The Tonalmachiotl, the Sun's Stone or Aztec Calendar, as portrayed in a drawing by Martha Ramirez Oropeza.

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Martha Ramirez Oropeza's professional work is as a mural painter, performer and creator of indigenous/popular theater and as a researcher into ancient Nahuatl manuscripts called codices. She serves as vice-director of the Mascarones Theatre Group, with which she has worked for 30 years, and as cofounder, administrator and designer of the pyramid campus of the Nahuatl University that Mascarones and its supporters created in Ocotepec, a small community close to Cuernavaca, in the Mexican state of Morelos. She also teaches at Nahuatl University and promotes cultural exchange with faculty and students from universities based in the United States.

Her own biography embodies many of the contradictions of globalization, from her childhood as a migrant farmworker, picking prunes from the age of four in the California agricultural fields—and having to relearn Spanish after it had been driven out of her head by a second-grade teacher who washed her mouth out with soap. Growing up in the violent Pacoima barrio of Los Angeles, she took part in the militant awakening of La Raza, of the Chicano[1] movement, participating in a victorious hunger strike for the United Farmworkers Union, designing posters for anti-war demonstrations, painting her first murals, studying with maestro David A. Siqueiros and, in 1971, joining Mascarones.

This essay is remarkable for its seamless fusion of ancient cultural symbols and contemporary realities, reflected throughout Mascarones' work. The expansive nature of the group's vision and its aim of cultural reconstruction seem to embody an understanding of culture's encompassing nature, the way it is possible to draw from the well of cultural tradition and use what is learned to move forward. The sheer ambition, enterprise and zeal required to create a university—all in the service of community cultural development—inspires awe. Here's a bit of the information she contributed in the spring of 2001 to the online dialogue among the authors represented in this volume:

Speaking in terms of my own country, if we want to seriously counter the negative effect of globalization, this neo-colonization, we must start by working with our youth, especially indigenous youth, to promote self-esteem, pride of our identity… But how to feel pride of being the sector of Mexicans that live in the worst possible conditions, all they want is to someday be able to escape this extreme poverty. This is one of the most important tasks our Nahuatl University has taken on in our town.… When we arrived here in 1989, the local authorities asked me

[1] Chicano: Term used to identify people of Mexican heritage who suffer discrimination in the United States and struggle against it.

to paint a mural which reflected the historical past of the town on the walls of the government office. This wonderful personal experience led me to the idea of teaching Nahuatl culture directly in the elementary school.

So, 12 years ago, after consulting with the local authorities,… teachers and parents, we instituted an annual spring festival, "Xopanixtli," to celebrate the new year in the ancient Nahuatl calendar.… Each year, we work with 500 students, teaching them myths, poems, Aztec dances, and especially the national anthem in the Nahuatl language. Because of the latter, the school has received recognition and prizes in state competitions. When the TV or radio comes to interview them, these children, who are daughters and sons of farmers, are now proud to say they are Nahuatl.

And the children go home to sing and speak Nahuatl to their grandparents, who still speak the language. The middle generation, the children's parents, forced to forget Nahuatl, to learn Spanish, also begins to "remember."

Addressing the specific situation of indigenous people in Mexico, this essay provides useful insight into the homogenizing tendencies of globalization and how they might be resisted.

Huehuepohualli[2]

COUNTING THE ANCESTORS' HEARTBEAT

by Martha Ramirez Oropeza

The indigenous culture of Mexico has survived repeated waves of colonization because our ancestors preserved their worldview in a highly disciplined oral tradition. This is a tradition that recognized the ordering principle of number as the invisible structure of visible time, the expression of the seasons of life that bind individuals into a living community. Many centuries before the European invasion, the indigenous cultures of Mexico devised a writing system based on the ritual calendar that governed the community's relationship with the agricultural and spiritual forces that sustained human life and spirit. By unifying the ritual life of the community in the traditional day-count of the calendar, our ancestors bequeathed us a vision of the organic unity of the world and our original place within that world.

With this in mind, I wish to make use of the ancestors' vision here to describe our own community development work. As their descendants, Mascarones'[3] work in the fields of theater, visual arts and education cannot help but reflect the perceptions and beliefs of those whose great communal works call to us from the past which lies on the other, unwritten side of history.

Although the Tonalmachiotl,[4] or Aztec Calendar Stone, is a monumental work that incorporates all the elements of the ritual calendar, its particular emphasis is on the cyclic ages by which the world is created and transformed. Each of its five Ages[5] or Suns depicts a distinct period in the development of the world itself, providing us with a model by which to encounter, evaluate, resist, adapt to and ultimately influence the forces of dehumanization that penetrate our communities.

[2] Huehuepohualli (*huehue*: ancient; *pohua*: to count; *li*: essence): The essence of the counting of the ancient. This concept (used in the title, "Counting the Ancestors' Heartbeat") is a way of applying the structure of the calendar to tell the history of Mascarones.

