlike state until the end, when he writes down the entire maize song, which is on the CD and the companion website, www.espantapajaro.com.

Three alternate titles of *Tlajpijketl* underscore Nahua agency. The physical book is entitled *Tlajpijketl / Canción de maíz*. Usually in bilingual Indigenous literature, the second title is a translation of the original Indigenous language. That is not the case here (*Canción de maíz* is “maize song”). *Tlajpijketl* can be roughly translated as “Guardian of the Maize Field,” and designates the person who must watch over the field and protect it from animals and encroachers. *Espantapájaro*, the title of the companion website, also is not a literal translation of *Tlajpijketl*. While the “scarecrow” is a lifeless mannequin, the *tlajpijketl* is a “living scarecrow” as described in the text (14). Although popularly represented as lifeless vestiges from the past, Nahuas exercise their agency to defend the fields and as an extension Nahua knowledges and practices in general. This deviance from translation and focus on the untranslatable appears in other parts of the *Tlajpijketl*, and points to Nahua perspectives. In the case of the word *tlajpijketl*, for which English and Spanish lack an equivalent, it stresses the importance of watching over the corn crop. Words like this help to reflect on certain concepts, such as caring for the crop so much that one is willing to stay awake throughout the night to protect it.

Renowned Mexican artist Mauricio Gómez Morín illustrated the book. Gómez Morín describes the process of collaboration with Carballo as one in which he based his illustrations on close readings of Carballo's text, and consulted Carballo for parts he did not understand. One key consultation was when Gómez Morín did not comprehend the references to a rabbit. Carballo stressed that Alice and the rabbit from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* had to appear.⁹ Regarding the final product, Carballo explains that it can be read together, as well as four separate works: the book, illustrations, song, and website. The work turns into a dialogue among this *tekiyo* (the Nahuatl term for collaborative projects) of artists who engage with Nahuatl perspectives and elaborate on Carballo's text.¹⁰

There are seventeen sections in the book with accompanying song and poetry. In the next part of this article, I focus on the first four sections. The book begins with a panorama of the sun rising over the town of Chicontepec, Veracruz, Carballo's home region in the Huasteca. The section that follows this illustration contains an untitled poem that imitates the boy's clapping to scare away birds. That is then followed by the sections entitled "Tlajpijketl" and "Mili" (*The Fields*) where the focus is on the boy's responsibility to care for the fields.

I then analyze when the boy enters into something of a dream world in "Tlapextli" (*Platform*), "Tlapextli. Cama" (*Platform. Bed*), "Papanes al ataque" (*Papanes to the Attack*), and "Papanes. Piratas" (*Papanes. Pirates*) in which he defends the crop against papamej birds that transform into pirate ships. The poems that follow, "Entre soñando / Kochmejtok" (*Half-Dreaming / Sleepwalking*) and "Modorro / Kochmejtok" (*Drowsy / Sleepwalking*), number the troops (cornstalks) lost in the battle against the birds. In "Baile / Mijtotiliz" (*Dance*), the boy climbs onto the wooden platform and begins to dance. He falls off this tower and down a hole, and awakes a full-grown man in "Revelación. Tlachiajketl." He finds a Wonderlandesque rabbit who wreaks havoc on his cornfield every evening in "Uno Conejo" / "Ze. Kuatochin" (*One Rabbit*). When captured by the man/boy, the rabbit warns him of an imminent flood that will last forty days and forty nights.

In the final part of my analysis, I explore the last three sections, as well as the song on the CD and its companion website. In "Vuelta / Kuepaliztli" (*Return*), the boy wakes up and his father takes him back home. He sees the rabbit as he departs, and the reader is left wondering if what happened was dream or reality. In "Cuaderno" / "Amatlaijkuiloli" (*Notebook*) he writes out the maize song and the lines on the page are represented as furrows

in the field. The book concludes with the lyrics to “Canción del Maíz / Zintlikuikatl” (*The Maize Song*), the song the boy has composed little by little as the book progressed. As stated earlier, the perspectives of *tlaixpan*, *ixtlamatlistli* and *yoltlajlamikilistli* serve as a methodology in studying more in depth the images and sounds in the text/website/music of *Tlajpijketl*.

Oralitura / Oraliture: The Wider Meanings of “Text.”

Carballo invites the reader/viewer/listener to reconsider limited Western notions of what constitutes a text. There are numerous ways of “writing” in addition to the inscription of graphemes on the page. Depicted in *Tlajpijketl* as Mesoamerican speech scrolls, smoke from incense and fire is “writing on the air” that carries messages to deity and deceased ancestors. The remains of this communication, *tlikoli* (embers), can also function as a writing instrument and by extension it refers to blackboard markers. Resembling the Ojibwe images written on birch bark analyzed by Abenaki historian Lisa Brooks, Carballo “spin[s] the binary between word and image into a relational framework” that challenges the “oppositional thinking” that situates orality as Indigenous authenticity and written script on the page as “contaminated” indigeneity (Brooks xxi). The idea of illiteracy based on ignorance of Latin graphemes is parochial in its scope and fails to account for the multitudinous ways in which one may communicate and write a message on the heart of the recipient. The transitions between these different tools is highlighted by Carballo’s creation of the work by shifting between Nahuatl and Spanish, between his mother’s oral account of a rabbit who reached the moon and a transposition of that narrative into writing.

