

THE LINGUISTIC CAREER OF DOÑA LUZ JIMÉNEZ

FRANCES KARTTUNEN
Linguistics Research Center
University of Texas at Austin

For linguistics, anthropologist, folklorists, and ethnohistorians, the memoirs, and the folktales (*zazanilli*) told in Nahuatl by doña Luz Jiménez, are of great significance. Not only is their content important, but students, and teachers of Nahuatl use her memoirs, *De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata: memoria náhuatl de Milpa Alta* as a textbook of the language as it has been spoken in the twentieth century.

As she dictated her life experiences, she always referred to herself as *niLuz*, 'I, Luz.' Until very recently we did not know of Julia Jiménez González, or Luciana. In his introduction to her memories Fernando Horcasitas mentions her career as model for Jean Charlot and Diego Rivera, but the full extent of her role in post-Revolutionary art in Mexico escaped the social scientist who worked with her. To linguists and anthropologists she was and remains the revered doña Luz. Now we are aware that in the several worlds she inhabited she was known by different names, of which doña Luz was but the last.

By 1930 Julia Jiménez González, in her assumed persona of Luciana, had been employed by Mexico City's art schools for a decade. She also worked directly for many of the artists whose careers took shape in Mexico City during the 1920s. In 1929 Diego Rivera had begun yet another monumental project, painting murals in México's National Palace, and he once again engaged Luz as one of his models. Yet despite this work that placed her face and figure permanently before the eyes of the public, the end of the 1920s brought personal hardship to Luz.

Her daughter Concha was five years old. Her relationship with Concha's father, Manuel Hernández Chaparro, was distant, and Luz supported herself and Concha on her own income. Moreover, both Concha's godparents, who later contributed substantially to the welfare of their goddaughter, were absent from Mexico City for long periods of time during Concha's early childhood.

Luz's *compadre*, Jean Charlot, who had previously paid her to sit for a new painting and countless drawings every week, had become staff artist of the Carnegie Institution project at Chichen Itza and spent six months of each year from 1926 to 1928 working in Yucatán. Thereafter, he moved to New York City to continue his painting career.

Anita Brenner, her *comadre* who had often employed Luz to cook for dinner parties, had enrolled as a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia University in New York in 1927. Recruited and mentored by Franz Boas, Brenner completed her doctoral studies in the summer of 1930.

Meanwhile, Luz was supporting an aging mother and a growing daughter. With her *compadres* off in New York, Luz found the means by which she had previously augmented her income from the art schools drying up.

Although Luz did not withdraw from the world of the artists, she had never relinquished her earlier ambitions either. Her school in Milpa Alta, the Concepción Arenal School, had been named for a Spanish educational theorist who was also Spain's first woman lawyer. The inspector of the free federal schools for the children of Milpa Alta, Lucio Tapia, had exhorted parents to send their children to school regularly in exchange for the promise that the schools would produce professionals: lawyers, priests, and school teachers. No longer, he stated, would the young women of Milpa Alta, have nothing better to look forward to than a life of drudgery, cleaning other people's houses and doing other people's laundry. It was Luz's dream to take her place in the classroom as a teacher of children, but the Mexican Revolution had destroyed her school, cut short her education, and sent her to Mexico City as a refugee. In 1930, the closest she had been able to approach her dream was through Rivera's mural of the rural school teacher on a wall of the Secretariat of Public Education.

In the early 1920s José Vasconcelos, México's post-revolutionary Minister of Education, had organized an army of young men and women to dedicate themselves to a "sacred mission against ignorance." They were the *maestros rurales*, rural school teachers, who went to the most inaccessible communities in the Republic of Mexico to teach literacy, good hygiene, and patriotism, the same topics that had been taught to Luz in Milpa Alta before the Revolution. But Vasconcelos's rural school teachers met violent opposition in the countryside, and by the 1930s the educational missions and the title *maestro rural* were being abandoned. Nonetheless, Luz sought to be certified for the position. To her disappointment, her petition was rejected.

Although the Concepción Arenal school was blown up in the Revolution, Luz's school records survived. In her application to become a

maestra rural, Luz used her baptismal name of Julia as it appears in these records. Had the application been successful, she might have reintegrated her prerevolutionary self, Julia Jiménez González, with a future as *maestra Julia*. But instead she was about to assume yet another new identity: doña Luz Jiménez, collaborator with linguistic anthropologists in the exploration of the Nahuatl language.

The opportunity came from an unexpected quarter. The North American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf received a grant from the Social Science Research Council that enabled him to visit Mexico for several months in the winter and spring of 1930. The purpose of his visit was to collect and analyze samples of modern spoken Nahuatl.

