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**Ballads of the Lords of New Spain: The Codex Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España.** Transcribed and translated from the Nahuatl by John Bierhorst. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 256 pages. \$65.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

John Bierhorst transcribes and interprets Nahuatl texts derived from one of two principal codices of Aztec song in his book *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain: The Codex Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España*. Dating from the late sixteenth century, the *Romances* codex is a volume created in the style of a Spanish *cancionero* (or song anthology). The Spanish term *romance* is used synonymously with the Aztec song genre known as *netotiliztli* due to parallels in lyrical themes. The “romance” song texts under study are derived from precontact, indigenous forms, but represent an early example of colonial-period hybridity. Bierhorst approaches his analysis from the perspective of the codex’s presumed sixteenth-century compiler: missionary-ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún, who once noted that Native leaders were “using” *netotiliztli* songs “to persuade the people to do their bidding, whether it’s war or other business that is not good” (viii). *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* builds upon his previous work in *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs* (1985). In *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain*, Bierhorst finds that late-sixteenth-century Aztec song represents a post-Cortésian revitalization movement, a “testament of nativism and defiance in the face of colonial authority” (viii).

*Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* unites Bierhorst’s skills as a linguistic translator and analyst of indigenous oral literatures. It consequently reads like a hard-nosed linguistic monograph that also illuminates the metaphorical meanings characteristic of Aztec ritual. Bierhorst seeks to advance three principal claims. The first of these is literary and speaks to an assumption within Aztec scholarship that views song texts as a form of poetry. Bierhorst’s development of this theme throughout *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* touches upon the reconfiguration of Aztec nationhood through the manipulation and reimagining of prominent symbols (such as contact-era political leaders Montezuma I and Nezahualcoyotl), as well as the postcolonial interweaving of indigenous artistic forms and Western philosophical heritage. He agrees that *netotiliztli* are poetry, but states that because the texts originate in ritual, they are distinct from the pastoral tradition of “the West.” Situated directly within Bierhorst’s area of expertise—indigenous literature—this thread of his argument is most detailed and persuasive. Paradoxically, it is also mentioned nowhere within the book’s promotional materials, perhaps because poetic analysis and scholarly theory provide a less seductive commercial teaser than those themes emphasized most prominently: war, sacrifice, and revitalization.

Second, Bierhorst argues that the *Romances* song texts are reflective of pre-Cortésian “Aztec values”: “The ballads reveal in no uncertain terms the pre-conquest Aztec belief in the warrior’s paradise and in the virtue of sacrifice,” as the book’s back-cover blurb states it. But Bierhorst’s communication of this point is hindered by a sociohistorical analysis that too often operates at the indistinct level of “Aztec belief.” The question that arose for me was: do the ballads reveal an “Aztec” belief in war, warfare, and sacrifice (whether personal or ritual), or are they the domain of a thin stratum of Aztec society (perhaps the more narrowly defined religious intelligentsia, who oversaw *netotiliztli* performance; the martial classes, whose deeds and values are recorded; and/or the political classes, those persuasive people seeking fulfillment of their “bidding”)? The pages of *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain*, as a result, display a sense of sociological imprecision that makes it difficult to piece together a coherent portrait of the *netotiliztli*, its performance, and its ultimate significance within the context of sixteenth-century Mexico. It is fair enough to note that *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* is linked to Bierhorst’s earlier work, *Cantares Mexicanos* and that one versed in both texts might find the socioanthropological development sufficient. However, lacking proper explication of analytical perspective and social-scientific context in a crisply written introduction, *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* could use more supporting detail.

Finally, Bierhorst posits the *Romances* as evidence of an Aztec revitalization movement sixty years after the defeat by Cortés. This argument is a contentious holdover introduced in *Cantares Mexicanos*. Scholars critiqued Bierhorst’s earlier work based upon its linguistic merits (Bierhorst is not a linguist in the strictest academic sense). My own assessment takes issue with the ethnographic evidence. The presented data does not fully convince me of the argument that *netotiliztli* texts, according to the book jacket, represent “a song of resistance by a conquered people and their recollection of a glorious past.” Bierhorst provides scant evidence in support of his revitalization contention. His reasoning is heavily founded upon a passage taken from Sahagún’s Florentine Codex (“They sing when they wish . . . every day it grows worse” [16]) and reinforced by the Mexican historian García Icazbalceta (who wrote three centuries later that Aztec lords and priests maintained political power over the lower classes “by circulating the prediction that Spanish rule was to last only eighty years” [18]). This provocative but spare evidence seeks to link Aztec resistance to cultural “revitalization” movements evident throughout colonial North America (for example, the Ghost Dance of Wovoka, Handsome Lake of the Seneca, and Nochaydelklinne at the San Carlos Apache Reservation). But the argument is not yet compelling. Evidence of revitalization within Aztec Mexico demands deeper corroboration from original source documents, situation of the claim within a more extensive

scholarly discourse, or both. Bierhorst develops the theme lightly, however, and his interpretation is unique. Links between Central American and North American practice remain tenuous absent fuller development. The resolute agency of *netotiliztli* performers sixty years after defeat is not proven, leaving readers unsure as to whether the ritual practice of *netotiliztli* stems from determined colonial opposition or simply from the lingering (though declining) performance of preconquest “tradition” in an era of changing mores. Bierhorst’s claim regarding revitalization as a result remains circumstantial, rather than authoritative, on the basis of its ethnographic evidence.