[3] Mascarones: The name of the Mascarones Theatre Group originated in a high school that operated in Mexico City within a neo-colonial building with masks on its walls. Because of these masks, the popular name for *Preparatoria No. 6* was *Prepa Mascarones*, "preparatory school of the masks."

[4] Tonalmachiotl (*tonal*: energy; *machio*: map, model; *tl*: essence): What is popularly known as the Aztec Calendar. A monumental sculpture of great importance can be seen in the National Museum of Anthropology. It contains the cycles of Earth, Venus and the Moon, as well as the cycle of the five Suns, or Ages.

For this reason, the Tonalmachiotl appears to us as a map for strategic action in the face of mounting pressures as Mexico struggles to defend itself against the newest wave of colonization: globalization. Because the implicit intent of those who wage the cultural war known as globalization is the cultural conquest of poorer nations lacking the economic and media resources to compete on the same field, we resort to our greatest natural resource: the wisdom of our ancestors and the vision of unity and harmony inspiring their descendants.

In the five sections that follow, I will attempt to show how our endeavor has been guided—sometimes consciously, sometimes intuitively—by the enduring vision of transformation our ancestors inscribed on the Stone of the Five Suns.

Because the shifting figure of "the Other" has evolved from its earlier form of colonizer into its current form of globalizer, our work has had to take on different manifestations in order to survive as a community-development group. In 1962, we formed the Mascarones Theatre Group under the direction of Mariano Leyva. Developing from a high-school drama class into a professional, award-winning theater group, Mascarones began recording albums of choral poetry and classical plays. The turbulence of the late 1960s politicized Mascarones, sculpting us into an institution committed to advocating for the rights of workers and indigenous people in Mexico.

What set Mascarones apart from other theater groups—and assured our survival—was our economic independence: rather than relying on universities, the government or elite funding agencies, we appealed directly to the popular needs and concerns of the time. Factory workers would set aside money from their unions to pay for a play; the farmworkers and indigenous community organizations would give us sacks of corn or beans and transport us in their tractors or trucks; political parties would set aside money for community culture activities; and in some cases, we would simply pass the hat. Furthermore, Mascarones was the first independent popular theater group to produce records, posters, books and audio tapes for supplementary income and as a means of cultural diffusion. During the past 40 years of uninterrupted community cultural development work, Mascarones has evolved a unique style of theater that responds to actual circumstances—because many of the poor and disenfranchised do not go to formal theater settings, we take our work to towns and villages.

By the late 1980s, our work had become more narrowly focused on the rights of indigenous peoples, inspiring us to create an institution that would preserve and disseminate our ancestors' culture in such a way as to increase awareness of and respect for our historical identity. Toward this end, we founded the Nahuatl[6] University.

[5]Five Ages: The first ring around the image of *Tlaltekuhtli*, the Earth contains four rectangles that refer to four ancient Ages. Starting from the left and advancing counterclockwise, they are: the Age of Four Jaguars, the Age of Four Winds, the Age of Four Rains of Fire, the Age of Four Waters. Together they form another, the Age of Four Movements. The names of the Ages or Suns refer to the day of the ancient calendar on which that particular Sun ends.

[6]Nahuatl: The ancient language that was spoken in most of Mexico when the Europeans invaded.

THE JAGUAR SUN: ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

This First Age is guided by the creative force named Tezkatlipoka,[7] or Smoking Mirror, who is identified with the obsidian mirror he carries in his chest — a mirror in which all who face him must look into their own hearts and see themselves as they truly are.

From this we learn that in order to encounter the Other it is necessary to know our own heart: before we can meet the Other face-to-face, it is necessary that we grasp the continuity of our collective identity. By confronting the ancestral memory within the Smoking Mirror, we do not allow our identity to be defined by the Other. Remembering who we are in our totality, however, requires that we educate ourselves about the essential experience that makes us one.

In 1990, we founded the Nahuatl University as a means of crystallizing theatrical experience into a deeper expression of community identity. Based on the oral tradition of the ancient *kalmekak*,[8] or centers of higher learning, we designed a curriculum with a dual objective: (1) for the urban community, 80 percent of whom have lost our native language yet deeply desire to find answers to modern problems with the ancient wisdom of the past; and (2) for the rural and indigenous community, to be supported in their struggle to retain their identity and resources. Both objectives result in increased awareness and pride in our original cultural roots.

Toward these ends, we constructed four pyramids in the traditional architectural model: standing in the four cardinal directions, the pyramids face a central plaza and ceremonial space. Within the Western pyramid of Zihuatlampa,[9] or Region of the Feminine Force of Transformation, we incorporated a traditional *temazcal*, or steam-bath, for the purpose of conducting rites of purification and self-knowledge. By inviting healers from various indigenous communities to guide our *temazcal* ceremonies, we have found our own sense of purpose arising from spiritual roots running much deeper than intellectual curiosity.

