

MODERN CHICANO WRITERS

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

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correct your own abuses on la raza
for your own sake and not for ours
so you can have some peace of mind.²⁴

Although the spirit of contemporary Chicano poetry may be considered revolutionary, its intellectual emphasis is on reason, its theme the quest:

It is not the great plumed serpent
that we seek in the dark and lonely
niches of the street; we seek the mysteries
of who we came to be: victims
of the prison of the skin.²⁵

—Felipe Campos-Méndez

This same quest, be it for identity or for the understanding of lived experience, characterizes the work of two excellent (and radically different) modern poets, Raúl Salinas and Gary Soto.

In that same essay of 1971 I suggested that Chicano poetry would soon shift away from mainstream American poetry to a distinctly new poetics embracing the politics and sociology of poetry as well as new linguistic parameters. It was all too clear then that the aim of Chicano poetry was to identify the enemy, praise the people, and promote the revolution. My view now is that Chicano poetry has probably moved past that highpoint of the decade from 1967 to 1976. Hard-hitting "movement poetry" has mined the thematic vein of ills visited upon Chicanos by Anglo-America. This is not to say that those ills are no longer with us or that the spirit of Chicano poetry is no longer revolutionary. They are; it is. But the shift is now towards artistic competence. The poetry of social protest prevalent in the sixties and early seventies has given way to a poetry of introspection and a poetry that will continue to reflect for us not just the splendor of our antiquity but the entire range of the Chicano experience. The poetic expressions of the Chicano Renaissance have given us all a better image of who we were.

I now see five critical points of departure in the organization of Chicano poetry: the nihilistic view of liberal iconoclasts, the nostalgic view of mythopoetic romantics, the canonical view of revolutionary nationalists, the Olympian view of metaphysical esthetics, and the visionary perspective of eclectic pragmatists. These are not absolute categories, of course. But most contemporary Chicano poets may be described by one or several of these categories. All contribute to our understanding of the Chicano experience. All assume that being Chicano remains a source of inestimable pride.

²⁴Abelardo Delgado, "The Chicano Manifesto," in *25 Pieces of a Chicano Mind* (Denver: Barrio Publications, 1970), pp. 34-35.

²⁵Felipe Campos-Méndez, "Hijos de la Chicangada," *Nosotros*, 1 no. 2 (February 1, 1971), 9.

Alurista's Poetics: The Oral, The Bilingual, The Pre-Columbian

by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto

I

Alurista (Alberto Uribe) is a seminal figure in the contemporary florescence of Chicano poetry. During the tumultuous phase of the Chicano Movement (1965-1969) his creative participation was one of action within the struggle. Alurista helped project the role of the poet as public performer and the poem as public conscience. His experiments with bilingualism and the incorporation of indigenous themes in his work became points of departure for other poets. As a philosopher and ideologist he helped formulate the "Plan de Aztlán" and theoretical notions such as the concept of "Amerindia" which became basic to the nationalist phase of the Chicano Movement.

Alurista's early poems were published in barrio newspapers or mimeographed and passed out during the hectic round of the mid-1960s—picketing, sitting in, walking out, and organizing for community control, for student services, for justice on farmworkers' issues, and for total Chicano self-determination. A direct participant in the social upheavals of the period, Alurista was constantly surrounded by diverse groups of Chicanos, ranging from rural *campesinos* to urban *pachucos*, from recently arrived *mejicanos* to loyal regionalists such as *manitos* or *tejanos*. Each group expressed its particular experience in a particular variation of Spanish or English, or in creative combinations and transformations of these languages. The rich cadences, unique vocabularies, and other expressive resources must have attuned and inspired the poet to explore the poetic possibilities of this compelling multilingual actuality. Alurista began at this time an experiment with poetry in various bilingual modes which he and other Chicano poets would continue to develop. This overture has renovated Chicano poetry by creating fresh images and metaphors and allowing new rhythms to be heard.