On the first two pages after the prologue, the clouds that surround a rising sun are shaped like speech scrolls, called *volutas*. This suggests the perspective of *ixtlamatlistli* and its emphasis on close observance, a reading, of one’s surroundings. These first two pages supposedly absent of text, in the sense of graphemes, are instead replete with a textual landscape.

From a Mesoamerican orientation, the cardinal point is the East rather than the North. On these first pages, Carballo situates the geographical spacing toward this position. It also subtly suggests taking knowledges seriously that in the past had been displaced by knowledge production from “the North” (in other words, the U.S. and Europe). Carballo breaks with standard orientations of maps toward the North and thus departs from a colonial visual alignment. Instead, a Mesoamerican reorientation turns the map on its side.

The fifth cardinal point is where one stands, so in this move Carballo places the community of Chicontepepec in the Huasteca at the center. The illustration displays a sacred landscape from which the name of the Carballo's municipality, Chicontepepec or Chicome tepetl (literally "seven hills/mountains"), gets its name. That landscape is key in the story that the book tells and the fight to defend the crop. The sun imparts the energy necessary for the crop to grow, and in turn people obtain energy from maize. Nahuas climb the mountains that appear on these first pages of *Tlajpiajketl* in order to give offerings to water. They petition for the ability to survive droughts or floods. It is a reminder that even without threats like NAFTA or GMO-corn, there are always unexpected challenges beyond one's control.

The following pages emphasize different sonorities of hearing Native voices and thus breaking with acoustic colonialism. The division between sound and image thins, as images play on words in Nahuatl and sounds are depicted as ripples in the images. The text invites readers to do the "close listening" that Cárcamo Huechante underscores as a strategy against acoustic and visual colonialism, to not only listen to humans but also to hear and read the landscape in general (65). The boy yells and claps his hands to scare away the birds: "sus manos gritan" (his hands yell; *Tlajpiajketl*, 12-13). The sounds from the claps reverberate across the sky and clouds. The root of the word for clap used in the following page carries the root for "to get extremely angry," *momatzijtzinia* (15). Within the text birds symbolize colonialism and attacks on Nahua communities. The protagonist's strong voice asserts the ability to defend itself.

The section "Tlajpiajketl" (Guardian of the crop) stresses the importance of this close observance in the boy's vigilance over the fields and his power to defend against attacks. The corncob begins to form and that is when the crop is most vulnerable to attacks from birds and other animals. At this stage people climb the *kuatlapechtli* (wooden platform) to scare away the animals with shouts and projectiles. Food placed on altars for deceased relatives and for the natural elements, such as *xamilt* (a tamale made out of pure corn), fly through the air like words in the image for the section "Tlajpiajketl." This sacred food emphasizes the image of the altar and the remembrance of ancestors and their knowledges. The offering of food flying through the air challenges the birds that will soon descend and attempt to devour the crop. It battles a displacement of Nahua practices.

"Mili" follows "Tlajpiajketl" and contains a complex image to unpack and relates to these ceremonial elements:



Fig. 1. "Mili"¹¹

In the background Zapatista protect the crop, “matas de maíz como hombres armados, disciplinados” (16). The focus here is to bring attention to what is occurring on the ground and personal experience, in other words *ixtlamatilisli* and the importance of paying attention to the voices ignored.

Images of Zapatistas in the field highlight that the narrative takes place recently, which in turn underscores the importance of the clothes worn by the child. This apparel is called a *manta*, and few children agree to wear it. Instead, children prefer to wear t-shirts from the United States. There are notable absences in these images, like Coke bottles and U.S. clothing. This absence of soda and foreign clothing adds to the narrative against transnational companies in the book. The child’s *manta* reflects a respect for Nahua practices and thus constitutes another text (or *textile*) with wider implications. It is white like a sheet of paper and the fieldwork writes on it with dust from the furrows. The word *manta* in Spanish can refer to bed sheets out of which one makes banners, used in popular demonstrations since before the Mexican Revolution, but which have come to be associated with organized criminal organizations that hang threats on *narco-mantas*. *Tlajpijketl* proposes a very different kind of *manta* that respects Nahua practices and encourages close observation and dialogue.

In “Mili” the poetic voice plays on the plosive alliteration of *v* y *b*, and in doing so it pays homage to Federico García Lorca’s “Romance sonámbulo” (1928).¹² Carballo’s poem in Spanish varies in length between verses of two and eleven syllables. The boy imagines a different space in which marginalized voices and images can be heard and seen, similar to the desires of the poetic voice in “Romance sonámbulo”.¹³

“Mili”

“Romance sonámbulo”

Verde.

Verde que te quiero verde.

Verde se ha **vuelto** la semilla,
se le ha **reventado** el corazón,
ha explotado la semilla y florece,
el corazón es semilla y promete.