Over the past 10 years, more than a thousand individuals have been introduced to these same ceremonies and shared our sense of self-discovery. Countering the emptiness and isolation people often find in their daily routines, the *temazcal* experience reawakens their sense of belonging to a higher community. For those who re-enter the womb of the earth represented by the *temazcal*, the elements of night, fire, water, steam, medicinal plants, nurturing companions and ancient chants combine to provide participants a clearer vision of what a meaningful life entails and the steps they wish to take in order to achieve it. Because the *temazcal* itself exists within the context of a ceremonial center, surrounded by four pyramids painted with murals and other artwork,

[7] Tezkatlipoka (*tezkatl*: mirror; *i*: his; *poka*: smoke): The smoking mirror. Ancient memory, inner knowledge.

[8] Kalmekak (*kalli*: house, community; *mekatl*: rope; *k*: the place): The place of the continuity of the traditions. A school for higher learning, where young people were trained to become leaders and spiritual guides.

[9] Zihuatlampa (*zihua*: woman; *tampa*: region): The region of women, the West. It refers to the place where the Sun metaphorically sleeps with the Earth.

Nahuatl University buildings are pyramids decorated with traditional symbols.

the vision that emerges is one of wholeness: as an act of healing the fragmented identity, individual and collective, the *temazcal* reunites its participants with their natural, cultural and spiritual heritage.

Complementing this form of traditional medicine are various courses of study that Nahuatl University has instituted as part of its curriculum. The following courses in pre-Hispanic culture provide us with the basis by which to define an authentic boundary between ourselves and the Other.

By presenting classes in the Nahuatl language, for instance, we work to preserve our native tongue and to demonstrate its central role in the formation of our ancestors' thought and cultural expressions. Not only is Nahuatl a language in which words come to convey complex and multiple meanings by compounding simpler morphemes, it also produces a thought and culture of harmony and beauty: those who learn to read and speak it not only discover their cultural origins, they take its logic and poetry as inspiration for their own creative expression.

Because much of our oral tradition is handed down in the form of historical stories, myth, song and dance, these make up a substantial body of performative art we have incorporated into our theater work. Toward this end, we present workshops to teachers and community theater groups, since they have ready-made audiences with local concerns and needs. For more than 10 years now, each one of our members has directed his or her studies from the experience

of theater toward a more specific area within the Nahuatl culture. As an example, I devoted my studies to the interpretation of the glyphs in ancient manuscripts, pre-Hispanic murals and sculptures. This quest brought me into connection with the research of other teachers and with indigenous artists and spiritual guides themselves. In our intensive workshops, I introduce the symbols in a classroom situation, showing slides as well as manuscripts. For instance, a special focus is interpreting the astrological calendar symbols. The day after I have introduced the symbols, students have the opportunity to paint their own particular symbols on *amatl*, the original paper used by the ancients. Or, if time permits, they make masks with their own spiritual images. Finally, the cycle culminates with a visit to Xochicalco, the National Museum of Anthropology, where they can find a meaningful relationship in the present with the greatness of the past.

By way of example, the community of Amatlan[10] had no voice by which to recount its historical drama as the birthplace of the great culture hero, Ketzalkoatl.[11] At the town's request, our theater group accepted responsibility for creating a play to commemorate the birth of Amatlan's most honored child, some 1,200 years ago. After 17 years of annual performances, our group was able to pass on the responsibility to a newly established theater group from Amatlan. This transition was accomplished in several stages: (1) members of our group designed a special two-month workshop to prepare the local group for their first theater performance; (2) we then taught them the play, rehearsed it with them, and helped them design and make their costumes and masks; (3) our final performance of the play was presented jointly with members of the local group; and (4) we publicly transferred our responsibility to the local group in a moving and solemn ceremony.

This example demonstrates how theater can *be* community identity—and how the act of reclaiming one's sense of historical self elevates the institution of theater beyond mere commodity or art form. Similar examples can be drawn from other classes that the Nahuatl University offers in the arenas of written history and its Nahuatl writing system, Mayan[12] mathematics, traditional medicine and nutrition, mural production, indigenous philosophy and poetry (or Flower and Song) and comprehensive studies of the ritual calendar as recorded in the painted manuscripts of our ancestors.

Through our efforts in the Nahuatl University, we strive to provoke in those we touch a sense of identity that reaches back to our mother culture and forward to our shared destiny—and a foundation from which to encounter any other culture as an equal.

[10] Amatlan (*amatl*: tree from which sacred paper was made; *tlan*: abundance): The land where there is an abundance of trees for making paper. The name of the town in the state of Morelos, close to Tepoztlan, where Ze Akatl Topiltzin Ketzalkoatl was born.

[11] Ketzalkoatl (*ketzal*: the quetzal bird; *koatl*: the snake): The balancing principle needed for creativity. This refers to three aspects. In cosmic terms, it indicates the planet Venus, the morning and the evening star; in terms of intelligence, it indicates great wisdom; and in myths that refer to the creation of the human being of the Fifth Sun, it indicates a degree of wisdom, as well as all of the guides prepared in this philosophy and discipline toward great wisdom, such as Ze Akatl Topitzin Ketzalkoatl.