In addition to technical innovations in language, Alurista has helped es-

"Alurista's Poetics: The Oral, the Bilingual, the Pre-Columbian" by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto. This article appears for the first time in this volume. It is used by permission of the author.

tablish another significant dimension of contemporary Chicano poetry: the emphasis on poetry as spoken rather than privately read. The Chicano poet writes for an audience that is not predominantly a reading audience, and on the whole has little inclination to value the printed word. This public's educational level does not predispose it to habitual reading, especially of poetry. Chicano poets assume that their audience will not ponder individual lines, savoring the formal composition by reading and re-reading. A Chicano audience is more likely to hear the poem, perhaps only once, and must comprehend it as it is sung or spoken. This focus on public comprehension calls for rhythmic patterning, a strong narrative line, and frequent use of the vernacular to reinforce "orality." Such poetry represents an attempt to reverse the tradition of private poets who elaborate a personal hermetic world in their verse. Alurista by contrast stresses the communal nature of poetry with an outward social thrust.

Although it is impossible to be sure that Alurista is the first contemporary Chicano poet to compose poems from selective mixtures of Spanish, English, and "Chicanismos," he is certainly one of the pioneers in this unique form of expression. The fluid and intricate possibilities of linguistic hybridism are deftly exploited by Alurista and become a striking characteristic of his poetry. Furthermore, he moves beyond bilingual experiments with poetic form to establish a bicultural content. Forging new images and a new vocabulary from the confluence of cultures which nurtures the Chicano experience, he sings of "the radiance of our quilted heritage." In his poems, pre-Columbian images relate to barrio symbols. Culture heroes like Quetzalcoatl, Tizoc, and Zapata coexist with Pachucos, Vatos Locos, and contemporary pop culture stars like Jimi Hendrix. Verbal portraits of archetypal Chicanos from the barrio contrast with caricatures of "the man," Mr. Jones, and the sterile "gabacho" society. A constant juxtaposition of words, images, and metaphors from Anglo-American and Mexican sources which have been incorporated into Chicano life create a rich bicultural effect.

II

Alurista has so far published three books of poetry: *Florikanto en Aztlán* (1971), *Nationchild Plumaraja* (1972), and *Timespace Huracán* (1976).¹ Each is related to the particular thrust of the Chicano Movement on which it comments and to which it is bound.

Florikanto en Aztlán records a change in consciousness induced by the campesino movement led by César Chávez. In the summer of 1968, during

¹Alurista, *Florikanto en Aztlán* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1971); *Nationchild Plumaraja* (San Diego, California: Toltec en Aztlán Publications, 1972); *Timespace Huracán* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Pajarito Publications, 1976).

the historic march from Delano to Sacramento, Alurista recalls standing on a hill and watching the long line of farmworkers and supporters as they trod the steaming asphalt of the highway chanting and singing, led by fluttering red and black thunderbird flags with images of the Virgen de Guadalupe held aloft:

It was the farmworkers who brought Chicanos to the forefront of national consciousness. As I watched the pilgrimage from Delano, I said to myself, that man Chávez is either a fool, a fanatic or a truly wise man. And very soon his genius was apparent.²

The campesino movement, while drawing on spiritual and mythic impulses, was firmly rooted in historical and material reality. Fighting for better working conditions for farmworkers, it often incorporated religious attitudes of non-violence and universal brotherhood into its programs for social action. Its dual nature is well articulated in the *Plan de Delano*, which called for pilgrimage, penitence, and revolution.

This duality, incorporating systems of belief as well as action, was very appealing to Alurista, who at that time was immersed in the study of pre-Columbian philosophy, especially that of the Nahuas. Fascinated by a philosophic system which ran counter to many Western tenets, Alurista appropriated elements of indigenous thought into an evolving philosophy which could serve as a basis for Chicano mobilization. This linkage of indigenous thought to contemporary reality gave the Chicano Movement mythic and psychic energies that could be directed toward its political and economic goals.