Verde.

Cientos de corazones **reventando**,
muchas semillas dando flor,
muchos corazones floreado,
corazones de maíz floreado,
corazones de maíz **vuelto** flor,
vuelto verde.

Verde el viento, **verde** la rama.

Veinte, Cuarenta, Sesenta. Ochenta. Cien. (11)

Verde viento. Verdes ramas.

El **barco sobre** la mar

Y el **caballo** en la montaña.

Con la **sombra** en la cintura

Ella sueña en su **baranda**,

Verde carne, pelo **verde**,

Con ojos de fría plata.

Verde que te quiero **verde.**

Bajo la luna gitana,

Las cosas la están mirando

Y ella no puede mirarlas. (*Romancero*, 56)

This likeness to García Lorca's poem connects with a wider struggle for LGBTQ2 rights, of which Carballo is a staunch advocate. As he describes in interviews, his allusions to artists such as García Lorca depart from popular expectations that he only cite Nahua "traditional" sources and be ignorant of broader literary production in other languages. It also breaks with trite re-presentations of Nahuas as *machistas* and champions of a hyper-masculinity. The oneiric space the boy enters juxtaposes the *sonámbulo* (sommnambulist) state of the poetic voice in "Romance sonámbulo." Similar to the poetic voice in "Romance" that resists a drunken *Guardia Civil* at the door, the poetic voice in "Mili" defends Nahua communities against encroaching government and transnational corporations at the door of the Huasteca. The play on *verde* and *ver* emphasizes personal observance with the face and signals an affective sensitivity in which great care and attention is paid to image, text, and sound—a sensitivity that outside threats attempt to stifle. Gender and outer appearance are also a kind of text that can be read in a multitude of ways, but societal pressures attempt to reduce that complexity. When people observe closely, they notice these wider complexities, symbolized in *Tlajpijketl* with maize itself and its many colors and dual gender (in Nahuatl, it is both masculine and feminine).

The poetic voices in both "Mili" and "Romance sonámbulo" both depict an ambiguity associated with the color green. It can symbolize desire and liberty, but also

decomposition and death. The corn crop contains both life and death in a perennial cycle of rebirth and decay. The color green is the mix of yellow and blue, which in *Tlajpijketl* are represented by corn and water. It juxtaposes desire and death, of frustrated desires rejected by society. Carballo signals indirectly this affective desire within the book and song. Both Carballo and Lorca defy literary conventions in their works. Carballo does so by writing in Nahuatl. In *Tlajpijketl*, he talks about himself in the third person and his own desires. Although not stated explicitly, he is the boy in the images.¹⁴ The *cuatlapachtli* (wooden platform) from which he observes symbolizes a challenge to the institutional and social panopticons that surveil society.

As one views the version of “Mili” in Spanish and then in Nahuatl, it becomes apparent that these are not literal translations, but rather two different versions of the poem:

Verde.	Xoxouik.
Verde se ha vuelto la semilla,	Xoxouijki nama i yolo.
se le ha reventado el corazón,	kueponki nama i yolotl
ha explotado la semilla y florece,	kueponki i yolotl, miauajkiza.
el corazón es semilla y promete.	Onka xochime pan to mila uan nopa tech paktia. (17)
Verde. (16)	

In Nahuatl the poem plays on alliteration with the affricative *xo* as well as the assonance with *o*: *xoxouik*, *xochitl*, *yolo*, *xoxouik ixouio*, *xochitian*. As mentioned earlier, repetitions of *yol*, “heart” or “seed,” can seem trite without knowledge of its wider ramifications. The numbers in the second stanza—“Zempoali. Omepoali, eyipoali, nauipoali, makuilpoali” (*Twenty. Forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred*)—allude to “the miracle of reduplication,” of corn’s ability to multiply endlessly and give life (17). It is uncommon to count in Nahuatl past twenty, and instead Spanish is used.¹⁵ This reduplication is reflected in the images and sounds of the book, such as *xo*, and such repetitions are a vital element of Nahua literary devices. Descriptions of flowers accentuate a wider meaning of text, as *flowers* and *corn* are prime metaphors for literary production itself. Art is *xochitlajtoli*, literally “flowered words,” harking back to the *xochitl in cuicatl* (“flower and song”). Oral communication should be marginal, just as Nahuas and their knowledge production should not be treated as peripheral either.