[12] The great ancient Mayan culture developed in the southeastern region of Mexico and Central America. The flourishing culture is recognized as having created one of the most exact calendar systems, as well as discovering the concept of zero.

THE WIND SUN: EVALUATING THE OTHER

This Second Age is guided by the creative force named Ketzalkoatl, or Plumed Serpent, who is identified with both the penetrating wind of intelligence and the wisdom of the serpent who perpetually renews itself—a wise intelligence that neither becomes narrow nor stagnant, but rather encompasses ever-widening vistas from constantly refreshed points of view.

From this we learn that in order to evaluate the Other, it is necessary to establish a viewpoint that places our efforts within the contemporary cultural context of the balance between justice and injustice: before we can assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Other, it is necessary that we develop the historical perspective to understand how its institutions of power have evolved. By exercising the conscious discernment of Ketzalkoatl, we do not allow our objectives and ideals to be defined by the Other. Creating new allies, however, requires that we point out injustices for all to see.

Holding a mirror up to the culture of dehumanization in all its many guises, our plays are intended to be participatory experiences in the sense of providing historical or mythological dramas that parallel the audience's contemporary concerns. An example of such a work is our dramatization of the life and death of Emiliano Zapata,[13] based on a series of related ballads or *corridos*[14] that arose around Zapata during the 1910 Mexican Revolution.[15] Its performance carries the audience from a time of injustices and hopelessness, through a time of rising social consciousness and hope, then into a time of popular victory tempered by betrayal and the institutionalization of a new form of exploitation.

The drama opens with the birth of Zapata in the indigenous community of Anenecuilco in the state of Morelos. Central to the mythic structure of the play is the fact that Zapata was born with a birthmark in the shape of a hand on his heart. The *corrido* begins:

> The tradition recounts that when Emiliano was born
> A hand engraved on his heart marked his greatness.

When the midwife notes aloud that the child has a sign on his heart that looks like the symbol for the community of Anenecuilco, his mother becomes alarmed. Reassuring her, the midwife reminds her of the date and forecasts the child's destiny in the manner of the ancient ritual calendar:

> He will be a guide and a companion for his people, reawakening the vision of a better life. His spirit will become a guiding force for our people's happiness.

[13] Emiliano Zapata: Best-loved Mexican revolutionary of 1910. Born in the state of Morelos. His example of great love for the field workers has inspired many social and political movements.

[14] *Corridos*: Ballads composed and made popular in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, encompassing ancient rhythms, oral history and the arrival of the guitar in Mexico. These songs became the popular way of sharing significant happenings of the revolutionary years when there were few other means of communication.

[15] 1910 Revolution: After more than 30 years of the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, the people of Mexico revolted in what was known as the Agrarian Revolution of 1910. It changed the structure of the government, although later on was betrayed. Nevertheless, it brought about important social and political reforms that benefited the people.

The author appears in a scene from the play "The Life and Death of Emiliano Zapata" by the Mascarones Theatre Group. Photo by Raul Aguilar.

The social conditions facing those who work the land is the subject of the next scene, dramatized by depicting Zapata at age 13, witnessing his father being unjustly beaten by the foreman. Confronting the social status of the land workers, which amounted to little more than slavery (symbolized by his father's shame), Zapata announces:

> When I grow up I will return the land to those who work it!

The next scene shows Zapata at 30, in a meeting with the community's council of elders. In a solemn ceremony, Zapata is handed several ritual objects that confer upon him the rank of *kalpulelke*, or leader of his people: the ancient land documents marking the boundaries of Anenecuilco; the ancient staff signifying the ancestor's wisdom; and the antique rifle carried by his predecessor. In response, Zapata hands back the staff of wisdom, saying:

> This staff will serve our cause better in your hands—but I will take this rifle in order to return the land to its rightful owners.

Then comes a montage of scenes depicting the exploitation of the land workers, their voicing of grievances, the violent reaction of the landowners and the acceleration of the revolution. The montage culminates with a meeting between Zapata and Francisco Madero, the new president of Mexico. As the liberal replacement for the deposed tyrant, Porfirio Diaz, Madero promises to fulfill the land reforms but covertly insists that Zapata accept a large land grant as a bribe. Zapata forcefully rejects the bribe, intuitively understanding that Madero will eventually betray the cause: they part ways as inevitable enemies.

There follows a scene in which Zapata's land-reform manifesto is read aloud. Because Zapata and his immediate circle spoke Nahuatl rather than Spanish, the manifesto was translated and signed by Spanish-speaking supporters—an act that permitted city dwellers far removed from the lives of the land workers to understand and support Zapata's struggle for land rights. In an uncompromising defense of land reform, Zapata's manifesto declares war against the new government of Madero. As the *corrido* relates—

> I am a rebel from Morelos,
> I will fight for the manifesto of San Luis.
> I am a rebel from Morelos
> Because Madero has not fulfilled his word.
> With my horse, my rifle, and my bullets,
> With my Virgin of Guadalupe as my shield,
> I will make the manifesto of Ayala come true,
> Or I will die in the effort.
> Wealth corrupts a man
> And estranges him from his people.