By 1580 Sahagún had noted the opacity of *netotiliztli* texts: “No one knows what [the *netotiliztli* singers] say except themselves alone” (i). *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* is Bierhorst’s retort to Sahagún’s enduring assumption: “Although it can be agreed, at least, that Aztec songs are richly figurative and carry an aura of mystery, the underlying question is whether they are inscrutable” (vii). Based upon Bierhorst’s translations, they are not. Bierhorst’s key contribution is his stimulating decoding of the figurative meaning of *netotiliztli* texts in his chapter “On the Translation of Aztec Poetry,” in which he provides an imaginative framework for unlocking the semantic and cultural meaning of lyrical metaphor. At its best, *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* provides fascinating insight into the use of language, music, and ritual by a politically ambitious, philosophically complex people. At his best, in many ways Bierhorst’s scholarly ambition provides a visionary model for the dynamic potential of thick textual analyses in the study of human cultures.

However, opaque writing undermines the clarity of Bierhorst’s message. His introductory chapter is reliant upon provenance and interpretive data pertaining to the *Romances* manuscript (with some secondary analysis of scholarly understandings of the codex). It reads more like a data-driven archival finding aid than a work of analytical synthesis. As a result, the textual body that follows reads inductively, with key points emerging as afterthoughts from the abundant technical linguistic data and lengthy source quotations preceding them. The Nahuatl- and English-language texts are offset, making it difficult to link the original to the translation. Comprehension is also complicated by competing glossator and university press editor line designations. Interpretive analyses central to decoding lyrical meaning are removed to the back of the book, under the vague heading “Commentaries.”

Book organization would be better served by simplifying the pedantic description of the original document (for example, by removing folio and excessive line markings), consolidating the translation and commentary sections, and banishing the rigorous but convoluted footnoting to the back of the book. The author and editors seem to be aware of the important relationship between the translated texts and the commentaries: the book’s support

Web site ([www.utdigital.org](http://www.utdigital.org)) allows the online reader not only to study the English and Nahuatl textual passages in a more clearly correlated manner but also to reference the commentaries (in the form of a pop-up window) as they review related textual passages.

In lieu of the insightful but not fully illuminating commentary section, I would prefer more narrative development of Bierhorst's conclusions. He entices with insights into indigenous religious and martial values not too distant from the invasion of Cortés. But his scholarly analysis should be of import to a work such as this, not his painstaking archaeological reproduction of the original *Romances* manuscript within a book format. With offset translations and the uncomfortable separation between the transcriptions and the commentaries, the print format is muddled in a manner not apparent in its Web presentation. The printed text version, as a result, reads like a scientist's self-directed field notes: meticulously documented, sourced, and cross-referenced but only incidentally attentive to readability by broader audiences.

Yet *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* is also the late-stage work of an established writer perhaps less interested in cultivating a broad readership than communicating his significant knowledge to a narrow scholarly audience. It is characterized by its juxtaposition of technical linguistic verbiage, academic citation, indexing, cross-referencing, and extensive footnoting against more readable passages offering interpretation of Aztec ritual metaphor, practice, and meaning. A challenging read, it is best suited for linguists and those interested in the indigenous oral literatures of Central America.

Although the writing style of Bierhorst's latest might "entertain" or "gladden" the scholarly pantheon observing the study of dusty Aztec codices, it leaves other potential readers—anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, historians, and general readers interested in indigenous cosmologies and literature, or issues of memory, music, and militarism (among others)—keenly aware of our own self-sacrifice. Its deeply academic style restrains the effective communication of a fundamentally fascinating thesis and book. Despite Bierhorst's goal of clarifying a ritual, music, and text dismissed by scholars since the seventeenth century as "inscrutable," any academic light shed upon historical shadow is not by the reader easily won. That is to say, if one reading *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* hoped the fruit of its knowledge to be easily revealed by the peelable flesh of soft banana, they are instead confronted by steely coconut husk. Though the labor of harvest in *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain* is arduous, the fruit gained through such effort, I am glad to report, is equally sweet.

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