The mother with child depicted in the image above the poem “Mili” reflects the perspective of *yoltlajlamikilistli* (knowledge with the heart), which can also be translated as

“knowledge with the corn.” It emphasizes an intimate connection with the body. In Huastecan Nahua ceremonies, *Chikomexochitl* (literally “Seven Flower”) is the maize deity and is a child (here in the arms of the mother). Every stage of corn is paralleled in Nahuatl with the growth of an individual. At this stage when corn is most vulnerable, it is referred to as *selic* (soft), and the same word describes babies when they are born. Also like humans, cornhusks grow a head of hair of different hues and its kernels vary like phenotypes. The descriptions of the boy parallel the descriptions of corn, such as his hair: “mo piuijken ken i tzonkal pan i tzontekon” (they [the maize] multiplied like the hair on his head; 17). This intimate connection with maize evidences itself especially in the meaning of heart, *yollotl*, which also denotes “maize seed” and appears explicitly in the images of corncobs in the shape of hearts. The root for heart, *yo*, is repeated ten times. The semantic ties between humans and the landscape emphasize a connection with the land, but not the hackneyed depiction of Indigenous peoples as close to the land. It is instead a more complex idea as to what constitutes sovereignty. Sovereignty is tied to the resources and stories about the land. Water and hills make an *altepetl* (literally “water and hill”) or city. The personal use of resources in the community represent a claim to the Huastecan region, of living off the land rather than exploiting it. At the end of this section entitled “Mili” appear the first words of the maize song contained on the CD: *xiuapilzintli, xintlimeztli* / maíz niña, maíz luna (16). The poem and song compare the tortilla and the comal with a full moon because of their similar color and shape.

Corn itself is a text that can be analyzed, and its kernels are directly read in ceremonies. *Tlajpijketl* asks its audience to consider the significance of what constitutes a text. It also subtly calls for a more complex reading of gender with allusions to García Lorca’s “Romance sonámbulo.” Carballo takes the reader into an oneiric space that challenges linguistic and gender discrimination. The leaves that fall down from the sky while the boy dreams are like sheets of paper on which his imagination runs. Through these different images and sounds, *Tlajpijketl* invites readers to gain closer familiarity with their surroundings and to expand their imaginations toward additional forms of communication.

Papameh Pirates Attack: The Past as Present

The boy climbs on the *tlapechtli* or *kuatlapechtli* to defend it from the birds. The platform and the boy are both described repeatedly as *chikauak*, again referring to that

metaphor of when corn hardens and also the boy's strength to battle encroachments (19). His skin appears like the surface of wood of the *tlapechtli*, which reinforces this metaphor. The poem mentions strong wood used as building material, such as cedar. He falls asleep on the platform, playing with the meaning of *tlapechtli* as also the term for beds. His dreams meld with his surroundings and detailed tree leaves blow around him.

Papameh birds then attack. Most birds are ominous in Nahuatl because they assault the crop. The name of this bird is onomatopoeic and imitates its call. In contrast with birds like the *etzontli* ("bird of 400 voices" or mockingbird, which appears above the boat the boy constructs later in the narrative), the *papamej* only make one incessant loud sound. They represent the univocality against which Carballo battles, and the images explicitly parallel the descent of *papamej* upon the fields with the European invasion of the continent. *Tlaxpan* again reflects the perspective that the past is not past. That past is in front of a person and there are repeated patterns of oppression that need to be recognized and confronted. The boy valiantly defends the crop with his slingshot, underscoring his agency in resisting. This image also makes clear that Westerners are the ones who bring the flood, and the pirate skulls on the sails reinforce that message.

A multiplication of the birds juxtaposes the previous descriptions of the corn: *ax ueli tij matin kezki tzonkali tij pian pam to tzontekon* (you cannot count the birds like you cannot count how many hairs are on your head; 23). The boy remains asleep and misses the encroaching attack. The wind blows hard and constitutes another threat to the crop. The wind brings the pirate ships to the land. In Nahuatl, it is also said that bad winds come from the north, *miktlampa* (land of the dead). There is another unexpected allusion in the images to the birds from Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963), underscoring more the menace from the Global North in which this film was produced.

Still asleep, the boy dreams of tortillas and Huapango music. Birds come out of his mouth like words, suggesting the traumatic story he has to tell of his defense against the birds. His mother's hand appears preparing tortillas on the *tenamastli*, or three hearthstones. Speech scrolls float up from the *comal* on which his mother prepares the meal. It was in settings near this flame that Carballo's mother related how a rabbit reached the moon. The hearth is a sacred space that represents the home in general. The *comal* is placed on these three hearthstones, which bring family together to gain the sustenance they need to live. It is the final stage in corn's life cycle and celebrates the success of having survived the birds and

other hazards. The speech scrolls that rise up from the *comal* are blue and red, suggestive of the water and fire that constitute a *difrasismo* for war.¹⁶ They are words that possess the power to defend Nahua communities. The boy's song remembers the encounter with the birds: "Recuerda entonces que los Papanes le han dejado un eco de su pico en los labios" (He remembers then that the *papamej* birds have left the echo of their beaks in his lips; 28). The beaks are like small quills writing on the air as he recounts this traumatic encounter.

Later, the boy awakes, or half-awakes, and dances on the wooden platform in the section "Baile / Mijtotilis" (Dance). There are many plays on language here. He falls off and again enters something of an *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* world. Huapango comes from the word *kuapanko* in Nahuatl, literally "upon the wood" and refers to the sound from the *zapateo* (tapping with the feet on a wooden stage). The boy is now suddenly a man. His body becomes a *payoj* or *paliacate*, a traditional handkerchief used to wipe away sweat and also scare away animals. The word *paliacate* also comes from Nahuatl, either *tlapali* (color red) and *yakatl* (nose) or a hybrid of Spanish *para* (for) with *yakatl* (the nose). Red flowers that appear in the design of the *paliacate* allude back to the red maize. The man's *paliacate* skin represents his hard work in the field and the desire to protect it. Maguey plants that appear below this boy turned man allude to Mardonio Carballo's hometown of El Maguey Mahuaquite. With these allusions to different features from his hometown, the text places his community at the center of knowledge production.