While the new government consolidates its power, Zapata implements a model of the agrarian land-reform movement: claiming most of the state of Morelos in the name of the land-reform movement and keeping his promise to return the land to the land workers, Zapata redistributes rights to the land so as to re-establish communal ownership.

In order to pacify the nation by forcing the institutionalization of the revolution, Venustiano Carranza, the new president, sets out to assassinate Zapata. The *corrido* recounts the treachery of Guajardo:

> They left from Tepalcingo in the direction of Chinameca.
> Zapata was with Guajardo because he believed him to be trustworthy.
> I will sleep in Water-of-the-Ducks,
> You and your men go on ahead to Chinameca.

The next scene shows Zapata sleeping with his wife, then awakening from a nightmare in which the birthmark over his heart has disappeared. In a flash of insight, his wife recognizes this as a portent of his death. Although she tries to stop him from rejoining Guajardo, Zapata departs and falls into Guajardo's ambush:

> Little bubbling stream, what did that carnation have to say?
> It says that our leader has not died, that Zapata shall return.
> And that this is the end of the *corrido* of the inconceivable treason
> By which Emiliano Zapata lost his life.

For the contemporary citizen of Mexico, this story is no less relevant today than 90 years ago. Repeated promises of reform have consistently been broken. Those who sacrifice for reform have consistently been betrayed. The need for widespread and deep-seated reform has consistently been ignored.

By attuning ourselves to the enduring myths of our people, the Mascarones Theatre Group has endured to tell and retell those stories that allow contemporary audiences to judge the acts of their exploiters and take sides against them.

THE LIGHTNING SUN: RESISTING THE OTHER

This Third Age is guided by the creative force named Tlalok,[16] or Drink of the Earth, who is identified with the rainstorm and its attendant lightning—a nurturing and animating force that ensures survival under even the harshest conditions.

[16] Tlalok (*tlalli*: land; *oktli*; drink): The sacred drink of the land, rain. The masculine waters. The powerful force of a storm. Lightning, thunder, rain.

From this we learn that in order to resist the Other, it is necessary to both find strength in the ritual life of our ancestors and foster that same strength in the community as a whole: before we can mount a credible resistance to the culture of the Other, it is necessary that we experience how our indigenous culture instills in us a wise face and wise heart. By embodying the vitality and fortitude of Tlalok, we do not allow our inner experiences to be defined by the Other. But holding on to our way of life requires that we re-enact our traditions as if our people's survival depended on it.

The last days of October and the first two days of November have since ancient times been celebrated in Mexico by the ritual called Mikiztli, or Day of the Dead: over a period of two weeks, all of Mexico coexists with the spirits of the deceased. Preparations begin nine days before the Day of the Dead with making of skeletons, traditional foods and public and private altars; through the use of rosaries and fireworks, the living guide the spirits of the deceased home. Five days before the Day of the Dead, the spirits of those who have died violent deaths are remembered and consoled. One day before the Day of the Dead, offerings are set out for the spirits of those who have died as children. On the Day of Dead itself, special attention must be paid to the spirits of family members who have died in the past year. An all-night vigil ensues where family and friends visit with the spirits of their loved ones, and the following day each family takes their offering to the cemetery to share it with the deceased. The nine days after the Day of the Dead are again accompanied by rosaries and fireworks in order to help guide the spirits back to Miktlan, or the Land of the Dead.

One of the most recent manifestations of the cultural war is the encroaching tide of mass-produced masks, costumes and candies typical of the "trick-or-treat" aspect of Halloween as celebrated in the United States. Because Halloween falls near the most important dates of the Day of the Dead ceremonies, its appeal to urban children threatens the continuation there of this ancient tradition into the next generation. Innocuous as the trick-or-treat holiday may appear, its masks and costumes are almost universally of a frightening or ugly nature, presenting a demonic or evil aspect to the deceased and death itself. Likewise, mass-produced candies and related paraphernalia threaten to replace the traditional hand-made and home-made papier-mâché skeletons and ceramic toys and figurines. Because the burgeoning population of Mexico represents such a large market for the products of global consumer culture, the economic forces driving the entry of Halloween merchandise into urban Mexico are considerable. Visits to urban supermarkets and malls during the past few Day of the Dead seasons have revealed that a minimum of 60 percent of the floor space dedicated to seasonal merchandise is for Halloween and trick-or-treat products.

For the past 35 years, our theater group has performed "Las Calaveras de Posada" ("The Skeletons of Posada"), a play we adapted based on the characters created by the great engraver Jose Guadalupe Posada. Using skeletons to comment on contemporary social and political conditions at the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Posada combined art and satire to criticize the powerful—a combination that inspired the Mexican muralist tradition a generation later. Mascarones' production of this play has proven to be our most popular and enduring—a fact we attribute to its reflection of a purer time in which the Day of the Dead celebration had not been trivialized by the culture of globalization.