The two towns where Whorf interviewed residents and transcribed their speech were Milpa Alta, on the edge of the Federal District and nearby Tepoztlan, Morelos. Following the ethnographic practice of the time, he did not record the names of the people he interviewed or any information about them as he wrote up his 1930 fieldnotes. But in a 1946 article comparing Milpa Alta Nahuatl with Tepoztlan Nahuatl and with Classical Nahuatl, Whorf acknowledged that his Milpa Alta material had been provided by Milesio González, Luz Jiménez, and her sister Petra. Although he seems to have considered Milesio González to be his principal “native informant,” Whorf praised all three for their excellent work.

Luz’s employment by Whorf was short-term, but it revealed to her what linguists were interested in and how they went about their work. Whorf did not record her speech; he listened carefully and wrote it down in phonetic notation. The process required the same sort of intuitive interaction between two people that modeling and painting requires. Luz needed to sense how much Whorf could hold in mind while he transcribed, how much to say and when to wait. He needed repetitions until he was satisfied with the accuracy of his transcription. The patience Luz brought to modeling served the linguistic process as well.

Moreover, the work set her feet on the road to the world of academic scholarship and a type of teaching she had not imagined. Several already-existing paths converged into this new road.

One had its roots in her hometown. Isabel Ramírez Castañeda was also a native of Milpa Alta, although from a more privileged background than Luz. Long before Franz Boas took an interest in Anita Brenner, *maestra* Isabel also became one of his protegés. As the only woman fellow of the Escuela Internacional de Arqueología y Etnología Americanas, founded in 1910, she provided written texts in Nahuatl for him and presented a paper about Milpa Alta at the International Congress of Linguists in London in 1912. Boas also received Milpa Alta Nahuatl texts from a man he identified only as “Lucio,” possibly Lucio Tapia.

Boas himself was in Mexico in 1912, endeavoring to carry on in spite of the departure of President Porfirio Díaz and the onset of the Mexican Revolution. Doomed by the Revolution and the First World War, the International School—a collaborative venture of the Mexican and German governments, the Hispanic Society of America, and several universities, including Columbia—did not survive the decade. Nonetheless, publication of texts in Milpa Alta Nahuatl (Ramírez C. 1913, Boas 1920, Boas and Haeberlin 1926, and González Casanova 1926) established Luz's town as an important locus for the study of folklore and linguistics.

Not only was Milpa Alta readily accessible from Mexico City, but Mexican scholars believed Nahuatl spoken there to be very similar in form to Nahuatl as spoken by the Aztecs in the 16th century. It is no wonder that the town attracted not only Whorf but a stream of linguists and anthropologists after him. Nor is it any wonder that Luz, with her gift for story-telling and her patient agreeableness, found a new source of employment as guide to her community and its language.

Another path was blazed by Byron McAfee and some of his associates at the Benjamin Franklin Library in Mexico City. In 1926 a hiking club they belonged to engaged a Nahuatl speaker from Tepoztlán to give them lessons in spoken Nahuatl. Most of the hikers soon dropped out of the classes, but McAfee and a few others persisted. Typing up the proceedings weekly, in the course of a decade they compiled over six hundred lessons. Eventually Luz began working with this group.

Upon becoming subsecretary of Education in 1927, Moisés Saenz concluded that efforts of the *maestros rurales* in the countryside were ineffective because the teachers did not speak the indigenous languages of the people they sought to reach. Looking for an alternative, he turned to William Cameron Townsend, a Protestant missionary linguist with long experience in promoting literacy among speakers of Mayan languages in Guatemala. In 1935 Townsend set to work in the Nahuatl-speaking town of Tetelcingo, Morelos, where he was visited by the new President of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas. President Cárdenas was impressed by Townsend's methods and afforded him and his colleagues support and protection for linguistic research in Mexico.

Common to these converging paths was an interest in Nahuatl as a spoken language, not simply as an artifact of the precolumbian Aztec empire. Nahuatl speakers responded to this new, constructive interest, and in 1940 they held a congress in Milpa Alta to establish an orthography for modern Nahuatl, to assess infrastructure needs in Nahua towns, and to press for social justice.

The artist had sought to portray indigenous Mexico as the heart and soul of the nation, and the visual image of Luz often represented

this concept in their work. Now there was also a positive valuation of indigenous languages. Luz was a superb speaker of Nahuatl, and her talent came to be recognized and modestly rewarded.