The Rabbit, a trickster, is causing havoc in the field and destroys the corn crop repeatedly. In the end though the rabbit helps the man by warning of an imminent Noah-like flood that will last forty days and forty nights. This flood symbolizes the over four hundred years of colonialism initiated with the arrival of Spaniards. Heeding the rabbit's warning, the man (boy) constructs a boat and, for the most part, figures from the Mesoamerican calendar accompany him. The boat is depicted in the section "Uno Conejo / Ze. Kuatochin." Gómez Morín painted this illustration on *amate* paper and based it on a similar boat carved into bone, called the "Bone Codex of Jasaw Chan K'awil."¹⁷ The vessel represents the world and the "paddler gods" transport the corn deity to safety:



Fig. 2. "Uno Conejo"

There is an impressive combination of multiple histories here. As the flood waters rise, they ascend to the moon and the rabbit stays there. The rabbit who ends up on the moon during Noah's flood is a common story told in Huastecan Nahua communities. The combination of Christian,¹⁸ Nahua, and other elements signals a Nahua perspective that is not exclusivist. Quetzalcoatl (The Feathered Serpent) flies along with the figures on the boat and symbolizes the creation of humankind. Calendric images of the *ozomachtli* (monkey), *mictli* (death), *aquetzpalin* (lizard) appear, in addition to many more common elements from pre-Columbian codices. The white boat is like a spinal cord that carries the world on its back. The color of the boat and figures resembles the color of white corn carried on the boat, and in relation to this the carrying of people and practices. *Tlajpajketl's* large size is similar to a pre-Columbian codices and emphasizes that the past is present in this modern-day codex.

Surprisingly on this boat is a classic image of Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but with an armadillo on her head. There is a clever play on language here: *ayotochtli* is literally "turtle rabbit." An armadillo resembles a turtle with its shell and a rabbit with its head. The rabbit portion of this play on language alludes to the rabbit Alice follows down the hole and its representing imagination. The turtle constitutes another allusion to a figure from *Alice*, that of the "mock turtle" and the plays on language with him.

In Spanish, Carroll's text is entitled *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*, which translates literally as "Alice in the Country of Marvels." The use of the word *país* (country) elicits thoughts of the nation-state, and in Carballo's case, Mexico. When the boy fell off the

wooden platform, he like Alice fell down a hole into an alternate reality. Carballo's text poses a criticism of acoustic colonialism, reflected in Alice's mention of "antipathies" quoted at the beginning of this article. "Antipathies" alludes to the far reaches of the British Empire, to Indigenous communities of New Zealand and Australia, to the Other, flip-side of the empire where things were upside down—the Antipodes. Alice ironically mixes up words and calls them "antipathies" or *antipáticos* in Spanish, suggestive of the antipathy or little regard Westerners had for Māori and other Indigenous knowledge production. In *Tlajpajketl*, Carballo takes readers to Huastecan Nahua worldviews to create a space in which Nahuas are no longer positioned as the Other of the Mexican nation-state, but rather as custodians of knowledge with effective ideas for the entire country and on an international scale.

Tlaxpan, past as present, is a view in which one does not get "stuck" in the past. The perspective of *tlaxpan* itself forms a part of those knowledges that need to be valued. It emphasizes a dynamic present full of innovation, and as such it is not a problem to bring Alice into the text and break with traditional Indigenous symbolism. The text plays on time, such as the rabbit's watch being backward. There is a key line on page 32, which states that the maize song was composed: "Hace mucho. / hace no tanto."; "A long time ago. / Not so long ago." In Nahuatl the line is only "Uejkajkia ki majtok nopa kuikatl," which translates literally as "A long time ago he learned that song." In Nahuatl the qualifier "not a long time ago" is unnecessary, as the past is not viewed as distant—but rather in front of a person. That song, the maize song, is the second title of *Tlajpajketl*, *Canción de maíz*, and highlights the importance of the boy's words and Nahua knowledge production today.

Writing Out the Furrows: Intelligent Affectivity and Kinship

After his visions, the boy is awoken by his father's flashlight. When he leaves, he sees a rabbit and they "tienen un secreto" (have a secret; 40). Rather than solely a fantastical element, his visions underscore an important realism. This "secret" is the insight gained from the journey down a Wonderlandesque hole and up to the moon. The song the boy has been composing encapsulates the lessons of these experiences. There is an affectivity encapsulated in these experiences that helps give meaning and feeling to the quotidian actions in the community. The father and son hold hands, and the rabbit on the moon appears above the enjoined hands. This story of a rabbit represents a narrative that helps unite their family, and his mother is indirectly present as the person who told it. The

narrative in Nahuatl states that after falling unconscious, presumably from his fall from the *kuatlapechtli*, he “ki majtojka zeyok xochipilmekatlajtoli tlen i Zintli i Kuikatl” (now knew more flowered lines from the Maize Song; 41). *Xochipilmekatlajtoli* (literally “the flowered stringed words”) refers to the verses of the song he is composing, and *mekatl* also denotes the connections with one’s kin and genealogy. This narrative serves as an affective connection with that kin. It represents the many floods, both metaphorical and literal, that Nahua communities have survived to this day and that unite them in defense against these challenges.