The scope of the play carries the audience from pre-Hispanic times, in which the skeletons quote the great Nahuatl poet–philosopher Netzahualcoyotl; through the European invasion, in which the skeletons relive the attempt to exterminate their civilization; through the colonial period, in which the skeletons recount three centuries of oppression at the hands of foreign kings; through the War of Independence from Spain, the French Intervention, the U.S.–Mexican War and the Agrarian Revolution of 1910, in which the skeletons pay homage to Posada and describe the social conditions that brought about the revolution; into modern times in the form of a debate between two popular characters, the Pulquera, a witty, truth-telling drunkard, and the Catrina, a snobbish, prissy member of the nouveau riche; and finally the play ends with all the skeletons throwing a big party and inviting the audience onto the stage to dance.

Characteristic of the play's theme is the following verse, spoken by a female skeleton who is explicitly identified with the Mexican conception of Death:

> Here am I, represented in another form,
> Without scythe or hourglass,
> As the final place of dwelling.

Through the use of pathos, humor and biting satire, the play builds one catharsis upon another to produce the laughter and tears that fortify the heart against the perennial cycles of invasion.

THE WATER SUN: ADAPTING TO THE OTHER

This Fourth Age is guided by the creative force named Chalchiuhtlikue,[17] or Jade Skirt, who is identified with lakes, rivers and streams—a nurturing force that adapts to circumstances without losing its essential nature.

From this we learn that in order to adapt to the Other, it is necessary to subvert its institutions of power to our own ends: before we can chart our own course across the landscape of the Other, it is necessary that we ensure our own objectives and goals will never be subverted by success or recognition. By making ourselves as resilient and versatile as Jade Skirt, we do not allow the way we interact with our surroundings to be defined by the Other. Crossing the most desolate terrain without losing our way, however, requires that we keep our gaze fixed on the guiding star of our core values and principles.

As the Mascarones Theatre Group grew and evolved, we sought ways to achieve economic stability that would not pressure us to sacrifice our vision of social transformation. In 1984, we were invited by the governor of the state of Morelos to create a Commission for Cultural Development that would benefit primarily the rural population of the state. Despite a limited budget, Mascarones organized 11 troupes of artists who traveled between the 400 towns of rural Morelos, creating a new audience and, thereby, a renaissance of popular theater. Our relationship with the government lasted for 13 years, proving beneficial to the rural areas, the government and ourselves.

An important aspect of our cultural-development work was the production of murals under my direction as Mascarones' vice-director and longest-standing member. After apprenticing with the master muralist David A. Siqueiros, I joined Mascarones in 1971 and have since produced approximately 20 murals. An example is the large-scale mural "Kuauhtemok"[18] that occupies the local government office in the indigenous township of Tetelcingo, whose citizens contributed to the mural's theme by sharing the stories making up their local oral history.

[17] Chalchiuhtlikue (*chalchihuitl*: jade, precious stone; *kue*: skirt): Jade Skirt. The feminine waters. The penetrating rivers, lakes, seas.

[18] Kuauhtemok (*kuauhtli*: eagle; *temok*: descends): The Eagle That Descends. Last Tlahtoani (governor) of Mexico. A young man of only 21 years who confronted the Spaniards in 1521, guiding his people in a heroic defense of the nation. Undoubtedly the most powerful symbol against foreign intervention.

In the mural "Emiliano Zapata," the agrarian revolutionary hero rides on horseback with machete in hand to defend Koatlikue, Mother Earth, and the right to "Tierra y Libertad" (Land and Freedom). The mural was done with community artists directed by Martha Ramirez in the Agricultural Collective Government Building in Yautepec, Morelos. Photo from the Mascarones Archive.

I produced a previous version of that mural's theme in 1988 for the State Auditorium of Morelos. That mural spanned two large panels, each 25 feet high and 40 feet wide, depicting an indigenous couple engaged in acts of their traditional way of life. Located in the most important public auditorium in the state, the mural came to play an important role in the public rallies and celebrations of its citizens.

Seven years after the mural was painted, a new governor created a unified State Institute of Culture that assimilated all existing state-funded cultural development commissions, including our own. One of the first acts of the new Institute was to remodel the old state auditorium and convert it into a modern movie theater. Without notifying us, the director of the new Institute of Culture ordered the murals irrevocably destroyed by painting over them. Ironically, the reason given was that the new director believed they would distract audiences from the movies being shown in the darkened theater.

A public outcry ensued, fueled in part by the fact that the new director had come from Mexico City after an assignment as cultural attaché in France. The community of Cuernavaca found the director's arbitrary destruction of indigenous symbols so insulting that the State House of Representatives inquired into the matter in one of their hearings, during which the director of the Institute of Culture accepted full responsibility for the destruction of the mural.

At this juncture, Mascarones had a critical decision to make: either we safe-guard our longstanding theater contract with the government by not joining the public outcry, or we forfeit the economic stability of the past 13 years

by filing a lawsuit against the government for the destruction of the mural. We decided to file the lawsuit, and one week later our contract with the state government was terminated.