Nahua concepts of poetry and art became firmly established in Alurista's poetics. Although most extant collections of pre-Columbian poetry translated into Spanish feature work of educated courtly poets,³ Alurista chose to focus on the poetry of the people. Looking back through the millennia of aboriginal thought, he discovered in the Nahuas a collective voice:

We should note that in contrast to European poetry written by the privileged classes and destined for the same audience, Nahuatl poetry was publicly sung, dialogued, and collectively danced as much by the nobility as by the working classes. And although much of it was written in elevated style with didactic intent, it never ceased being an object of tribal recreation and delight.⁴

From these notions, Alurista laid the framework for much contemporary Chicano poetry. Developing an idiom, collective and didactic in character, taking his vocabulary, metaphors, and allusions from pre-Columbian myth,

²Interview with Alurista in San Diego, California, March 24, 1977.

³See for example Angel María Garibay, *Historia de la Literatura Nahuatl*, 2 vols., (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1953-54), and Miguel León Portilla, *Las literaturas pre-colombinas de México* (México: Editorial Pormaca, 1964).

⁴Alurista, "La estética indígena a través del Florikanto de Nezahualcoyotl," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, 3, no. 2 (Spring 1977), p. 56.

experimenting with the spoken Chicano vernacular, he opened windows on new horizons. As he began to publish in the Chicano press, to read his poems at hundreds of rallies, and to ask for the revitalization of an indigenous Chicano world view as an antidote to the vacuous and sterile reality of white America, he drew attention to a cultural legacy from Indo-America which he designated as the authentic root of Chicano culture.

This root continued to nourish his imagination in his first published book, *Florikanto en Aztlán* (1971). Most of the one hundred "cantos" in the collection grew out of the rich mytho-religious tradition of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples. The linkage of Chicano actuality with indigenous thought and culture structures the collection, which celebrates in both past and present the regenerative force of creation itself. Just as poets perpetuate the past in the present through their songs, Chicanos are admonished to absorb the humanitarian and spiritual values of their Indian heritage as elements contributing, now, in the present, to a symbolic new birth. Affirmation, optimism, and joy are the dominant tones. Quetzalcoatl (god of light and knowledge), Ometeotl (dual principle of self-creation), Tlaloc (god of rain and vegetation), and Tonantzin (mother earth) are invoked to underscore the emphasis on positive renewal.

Alurista's poetry is dense with figurative language through which he recreates a Nahuatl world view interpreting a metaphorical universe. What appear to be concrete details—flower and song, red tunas, quetzal feathers, eagles and serpents, jade and precious stones—are metaphors used to express subtle abstractions based on ancient philosophical symbolism. Alurista's use of parallelism also has antecedents in oral pre-Hispanic poetry such as was recited at religious festivals. Here, for example, is a fragment from a Nahuatl lyric exalting the bellicose spirit of the Aztecs:

From where the eagles are resting,
from where the tigers are exalted,
the Sun is invoked.
Like a shield that descends,
so does the Sun set.
In Mexico night is falling,
war rages on all sides....⁵

In addition to parallel phrasing within a poem, Alurista often parallels ideas in several poems. The following examples symbolically emphasize the theme of survival in alien territory, through the symbols of the maguay (cactus plant) and the seed:

...(*siembra de bronce*) ... (bronze cornfield)
-*perpetua Raza* - perpetual Raza
fértil abono del desierto fertilizer of the desert

⁵Miguel León Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), p. 86.

-*crece* -grow
reproduce... reproduce...

(No. 65, "to be fathers once again")

el maguay en su desierto
-even though arid-
produce tunas
let your seed turn fruit
allow the tuna of your
humanity to flourish...

(No. 18, "el maguay en el desierto")

Another device much used in Nahuatl compositions is the combination of two words which complement each other either because they are synonymous or because they evoke a third idea, usually a metaphor. Samples of this technique from *Florikanto en Aztlán* include *fuegopizca*, *brotafuego*, *sangrerajapiel* and *gentera-abroncepiel* ("people-bronze-skin").