As the boy returns home, he continues to imagine the maize song and images of him shouting in the field appear. The crop appears with cornhusks and the different color “hair” that grows on them, both yellow and red. Musical notes fly across the stalks, suggesting that the cornstalks are like musical notes and the lines on the husks and leaves like musical stanzas in sheet music. The agricultural cycle continues on and the boy, now more mature, is there to guard it.

The boy finally goes home and wakes up sick the next day. He feels too ill to go to the fields, and so he stays home and finishes writing the maize song:



Fig. 3. "Cuaderno."

His writing out the song like furrows in the field brings together the three Nahua perspectives used as the methodology for this analysis: 1. *Ixtlamatlistli* (knowledge with the face): personal experience and close interaction with the landscape, in careful observation of the crop and a wider meaning of text; 2. *Tlaixpan* (that which is in front): a perspective closely connected with the crop, as there are certain patterns that tend to repeat themselves in farming (the knowledge from your ancestors is needed to be able to tend to it within a

dynamic present and future); and 3. *Yoltlajlamikilistli* (knowledge with the heart): the affective connection with corn, as “yol” is both heart and maize seed, and constitutes the prime natural element that strengthens Nahuas and their kinship ties.

The text describes the boy as “asustado, enfermo. Está enfermo de susto” (frightened, ill. He is ill with fright; 44). He feels traumatized from the aggression he has witnessed against the crop and writing serves as a way to process those feelings. His writing is depicted like the crop’s growth. The slingshot lies across the center of the page. These different elements highlight a Nahua voice and active resistance. In the upper left-hand corner appears an image of the sun with a boy’s face and in the upper right-hand corner is the image of a blue moon with a girl’s face. These two colors (yellow and blue) combine to create the green described in the book, and the green corn stalks that appear as the boy writes on the page. Blue lines in the boy’s notebook and yellow fields from which the green stalks emerge accentuate this mixing of colors. Again the boy is painted on wood, harking back to the wooden platform from which he defended the crop, as well as the desk upon which he writes the song. These constitutive experiences have written upon him. They connect him with centuries of Nahua experiences, strategies and knowledges used to battle a gambit of challenges.

This image of the notebook stresses the importance of kinship and those affective ties that bring the boy’s family together. The song and these writings serve as a way to deal with traumas, from the attacks on the corn as well as the attacks on Nahuas. The respect for corn is one of the most sacred elements of life. It resists push by transnational companies with GMO corn for a monoculture of only one color, seen metaphorically as an erasure of Nahua communities. The song at the end emphasizes the importance of these different colors, in particular red, which is one of the varieties most in danger because the market rejects it. Nonetheless, within ceremonies it is deeply important because it constitutes the maize’s blood.

The final pages, CD, and companion website contain the full maize song. This song brings together the verses scattered throughout the book. The music itself reflects the break with common stereotypes regarding Indigenous nations. The song is played on an electric guitar and reflects influence from progressive rock. It breaks with what would be considered traditional Indigenous music and takes listeners back through the book, repetitive like the agricultural cycle itself. The repetitions of the *sones* (ceremonial music) are reminiscent of

this. The word used when musicians learn to play these *sones* is *ixtlamatilistli*, emphasizing that they are learned by experiencing and listening to them. They are supposed to be played only in ceremonies within sacred spaces such as hills and the *xochikali* (flowered house). *Canción de maíz* (maize song) here is also the name of a sacred *son* used to scare away the birds that threaten the crop. The lyrics describe the kernels as teeth of different colors, red and yellow, again playing on the mixing of these hues mentioned earlier.

The song begins with a melodious and relaxed rhythm, as if everything were idyllic. At 1'18" the song reaches the verse *mosisimia* (it gets furious) and turns ominous, alluding to the problems in the fields. The bass guitar introduces a dissonant tone and an angry voice surfaces. It speaks of indignation, like the themes often addressed in progressive rock or hip-hop.¹⁹

As Carballo describes, the song in its rhythm is a *huapango*, but with heavy influence from progressive rock.²⁰ The predominant instruments in the background are drums and bass guitar. The bass guitar stands in place of the traditional *jarana* and violin. Near the end, the bass guitarist Alonso Arreola repeats the lines from the beginning: "Andando juntos inundan con calor la tierra" (Walking together they flood the earth with heat). This alludes back to the flood depicted within the book. The lyrics shift back and forth between Nahuatl and Spanish, and in a sense resemble the reproduction and fusion of corn described in the song to produce something new. The song closes with a repetition of the first stanzas both in Spanish and Nahuatl, resembling the cyclical nature of the crop itself. The lead singer's voice does not come to a certain ending, but fades out into the distance, suggesting the song has not really come to an end.

