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ARTICLES

- Paco Martín del Campo. "Are Pachucos Subalterns?: Crime, Liminality, and the Uncanny in Early Chicano Literature." 2
- John Thomas Maddox IV. "Los hijos de la Xica que Manda: *El laberinto de la soledad de Octavio Paz y Fe en disfraz* de Mayra Santos-Febres." 10
- Kathleen Cunniffe Peña. "Ferro's *El otro Joyce*: Originals and Copies." 22
- Greg C. Severyn. "Franz Galich's *Tikal Futura* and the Perpetuation of History's Violent, Eurocentric Cycles." 31
- Carolyn Wolfenzon. "El fantasma que nos habita: *El huésped y El cuerpo en que nací* de Guadalupe Nettel como espejo político de México." 41
- Diego Alonso. Borges y la escritura de la historia. Tres tesis en torno a 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' 51
- Claire Climer. "Un fuego sin luz: La paradoja y el error en *La busca de Averroes*." 59
- Silvia Rocha Dallos. "Intervenciones contaminantes y profilaxis cinematográfica en la vecindad de Pepe El Toro: la trilogía de Ismael Rodríguez (1948-1953)." 71

TRANSLATION

- Mempo Giardinelli, "Kilometro once."
Translation by Cameron Hicks Baumgartner. 80
- Felipe H. Lopez, "Mam" and "Guepy": Two Valley Zapotec poems.
Translation by Brook Danielle Lillehaugen. 83

REVIEWS

- Latin America at Fin-de Siècle Universal Exhibitions: Modern Cultures of Visuality.*
By Alejandra Uslenghi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 244 pages.
Reviewed by: Shelley Garrigan, North Carolina State University. 85
- Trauma, Taboo and Truth Telling: Listening to Silences in Postdictatorship Argentina.*
By Nancy J. Gates-Madsen. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. 235 pages.
Reviewed by: Ana Forcinito, University of Minnesota 86
- Invento, luego resisto: El Período Especial en Cuba como experiencia y metáfora (1990-2015).*
By Elzbieta Sklodowska. Santiago, Chile: Cuarto Propio, 2016. 494 pages.
Reviewed by: Vicky Unruh, University of Kansas, Emerita 88
- Literature and "Interregnum": Globalization, War, and the Crisis of Sovereignty in Latin America.*
By Patrick Dove. Albany: SUNY Press, 2016. 330 pages.
Reviewed by: Michael J. Lazzara, University of California, Davis. 90
- The Limits of Identity: Poetics and Politics in Latin America.*
By Charles Hatfield. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. 158 pages.
Reviewed by: Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, Washington University in St. Louis 93

“Mam” and “Guepy”: Two Valley Zapotec poems

Poetry and Spanish translation by Felipe H. Lopez

English translation and Introduction by Brook Danielle Lillehaugen

ABSTRACT: This work consists of two poems written in San Lucas Quiavini Zapotec, a Valley Zapotec language spoken in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. The poems are presented with English and Spanish translations, notes about the poet and translator, explanation of the translation process, and culture information.

KEYWORDS: poetry, Zapotec, Oaxaca, indigenous language, translation, migration

The poetry presented here is written in San Lucas Quiavini Zapotec, a Valley Zapotec language spoken in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico.¹ The poetry is the work of Zapotec writer and scholar Felipe H. Lopez, who migrated to the United States from Oaxaca at sixteen years old and now lives a life on both sides of the border. The content of his poetry reflects the experiences of an indigenous migrant. Questions of identity, connection, distance, and loss wind through the poetry, which relates the lives of indigenous migrants trilingually, in Zapotec, English, and Spanish—the languages of the Zapotec migrant community. The Spanish translations presented here are done by Lopez himself and the English translations are done by me in close consultation with Lopez. I work directly from the Zapotec in creating my translations. As Lopez is trilingual himself, I consult with him on the translations, both in the process and regarding the final product.