Going beyond stylistic echoes, Alurista also evokes modern barrio manifestations of ancient themes. This fusion of contemporary life with mythical events sharpens appreciation of both the indigenous heritage and the present challenge. In the poem "los tripas y los condes," for example, he compares barrio gangs, such as *tripas* and *condes*, with ancient warrior societies to give an extended historical dimension to the idea of struggle and self-sacrifice. The implication is that a spirit of rebellion has been maintained in Chicano barrios from time immemorial:

"los tripas" y "los condes"	"Los tripas y "los condes"
"los tequilas" y "los coloraos"	"los tequilas" y "los coloraos"
today in the barrio	today in the barrio
los clanes de mi gente	the clans of my people
incarnate gangs of cactiques	incarnate gangs of cactiques
con plumas y navajas	with plumes and knives
caballeros águilas y tigres	eagle and tiger warriors
los pumas y los cocodrilos	the pumas and the crocodiles
los clanes de mi gente...	the clans of my people
(No. 50, "los tripas y los condes")	

The confluence of pre-Columbian and modern themes is not always used to spur Chicano activism. Sometimes its function is to question the modern loss of venerable customs. For instance, the poem "must be the season of the witch" uses one of the basic Mexican myths, that of "la llorona" (the weeping woman), to project a chilling loss of identity in the modern Chicano. The myth dramatizes an earth mother who wanders aimlessly in search of her children. Many of them, however, have been cut off from their heritage and can no longer draw sustenance from her:

...la llorona
 she lost her children
 and she cries
 en las barrancas of industry
 her children
 devoured by computers
 and the gears
 must be the season of the witch
 I hear hucos crack
 in pain
 y lloros...
 must be the season of the witch
 la bruja llora
 sus hijos sufren; sin ella

(no. 26, "must be the season of the witch")

As noted earlier, Alurista has been a pioneer in the alternating use of languages. Sometimes a poem is written entirely in English (No. 57, "sacred robe"), sometimes entirely in Spanish (No. 73, "cantar de ranas viejas," the chant of ancient frogs). The majority, however, exploit both languages, creating exciting possibilities as demonstrated by this fragment of the poem titled "wheat paper cucarachas":

wheat paper cucarachas
 de papel trigo
 y la cosecha del sol
 winged in autumn
 de vuelo al sol
 y las alas de trigo
 a volar
 en la primavera
 spring of youthful bronze
 melting in the lava of our blood
 la cucaracha muere
 y muere el polvo
 powder wheat
 de atole con el dedo
 and they bleed
 crushed by florsheims

In seemingly chaotic and random fashion, the poem unravels a series of images. The impact comes from understanding the bilingual and bicultural context to which the images are related.

wheat paper cucarachas
 de papel de trigo
 y la cosecha del sol

The hidden meaning here lies in understanding that *cucaracha* does not literally refer to a cockroach. "Roach" is barrio slang for a hand-rolled marijuana cigarette.

Thus the *cucaracha* de papel de trigo is marijuana wrapped in wheat paper. Swiftly, the image is extended so that *trigo* becomes wheat, a crop grown with plenty of sunlight: la cosecha del sol."

winged in autumn
 de vuelo al sol
 y las alas de trigo
 a volar
 en la primavera
 spring of youthful bronze
 melting in the lava of our blood

The principle in this section is the interplay of opposites. Autumn is related to the migratory flight of insects juxtaposed to the moving yet passionate blood of impetuous youth. "Lava" unites both images since it is destructive and yet powerful in its flow.

la cucaracha muere
 y muere el polvo

The key element here is the ironic commentary on the death of the cucaracha. "Muere el polvo" is a direct translation of "bite the dust," which in itself is a euphemism for death. This brings back the initial image of the cigarette, the "roach" crushed to the ground.

powder wheat de
 atole con el dedo

Powdered wheat brings to mind *atole* (a mush made from crushed wheat). However, this positive image is extended to a popular Mexican *refrán* with negative connotations: "Ya no queremos atole con el dedo" (we no longer want to be spoon fed, i.e., tokenism)

and they bleed crushed
 by florsheims

Now the literal meaning of *cucaracha*, "a small insect often found in the ghetto," is reintroduced. Here the image of "cucaracho" also suggests young people, "los cucarachos," whose self-esteem is also crushed by consumer products such as Florsheim shoes which serve as a symbol for the dominant culture.

The image is liberated by exploring the connotative and denotative domains of two languages. This is one of the major formal contributions of Alurista's bilingual poetry.