The companion website contains photos of a wooden platform that Carballo constructed near his hometown. The platform serves as a physical connection with previous generations who used it. The viewer scrolls down as the maize song plays in the background and words from the song pop up on the screen. The companion site begins with a black and white image of an area near Carballo's hometown. As the viewer scrolls down silhouettes of *papamej* birds fly across the screen. Verses from parts of the book *Tlajpajketl* scroll across the screen. Green is the predominant color as photographs depict the corn stalks in their initial stages. A corncob with a red shuck then appears and corncobs fly across the screen. A young boy emerges with a slingshot and aims at a black and white bird that flashes across the screen. The next image then shows the boy asleep on his *tlapechtlí*, and then the site shifts to

a close-up of the boy looking at the camera. The final image is that of a close-up of a tortilla on the *comal*, reminiscent of the close-up of the boy. These images and sounds feature an affectivity and closeness to the crop, as well as an emotional connection with ancestors. The sounds and images of *Tlajpijketl* invite readers to experience this affectivity and recognize their connection to the crop. The combination of a book, CD, and companion website help to bridge distinct generations and invite both youth and elders to come together in sharing their experiences and knowledges.

Tired of Maize Bromides: Knowledge and Corn Production with Teeth

In this study, I have argued that, with its wider notion of what constitutes a text, Carballo's *Tlajpijketl* points to innovations in Nahua cultural production that fight acoustic and visual colonialism through a diverse array of media and unique worldviews. A key objective has been to view Nahuas as knowledge producers, with valuable perspectives for the present and future. As a methodology, *ixtlamatlistli*, *tlaxpan*, and *yoltlajlamikilistli* have helped to explore more in depth the complexities in *Tlajpijketl*. The concept of *acoustic and visual colonialism* has helped me identify how these perspectives battle the persistent displacement of Indigenous nations from mass media. The perspectives highlighted through *Tlajpijketl* serve as a strategy to take back the soundscapes and mediascapes dominated by inaccurate depictions of Nahuas, and position them to offer solutions to societal challenges today—in a figurative sense, from a platform where they observe and defend their worldviews for Nahuas and society in general.

In an interview during summer 2011, Carballo said he was tired of hearing Nahua authors write about corn.²¹ He complained that all these authors repeated the same bromides that confirmed expectations from government-funded publishing houses that Nahuas are isolated in rural areas and mired in ancient practices. Three years later, Carballo sought with *Tlajpijketl* to depart from previous representations. His approach to the sacred topic of maize is unique with its integration of figures such as Alice and the Zapatistas. An unpublished version of the text even depicts Marilyn Monroe and Emiliano Zapata on the boat with Alice, perhaps to underscore more a challenging of societal and editorial norms.²² Carballo seeks to traverse textual and generational borders and use media that engage more with youth. The acoustics of rock music mixed with Huapango in a message of protest break with the persistent depiction of Indigenous nations as stuck in the past. He criticizes the

literature of other Nahua authors as lacking teeth, because they do not denounce injustices in society and instead reiterate the same bland portrayals of corn. In other words, according to Carballo, they are ineffective at battling acoustic and visual colonialism.

From his view, symptomatic of this prosaic style, there exists a popular assumption that contemporary Indigenous literature is simplistic and for children. Here Carballo intentionally has written a children's book, but one that covers traumatic events and is really for all ages. The text engages the imagination as a way to process trauma. The genre of a children's book allowed Carballo to work more with image as well as sound. The artwork in the text is similar to Zapatista murals and Guerrero *amate* protest art, and, as art historian Luis Vargas-Santiago describes, this type of art serves as "a bridge that narrows the distance between art-making and the production of social thought" ("Zapatist Muralism"). *Tlajpiajketl*'s art depicts Nahua perspectives and an alternate education that respects a multiplicity of views. *Tlajpiajketl* is an attempt to value the observance of marginalized sectors of society, of valuing their knowledge "with the face."

Perhaps the boy suddenly turns into a grown man in his dreams because of the trauma he experiences from attacks on his community. For future studies, it is important to explore the ways in which this text uses fantasy to process trauma, from atrocities such as genocide, displacement, silencing, and starvation. The speech scroll shells around the boat in which the boy's family saves itself allude to Zapatista organized regions, called *caracoles* or "conch shells." The waves carry speech scrolls similar to those depicted in the Zapatista murals. The shells mixed with symbols of fire are the Mexica symbol of war (*atl-tlachinolli*) and in *Tlajpiajketl* highlight a Nahua agency against the dangers that beset their communities. This symbol of war can also be found on the Mexican nation-state flag, and *Tlajpiajketl* questions the nation-state exclusion of Nahua voices, even though Nahua elements appear in numerous nation-state symbols. *Tlajpiajketl* like the Zapatistas proposes an alternative education. The images of turtles in the work (such as the armadillo, a "turtle rabbit," and the turtle below the boat with a speech scroll for its tale) could also constitute an allusion to another space of alternative education—the rural teacher's college of Ayotzinapa and the disappearance of forty-three students, many of whom were Indigenous, in September 2014. The turtle is the school's symbol. Speech scroll shells and turtles in *Tlajpiajketl* invite the public to listen to a wider variety of texts and voices, from the agricultural landscape to the cityscapes in which the perspectives covered can help guide toward a more just world. The

boy's imagination invites readers to envision a space that respects and embraces diverse knowledges—to experience them with the face, view prior knowledges as part of a dynamic present and future, and develop an affective connection to them.