Not abandoning our ethics, not abdicating our responsibility to protest, proved to be the right decision: six months after we filed our lawsuit, the governor was impeached after having been linked to kidnappings and narcotics trafficking. When a new governor took office and appointed a new director of the Institute of Culture, we were once again approached to participate in the Institute's program. The new government settled the lawsuit filed by Mascarones, offering both financial restitution and another public space within which to produce a new mural with themes similar to the original. Work is currently underway on that mural in the State Public Education Building, the theme of which is the role of the *tlamatini*, or makers of wise faces and strong hearts, who were the teachers in the ancient Nahuatl culture.

The outcome of this battle was not so much a victory as a vindication: while defeating a corrupt and powerful officialdom is rewarding, we found that holding to our convictions and maintaining our dignity was infinitely more fulfilling. While the pitfalls of participating in the institutions of power of the Other are many, we negotiate our way through them by staying to the path of our original vision.

Another example of our adapting to the culture of the Other and turning its artifacts to our own use involves computer technology and its communications adjunct, the Internet. Like many other community cultural-development groups, the Nahuatl University has found the Internet to be a useful tool. Specifically, it enables us to: (1) communicate with groups and individuals who share our ideals; (2) offer courses and information to those seeking to learn about Mexico's indigenous culture; and (3) provide an innovative means by which indigenous professors receive computers in exchange for teaching Nahuatl.

Three professors from indigenous communities approached us, seeking advice on how they might acquire computers by which they could produce textbooks for their courses in Nahuatl. In response, we organized a month-long course in Nahuatl and announced over the Internet that people could receive instruction in exchange for donating used computer equipment in good condition. In reply, we received enough interest to provide each of the communities with the needed computers and printers.

Small-scale projects like this are rewarding for all concerned, touching individual lives in ways ultimately more meaningful than the straightforward exchange of money for services. It is equally rewarding, however, to see indigenous communities taking up the cultural products of the Other in order to preserve their own.

THE MOVEMENT SUN: INFLUENCING THE OTHER

This Fifth Age is guided by the creative force named Tonatiuh, or Shining Sun, who is identified with the light and heat of the Sun as it soars above the Earth—a transformative force that dispels the shadow of ignorance and self-interest by unwaveringly expressing the ideal of universal equality and justice.

From this we learn that in order to influence the Other, it is necessary to win the hearts and minds of those whose loyalties have not yet been settled: before we can change the course of the Other, it is necessary that we recruit allies from its own base of support. By shedding light on the equality of all cultures just as Shining Sun does, we do not allow our sphere of influence to be defined by the Other. Moving others to act with a greater sense of ethical responsibility, however, requires that we expand their vision of what is possible.

As a result of the social and political unrest of 1968,[19] Mexico began evolving a more democratic form of government in which independent political parties were tolerated and allowed to seek popular support. By the 1980s, parties representing the interests of urban and rural workers began actively seeking the support of artists and intellectuals in an effort to make their message more accessible to a wider range of voters. As a result, Mascarones was invited to contribute to a party primarily representing the interests of rural land workers.

[19] 1968 saw a political student movement in Mexico, as in other parts of the world, that awoke the nation into change. The government led by Diaz Ordaz massacred thousands of students in Tlatelolco, frustrating the movement. Yet it set the basis for a deep transformation within the political structure and for the creation of a powerful wave of new political parties.

Feeling that the time had come for us to erase all boundaries between our political and artistic efforts, we channeled our group's experience in the visual and theater arts into a political campaign. Our artistic approach to campaigning proved to be successful, eventually leading to the election of our group's founder, Mariano Leyva, to the Federal House of Representatives. His three-year term was highlighted by his proposal to reform education for indigenous people by mandating that elementary schools provide education in the indigenous language of its students. Forcing debate of such a disregarded problem was a historic victory in and of itself—and it proved to be a precursor to current efforts of the legislature to address national and international demands for indigenous rights.

As a result of the social and political unrest of the 1960s, migrant farmworkers in the United States began organizing a union in order to obtain adequate living conditions. Under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, the farmworker movement attracted supporters from nonpolitical arenas—among whom was Luis Valdez, founder of a new theater company, Teatro Campesino. Teatro Campesino became the artistic voice of the Farmworkers' Union, evolving from its initial drive for farmworkers' rights into a wider understanding of its indigenous roots.

Center image of the Aztec Calendar, showing the five Suns surrounding the face of Tlaltekuhtli, the Creative Force of the Earth, which receives the influence of the cosmos. The four squares represent four Suns: counterclockwise from the upper right, they are Jaguar, Wind, Rain of Fire and Water. The fifth Sun is Naui Ollin, Four Movements, represented in the sign of movement, the two symmetrical bars that connect two Suns each, coming together in the center, and in the four circles next to each Sun. Drawing by Martha Ramirez Oropeza.