III

Florikanto en Aztlan, published in 1971, responds mainly to the farmers' thrust within "El Movimiento" from 1965 to 1967. An introduction to an evolving poetics, it establishes a cultural kinship between modern

Chicano life and past indigenous values, explores and validates bilingual expression, and seeks to unite social concerns with artistic practice. By 1968, Alurista had pared down his poetic creed to one ideal: "Poetry is for the transformation of consciousness." His activism shifted from the farmworkers to focus on the Chicano Student Movement in San Diego, California.

Those were the days when we were moving in the schools developing Chicano studies, organizing brown berets, organizing the moratorium against the war, organizing for welfare rights, establishing free clinics in the communities.⁶

It was a time of mass activity, a period when many Chicanos approached revolutionary ideals through practice. The aim was to act and then articulate. Alurista began teaching in the Chicano Studies program at San Diego State University. During the same period, student uprisings in Paris and Berkeley and the massacre of students at Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City fed the turbulence of Chicano student groups. Alurista, activist and artist, confronted a key question posed in moments of social agitation — how to be true to his art while meeting the social demands of the historical moment.

Where do we begin? . . . with the rifle or with the pen? With the armed revolt for the popular take-over of the Yankee state or with the cultural revolution for organization of the popular revolutionary conscience of the Chicano peoples north of Mexico. The first alternative is heroic suicide. The second is protracted (long-range) insurrection.⁷

Looking back on a process of resistance by Chicanos during almost a century and a half, Alurista joined with many other writers in reaffirming the central role of the artist in social struggle. The preservation and renewal of a literary tradition were seen as insufficient; the poet must be actively involved in the battles against oppression and inequality.

A landmark contribution toward defining the ideological thrust of the Chicano Movement was the proclamation "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," written by Alurista during the first Chicano Youth Liberation Conference held at the Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado, in 1969. "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," which put forth the notion of a material, cultural, and psychic identity for the Chicano, stresses spiritual values derived from a return to nature. Validating cultural permanence rather than change, it focuses on traditional features as core elements of the Chicano experience. Essentially it posits a program of action that fails to respond to immediate and tangible social conditions. Nonetheless, the proclamation of "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" served as a catalyst for discussions on the role of the artist in "El Movimiento."

By 1971, the year of *Florinto*, Alurista had entered a third phase center-

⁶Interview with Alurista in San Diego, California, March 24, 1977.

⁷Alurista, "The Chicano Cultural Revolution," *De Colores*, 1, no. 1 (Winter 1973), 23-33.

ing on identification with Indian experience. He aided in the organization of a center for cultural workers called "Toltecas en Aztlán" in San Diego. Its aims included study of indigenous wisdom in art, music, literature, and life, but also the provision of "cultural guerrillas," people trained to use art as a weapon in the struggle for social change. Experimenting with an indigenous lifestyle, Alurista also experimented with poetry to be sung, chanted, and danced. An important influence in his developing poetics was his participation with Juan Felipe Herrera and Mario Aguilar in a theater/music group named "Servidores del Arbol de la Vida" (Guardians of the Tree of Life). This ensemble attempted to re-create Indian chant and ritual singing and dance forms in a modern context. While maintaining a reverent attitude toward the spiritual intent of their performance, they wove a secular sociopolitical commentary into their texts. A key assumption in many of these song-poems is that spiritual and material realities must be fused:

<i>no le aflojen a la lucha</i>	don't give up the struggle
<i>transformando la energía</i>	transforming the energy
<i>liberando la conciencia</i>	liberating the consciousness
<i>cultivando la materia</i>	cultivating matter
<i>no negamos la energía</i>	we do not negate energy
<i>ni negamos la materia</i>	nor matter
<i>pos las dos en su dialéctica</i>	for it is both in their dialectic
<i>nos entregan vida nueva . . .</i>	which give us new life . . .

Playing the conch, a modern adaptation of a pre-Conquest instrument, and experimenting with sound, Alurista developed a style of recitation which is a cross between Gregorian chant and monotone. The intent is to locate poetry not only in the mind but also in the viscera.