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Notes

¹ From interview conducted by Sandra Lorenzano on the program *Pasiones y obsesiones*, 3 June 2012. Full quote in Spanish: “Solo en la casa había tres libros: la Biblia . . . , *La divina comedia*, que no sé que hacía allí y *El Quijote*. Eran libros que estaban extraviados por allí. Pero en realidad el primer libro que me atrapó fue *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*.”

² *Mexicanizar* (Mexicanize) and *castellanizar* (Castilianize) were both terms used to refer to assimilation projects that attempted to erase Indigenous languages and subsume those who spoke these languages into the Mexican state and one official language, Spanish. The use of “Mexicanize” to refer to this assimilation was ironic, since another term for the Nahuatl language is *mejicanoj* (Mexican).

³ See Mónica Maristain, “Entrevista: La defensa de los derechos indígenas es un asunto moderno: Mardonio Carballo.”

⁴ As evidence of these efforts, Carballo advocated to have oral submissions accepted in competition for the Premio Nezahualcoyotl, the foremost prize in Indigenous literatures in Mexico. He served on the panel of judges for this prize in 2012.

⁵ Reflective of this wider meaning of text, the publication itself combines different media and has three different titles: *Tlajpajkettl* (Guardian of the Maize Fields), *Canción del maíz* (Maize Song), and *Espantapájaros* (Scarecrow). The companion website can be found at <http://elespantapajaros.com.mx/>

⁶ There are numerous competing alphabets in Nahuatl—at least five main ones—and heated discussions have arisen as to which system is “correct.” Unless I quote directly from Carballo’s text, in this article I use the system developed by Nahua teachers in the 1970s, which was later adopted by the Secretariat of Education for bilingual education in Veracruz. Carballo uses his own personal alphabet that mixes elements from different orthographies.

⁷ See Luis Cárcamo Huechante, “Indigenous Interference.” Also, in the Mellon-Sawyer Fall 2014 faculty seminar at the UT Austin, Cárcamo Huechante expounded on the idea of *visual colonialism*, and how mainstream visual media suffers from a similar exclusion of Indigenous representations.

⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of these tropes, see María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*.

⁹ Personal interview with Mauricio Gómez Morín, 1 August 2016.

¹⁰ *Tlajpajkettl* is dedicated to Rodrigo Lovera, described as an “amanuense de espantapájaros” (amanuensis of scarecrows; 7). In interviews, Carballo relates that the story of a worldwide flood and a rabbit who jumps to the moon to escape it is based on a narrative that his mother often told him in Nahuatl.¹⁰ Unlike his father, Carballo’s mother spoke Nahuatl to her children. In creating *Tlajpajkettl*, Carballo calls Lovera an amanuensis because Carballo first thought out the story in Nahuatl and then dictated the narrative in Spanish to Lovera. After Lovera transcribed the story in Spanish, Carballo translated it back into Nahuatl. Carballo states that he used this creative process to make the text more readable and flow as it did when his mother related the account of how a rabbit ended up on the moon. Personal interview, 3 August 2016.

¹¹ Images in this article are used with permission from Mardonio Carballo.

¹² Discussed in personal interview with Mardonio Carballo, 3 August 2016.

¹³ For more information on how “Romance sonámbulo” has taken on new meanings in the popular imagination, see Alejandro Gómez Camacho, “La saeta” y el “Romance sonámbulo” and Mercedes López-Baralt, “El misterio como ultimátum lorquiano.”

¹⁴ Personal interview with Mardonio Carballo, 3 August 2016.

¹⁵ The numbers twenty, forty, etc. underscore a vigesimal system as opposed to the decimal system used especially for counting currency.

¹⁶ *Difrasismo*, a term coined by Ángel María Garibay, “consists in pairing up two metaphors that, together, serve as the symbolic medium to express a single thought” (Garibay 19).

¹⁷ For more information regarding this bone codex, see Robert J. Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 744-745.

¹⁸ Although such floods appear in all Hemispheric Indigenous stories, the Huastecan narrative of the rabbit explicitly refers to this deluge as “Noah’s flood.”

¹⁹ There are Nahua artists who use these styles because of their unabashed quest to speak out against hypocrisy, and in doing so help to forge communities in the fight against these problems.

²⁰ Personal interview, 3 August 2016.

²¹ Personal interview, 2 June 2011.

²² Personal interview with Mauricio Gómez Morín, 1 August 2016.