In 1970, Teatro Campesino invited the Mascarones Theatre Group to participate in a cultural exchange with Chicano theater groups from California. One outgrowth of this festival was TENAZ (Teatro Nacional de Aztlan, or Aztlan National Theater), a transnational association cofounded by Mascarones that organized an annual festival and promoted the creation of new theater groups, more than 50 within the United States and Mexico within the 1970–74 period alone. That momentum culminated in the Fifth Annual TENAZ Festival hosted by Mascarones in Mexico City and attended by 700 people, representing 50 theater groups from North, Central and South America.

The opening ceremony of this festival took place in Teotihuacan, or Where the Creators Gather, the greatest ceremonial site of Central Mexico. Amid the great pyramids and temples of Teotihuacan, the hundreds of participants heard the unity speeches spoken in four different languages—English, Spanish, Nahuatl and Portuguese. The spirit of the opening ceremony pervaded the rest of the festival: because the shared origins of our identity were represented by the power and majesty of Teotihuacan, a profound sense of belonging began to emerge. The following days provided an exchange of experiences that helped bridge the gap between Chicanos and Mexicanos. By performing their plays before a Mexico City audience, Chicanos were able to feel themselves part of a family separated only by a political boundary, and their Mexican counterparts were able to hear in their stories of alienation the Chicanos' struggle to recover their history and culture.

During the final days of the festival, theater troupes were transported to rural villages in the state of Veracruz, where they performed before indigenous audiences. The experience culminated in a closing ceremony at the ceremonial

An audience of 2,000 attends Mascarones Theatre's performance of "Don Cacamafer" at the Casa del Lago theater in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park during the 5th Annual TENAZ Festival in 1974. Photo by Alejandro Stuart.

center of Tajin[20]: following an indigenous wedding ceremony uniting a couple from Teatro Campesino, farewells brought us together in a vision of belonging to a single continent.

[20] *Tajin* (thunder): An important ceremonial center in the state of Veracruz.

By reintroducing Chicano theater groups to their cultural heritage, Mascarones was able to play an instrumental role in the development of a shared identity and purpose. By helping newer groups in the United States organize, Mascarones was able to extend its voice and vision beyond the borders of Mexico. By demonstrating that a theater group can survive even as it holds up a mirror to commonplace injustices, Mascarones advocated for the role of the artist in the development of an international community.

During the past 20 years, there has been a growing interest in indigenous studies worldwide. This is particularly keen in the United States, where many people are now more interested in exploring the native cultures of our continent than the cultures foreign to it. To meet this growing need, the Nahuatl University has been presenting courses and workshops outside of Mexico. In this way, we are able to reach those who are unable—or unprepared—to travel to our campus.

By exposing people to a worldview that they might never otherwise encounter, the Nahuatl University attempts to provide them with an alternative way of thinking and feeling about their lives. By bringing our ancestors' way of life to those in other cultures, the Nahuatl University attempts to expand the influence of our original culture. By increasing awareness of our heritage, the Nahuatl University attempts to inspire those in other cultures to act in a way that reflects their belief in the equality of all cultures.

CONCLUSION: RECOUNTING THE ANCESTORS' HEARTBEAT

The song of the wind calls from the ancient conch, the beat of the *huehuetl*[21] drum unifies our steps: the Jaguar Sun guides us to encounter, the Wind Sun guides us to evaluate, the Lightning Sun guides us to resist, the Water Sun guides us to adapt—and as we follow the ancients' wisdom, we are moved to move others. Without this *topializtli*,[22] or teachings that we must pass on, to guide us, our actions would merely be reactions to injustice, and our outrage would have no creative purpose.

We look back at these 40 years with a sense of satisfaction. Mascarones' modern version of choral poetry was embraced by the public school system, introducing poetry into the lives of millions of children. Within Mexican professional popular theater, our survival is an example for other groups linked to the struggles and lives of the community. We have pioneered making effective statements in the National House of Representatives to preserve the indigenous language and culture; and we have founded the Nahuatl University, the first of its kind, to research and reconnect ancient wisdom with the indigenous people of today. Our institution has branched out into other forms of art and education, inspiring others by presenting murals and Nahuatl courses beyond our borders. Yet, there is much to do toward protecting each of our respective *topializtli* through international collaboration.

For those of us whose communities and cultures are at risk of being overwhelmed by the rising tide of products and images pouring out of the global commercial culture, it is of the utmost necessity that we pool our efforts to preserve our autonomous identities. Of course, this is not a battle we will win in our own lifetimes, but one that our children and theirs will have to continue. Because the military, economic and media resources of the Other are so many times greater than our own, we survive through solidarity with those of like mind—and sustain the hope of an ultimate victory by changing minds wherever we can.

[21] *Huehuetl* (*huehue*: ancient; *tl*: essence): The *huehuetl* is a sacred drum that gathers the dancers, circling the heartbeat of a united spiritual healing ritual. It is made with a hollowed tree trunk.

[22] *Topializtli* (*to*: our; *pia*: to guard, to protect, to hold; *liztli*: the essence of an action): The essence of what we must guard and pass on to the new generations. The wisdom we inherit for our children.