IV

During the intense period of experimentation between 1968-1973, Alurista elaborated a poetic credo that reflects the social genesis of his art: "Poetry captures movimiento, conciencia y con medida." His movement was increasingly toward chanted plainsong, his consciousness was rooted in Indio-American struggles, and his rhythm was based on natural breath cadences. The *cantos* are to be read as sustained cycles, even though they are printed as individual poems in his second collection, *Nation-child Plumeroja*, appearing in 1973. This book reflects two of Alurista's perennial sources of inspiration, the spiritualism of the native people's movement in the United States and the political ideology of international socialism. The poet continues his reinterpretation of indigenous culture, shifting attention from the militaristic-theocratic society of the Nahuas to the scientific-aesthetic formulations of the Mayas.

whose explicit meanings are transformed. Examples would include *chili-maíz*, *razasol*, *adobecorazón*, and many others. Intensification of the link to ancestral memory is projected by images that merge elements of Mexican culture such as "a people glazed in barro," "our joys in the Quetzal pride," and "the corn of our heart warms our blood."

Steadily working to bring poetry into the area of performance, Alurista envisions many of the poems in *Nationchild Plumaraja* as near eruptions of song. Old bardic devices of chant and simple rhythmic repetition emphasize melody and syncopation, pushing language into the realm of music:

tuning flower tones
guitarra sings in serenata
the twanging, twanging, tone
to tablas tuned
the thumping of a rhythm shoe
tapping, tapping, taconeo
y latido de la sangre
en el corazón explota... ("tuning flower tones")

The "sounding" of the poem acquires new emphasis, the ideal being to bring composition and performance together in a single improvised event.

The technical innovations in the collection did not dampen Alurista's central concern with writing poetry which was political, partisan, and committed. In Chicano communities this period saw the escalation of protests against the war in Vietnam and support for the Native American movement in its takeover of Alcatraz and its struggle at Wounded Knee. Culminating the activism of the time, the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War in Los Angeles on August 29, 1970, ended tragically with the assassination of Rubén Salazar, a prominent Chicano journalist. Alurista responded to these events with poems in which political consciousness runs deep; yet their exhortations remain mannered and rhetorical. On only a few occasions, as in the poems "Trópico de Ceviche" and "danza leonina," are denunciatory elements fused with flights of the imagination to create felt designs of insight and emotion.

In the evolution of Alurista's poetry, *Nationchild Plumaraja* is a work of synthesis and ongoing dialectic in which he continued to experiment with bilinguality and with the linking of indigenous themes to Chicano actuality. The poet calls for collective action even while the poetic voice turns inward toward a more personal tonality as experienced in the self. Perhaps the most significant breakthrough is a decided emphasis on oral performance in the invigorating new forms of chants, songs, and incantations. This oral impulse adds new dynamism and coloration to words as articulated sound.

Nationchild Plumaraja is divided into five sections, or *katus* (five units of twenty), derived from the Mayan mathematical system. Each unit uses animal and flower symbols to signify the mood and the emotional coloration that should be assumed by the reader or interpreter of individual *katus*. All the poems in the "Conejo" *katus*, for example, are to be read in a fast tempo, whereas the poems in the "Xochitl" or "Nopal" *katus* are to be chanted in a more reflective, lyrical style. Each symbol taken from nature — *flores*, *venados*, *serpientes*, *conejos*, *nopales*, — denotes a particular type of *energía*. This energy is the actualization of thought as idea. Once the idea is transformed through the process of creation it has the capacity to incite concrete action. The source of this energy resides in the self:

turn on
to yourselves
cause carnales, carnalas
there just ain't
no carga
or righteous drug
as the self... ("turn on")

The shift toward introspection in many of the poems of *Nationchild Plumaraja* can be seen in such titles as "I have found my flesh," "mi mind," "i like to sleep," "i had chilaquiles," and "face your fears carnal." Their theme is that individual integration can be a path to a larger cultural wholeness and meaning. Individual consolidation must precede the more complex philosophical alignment with the indigenous inhabitants of America who share with the Chicano people a common language, a common spirit, and a living unity of the heart. In the sterile world of "robots y tragamonedas" the reader is incited to transform time into a plow, to affirm those values which negate "progress" in the sense of material gain:

... take the time to be born
take time by the neck
turn it into an arado
cultivate el maíz de nuestra
identidad indígena
a la vida, a la muerte
al nacimiento de un nopal... ("come down my cheek raza roja")

Time and again, nature is seen as the source of ultimate strength and wisdom. Only in harmonious coexistence with it can one escape the "frigidité of pestilence" which is life in North America, a wasteland "shrouded with green money and shiny guns of frozen death."