Readers may be familiar with Isthmus Zapotec poetry, such as that of Natalia Toledo (e.g. Toledo & Sullivan 2015), Irma Pineda (e.g. Pineda 2013), Víctor Terán (e.g. Terán & Shook 2015) and Víctor Cata (e.g. Cata 2010). The Zapotec language family is large and diverse, and belongs to the larger Otomanguean family. Isthmus Zapotec languages, while related to Valley Zapotec languages, are not mutually intelligible. They are distinct, related languages—like French and Spanish. The modern written literary culture in the Valley of Oaxaca is not as active as it is within the Isthmus of Oaxaca, with a handful of exceptions, including, but not limited to, poetry from a student collective in San Lucas Quiavini (Chávez Peón et al. 2009), Chávez Santiago’s translation of Aesop’s Fables into Teotitlán del Valle Zapotec (Toledo 2015), and works by writer Gabriel Martínez, who won an award for his Valley Zapotec writing in Francisco Toledo’s *Premios CaSa de literatura en zapoteco* in 2016. Thus, the

poems presented here are an important contribution to the modern written literary movement in Valley Zapotec; they are, as far as we know, the first poems in a Valley Zapotec language published with translations in both Spanish and English.

The poet. At the age of 16, Lopez migrated to Los Angeles, California, speaking no English and little Spanish. By 2007 he had earned his Ph.D. in urban planning from UCLA. In 1992 he began collaborating with linguists on the documentation of his language and working on language valorization and preservation work. He is the co-author of a trilingual Zapotec-Spanish-English dictionary (Munro & Lopez et al. 1999). He has taught language classes on Valley Zapotec at the University of California, San Diego and at UCLA, using a textbook for which he is the co-author (Munro et al. 2006). His Zapotec short story *Liaza chaa* ‘I am going home’ was awarded the 2017 *Premios CaSa* prize for Zapotec literature. He is currently working on a book of Zapotec poetry.

The English translator. Lillehaugen is a linguist who specializes in Valley Zapotec. She has been learning from speakers of Zapotec languages since 1999. Her research profile includes technical grammatical description (e.g. Foreman & Lillehaugen 2017, Anderson & Lillehaugen 2016) as well as collaborative language documentation and revitalization projects (e.g. Lillehaugen 2016).

Cultural note regarding poem *Guepy*. *Guepy* means ‘bellybutton’ and can be used to refer to the umbilical cord (Lillehaugen et al. 2016) in San Lucas Quiavini Zapotec. After a child is born, the umbilical cord is wrapped in a cloth and buried in the yard of the home where the child was born.

Audio The audio recordings of the author reading the poems aloud in Zapotec are available for download at the following URLs:

https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/ubiquity-partner-network/larc/journal/lalr/Lopez_Lillehaugen_2017_Mam.aiff

https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/ubiquity-partner-network/larc/journal/lalr/Lopez_Lillehaugen_2017_Guepy.aiff

Mam - Grandmother - *Abuela*

Mam	Grandmother	Abuela
Gwaa ydo gualdia— gutyai, e? Ladizyi cha. Zicya. Xini gualde guecya? "Chinezac Dyozy liu," naëb, blat laza.	I went to church to get blessed— had I died? I'm only going to the Other Side. I'll be back. Why did they bless my head? "God be with you," she said, and my heart was empty.	<i>Fui a la iglesia a ser bendecido— ¿habré muerto? Solo voy al otro lado. Regresaré. ¿Por qué me llevan a bendecir? "Dios esté contigo," me dijo, vacío quedó mi corazón.</i>

Guepy - Origin - *Origen*

Guepy	Origin	Origen
Cali bsanu xquepyu? Ricyi na lazhu. Ricy gyicyu. Xauzanu cabez liu! Lazhbuny queity rcazyiri liu, rseinyzi rcazri.	Where did you leave your umbilical cord? That is where your pueblo is. That is where you will return. That is where your parents wait for you! Away from there, they don't want you, they only want your labor.	<i>¿Dónde dejaste tu ombligo? Allí es tu pueblo. Allí regresarás. ¡Allí te esperan tus padres! En tierras ajenas no te quieren, solo tu trabajo quieren.</i>

END NOTE

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