Bilingual exploration continues to engross Alurista in his collection. One noteworthy feature is the creation of neologisms from ordinary words

and more colorful. Explorations into visual/verbal and written/oral communication surface as an attempt to reinvent and redefine the word and the sign. The central metaphors giving form, origin, and foundation continue to flow from indigenous sources. Alurista's recovery of these sources was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a pervasive validation of pre-Columbian heritage as an integral part of the Chicano Movement. At its best, this linkage with a non-European cultural tradition provided abundant mythic and symbolic structures for artists, writers, and intellectuals. At its worst, it inspired a romantic "neo-indigenismo" designed to make barrio vatos think of themselves as descendants of Aztec nobility without focusing on the basic realities of pre-Hispanic life. Furthermore, the glorification of a remote past tended to obscure the historical contradictions of Indian-Chicano relationships within the United States.

One of the articles which instigated this indigenous trend was "The Historical and Intellectual Presence of the Mexican Americans," published by Octavio Romano in 1969, in which he stated:

symbolically, the Indian penetrates throughout, and permeates, major aspects of Mexican-American life, and hardly a barrio exists that does not have someone who is nicknamed "El Indio" or "Los Indios." . . . On occasion los machines still make their Indian appearance in churches, and Aztec legends still pictorially tell and retell their stories in barrio living rooms, in kitchens, in bars, restaurants, tortillerías and Chicano newspapers. The stern face of Don Benito Juárez still peers out of books, still surveys living rooms and still takes a place of prominence in many Sociedad Mutualista halls and in the minds of men throughout the Southwest. Small wonder then, that several hundred years after the totally indigenous existence of Mexico, reference is still made to these roots and origins in the Mexican-American community. . . .

The Indian is root and origin, past and present, virtually timeless in his barrio manifestations—a timeless symbol of opposition to cultural imperialism.⁸

Like Romano, other Chicano intellectuals strove to uncover and validate their authentic cultural roots, which they sensed at base to be indigenous. They turned to Mexico and the ideas of such thinkers as Alfonso Caso, Angel Garibay, Octavio Paz, and Miguel León-Portilla. From these and similar sources that researched and promoted Mexico's pre-Hispanic past, converting it into a golden age comparable to the Greco-Latin splendor of

⁸Octavio Romano, "The Historical and Intellectual Presence of Mexican Americans," *El Grito*, 2, no. 2 (Winter 1969). For other important statements of this Chicano *indigenismo* see Miguel Méndez, "Tata Casehua," *El Grito*, 2, no. 2 (Winter 1969); Andrés Segura, "Continuidad de la tradición filosófica nahua en las danzas de Concheros," *El Cuaderno*, 3, no. 1 (Winter 1973); Ysidro Ramón Macías, "Nuestros Antepasados y el Movimiento," *Aztlán*, 5, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring and Fall 1974). In poetry, Rafael Jesús González is both a prominent investigator of pre-Columbian sources and, in his own right, a poet whose work embodies an indigenous worldview.

the Old World, Chicanos garnered aesthetic and cultural elements. Poets like Jesús Rafael González incorporated traditional mythology and themes into their poetry and avidly investigated pre-Columbian literatures. Stan Padilla and other painters featured Indian motifs and design elements from tribal sources, and *teatro* groups performed *actos* based on the rituals and legends of the Toltecs, Mayas, and Aztecs. Quetzalcoatl was often evoked as the supreme exponent of a humane philosophy of life. The exaltation of pre-Cortesian Indian culture was significant in awakening Chicano artists to explore and incorporate material from this rich patrimony.

Yet although the glories of past civilizations could provide ideals, the contemporary situation of indigenous people in Mexico and the Southwest was the result of domination, conquest, and subjugation. The integration of both currents—the validation of indigenous values and a critical evaluation of the modern role of the Indian—became, as we have seen, Alurista's major concern. His three collections of poetry all share in the exploration of an indigenous consciousness which is often formulated in terms of opposition between a decaying and corrupt Anglo-American culture and an ascending and unsullied culture of "la raza." Portrayals of "White America" are likely to be satiric. One of the harshest of them depicts the white man as a mute and lifeless scarecrow fluttering about with little dignity and no hope. "Paja" ("Straw"), describes not merely his physical exterior but also the weakness of his spirit and intellect.

hombre de paja
frigid in the fields
scarecrow
blind figurine. . .
de paja el cerebro
de paja su piel
ojos de paja
de paja el corazón
("Cuervo Chicano")

Such abject and pitiful figurines belong to the "klan del penny amerikano," a vast army of people whose supreme deity is the dollar and the things money can buy. As a counter view, *Floriscanto en Aztlán*, *Nationchild Plumaraja*, and *Timespace Huracán* create a structure of recollection where cultural heroes, mythology, and values from the Chicano's indigenous heritage are evoked as sources of pride and identity. The poems chart a spiritual journey aimed at achieving an organic, almost pantheistic, relationship between man and nature. Like a majestic hymn to the earth, the poetry parallels the natural cycle of abundance, erosion, death, and regeneration with the historical experience of "la chicanada," endlessly repeating patterns of struggle and survival.

Alurista's role as initiator, activator, and literary model for Chicano poets

and prose writers of the mid-1960s is inestimable. His commitment to art and his partisan politics helped define the dual task of poets within "El Movimiento": to participate as intellectuals in the struggles for social change in Chicano communities and to remain responsible to their art by elaborating techniques and approaches to reality that, in their aesthetic challenge, awaken, maintain, and enhance human alternatives and possibilities.

The Other Voice of Silence: Tino Villanueva

by Juan Bruce-Novoa

True art is the continual invention of new languages to reach
an as yet unexpressed truth.

JUAN GARCIA PONCE

Tino Villanueva's *Hay Otra Voz Poems* (*There Is Another Voice Poems*)¹ clearly exemplifies the extent to which Chicano literature is a response to chaos. As I have stated elsewhere,² the thematic-structural paradigm of Chicano literature is this: chaotic discontinuity threatens vital life images —> recuperation of images —> continuity in literary space. In Villanueva, death's agents, especially time, move man toward disappearance, each present instant being a crisis point requiring his personal affirmation of being or his silent loss of it. Future and past extend from the present; thus wasted "nows" condemn one eventually to total disappearance with no memorable historical presence. Self-affirmation can occur through any positive molding of the moment, but the most effective means is speech. Silent moments slip into oblivion with their voiceless victims. Chaos is eventual disappearance, but it attacks through steady erosion now. When man's physical presence fades, only images not dependent on the physical will survive to maintain that presence, as in literature, oral or written.

A simple solution might be to speak up, but one risks raising empty noise

"The Other Voice of Silence: Tino Villanueva" by Juan Bruce-Novoa. This article appears for the first time in this volume. It is used by permission of the author.

¹Tino Villanueva, *Hay Otra Voz Poems* (New York: Editorial Mensaje, 1972). All poems cited come from this edition and page numbers will be given in the text. The book contains thirty poems, thirteen in English, twelve in Spanish, and five in which the Spanish and English are mixed. Thus, the first two sections are bilingual, in that the poems are in either one language or the other, while the last section contains only one poem ("Escape") which is written only in Spanish. The mixing of two languages I call interlingualism, because the two languages are put into a state of tension which produces a third, an "inter" possibility of language. "Bilingual" implies moving from one language code to another; "interlingual" implies the constant tension of the two at once. In truth, although the first two sections of *Hay Otra Voz Poems* are technically bilingual in structure, the total experience of the reading is interlingual, but only in the last section does the surface of the text itself become obviously interlingual.

²Juan Bruce-Novoa, "Literatura chicana: la respuesta al caos," *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 29, No. 12 (August, 1975), 20-24.