In 1941 Robert Barlow arrived in Mexico from California to study Nahuatl. In addition to his university classes in Classical Nahuatl, he soon fell in with McAfee's group and established himself as leader. Completing a degree in anthropology, he received many research grants, was named director of a Nahuatl literacy project in Morelos, and eventually became chairman of the anthropology department of Mexico City College. A succession of Nahuatl-language newspapers issued from his home in Azcapotzalco, joint projects of several Nahuatl speakers together with Barlow and McAfee.

Throughout the 1940s Luz worked with Barlow and his associates, including the linguist Stanley Newman, who contributed the chapter on Classical Nahuatl to the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*. Unlike Whorf, Barlow recorded their work sessions, but the current location of his recordings is unknown. However, in 1948 Newman recorded Luz telling a story about Tepozton, the autochthonous hew of Tepoztlan. This recording is archived in the Languages of the World collection at Indiana University and is presently the only known exemplar of her voice. Barlow's transcription of a Day of the Dead story told by Luz was published in *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, and Luz herself wrote contributions to the Nahuatl-language newspaper *Mexihcatl itonalama*.

In 1942 *The Boy Who Could Do Anything and Other Mexican Folk Tales*, a children's book of Luz's stories in English translation by Anita Brenner with illustrations by Jean Charlot, was published in New York. Luz hoped that this book would finally establish her credentials as a teacher and bring her some much-needed income, but once again she suffered disappointment.

A Guggenheim fellowship returned Charlot to Mexico in 1945, and he joined Barlow's spoken Nahuatl class. Luz came to live with his family as housekeeper, and Charlot practiced speaking Nahuatl with her. Using sentences culled from lessons by Barlow and Newman, he constructed dialogue for a bilingual Nahuatl/Spanish puppet play, *Mowentike Chalman/Los Peregrinos de Chalma*. The puppets performed on the back of a truck touring Nahua towns, beginning with the village, of San Pedro Atocpan, close to Milpa Alta. The dialogue is so much in the style and spirit of Luz, that it is easy to assume that she was Charlot's primary source, but in fact fully half the sentences come directly from Barlow's class lessons, and many of them are attributed to informants from towns other than Milpa Alta.

Around the time Newman made the recording now archived in Indiana, Fernando Horcasitas met Luz at Barlow's house. Horcasitas was just beginning his studies at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología, and as it turned out, he and Luz were also just beginning a productive association that lasted the rest of their lives. Despite his youth, Horcasitas was named to the editorial board of the journal *Tlalocan: A Journal of Source Materials on the Native Cultures of Mexico*. Upon Barlow's death at the beginning of 1951, the journal passed into the care of Horcasitas and Ignacio Bernal. By 1957, Horcasitas and Luz were teaching Nahuatl together at Mexico City College.

Students from Mexico City College began working with Horcasitas and Luz, employing her to dictate Nahuatl folk tales for them to transcribe. Horcasitas also invited people with an interest in Nahuatl to his home, and that is where Miguel León-Portilla met Luz around 1960. Luz's presence and manner made a profound impression upon León-Portilla, although he met her in person only a few times. Later he would write about her and her work with heartfelt admiration.

In 1963 Horcasitas moved to the Institute of Historical Research at the National University, and once again he asked Luz to work with his students. This time she recounted for them the story of Milpa Alta before and during the Revolution.

In 1965 Luz died of injuries after being struck by a car on a Mexico City street. In her memory Horcasitas retranscribed her memoirs into traditional Nahuatl orthography, paired them with her own Spanish versions of each chapter, and published them as *De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata*. This was later republished by the University of Oklahoma Press in Nahuatl and English as *Life and Death in Milpa Alta: A Nahuatl Chronicle of Díaz and Zapata*. Both the Mexican and USA editions were beautifully illustrated by Alberto Beltrán.

With this first posthumous publication accomplished, Horcasitas went on to compile a second book of the stories in Nahuatl that Luz had dictated to him and his students, *Los cuentos en náhuatl de doña Luz Jiménez*. This book contains forty-four stories in all, including one about the flood that devastated San Pedro Atocpan in the early days of the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas and how the president himself came to direct relief efforts.

These two books at last revealed the full virtuosity of Luz's command of her native Nahuatl and of her narrative art, which had hitherto been discernable only indirectly through the English language of *The Boy Who Could Do Anything*. It is tragic that in her lifetime Luz was denied the satisfaction of seeing these two books in print. They completely validate her as a verbal artist and teacher of the first rank.

Her daughter Concha was asked in an interview with whom Luz preferred to work: the artists or the linguists? Concha replied that Luz liked both types of work. What was important to her was being in the company of intellectuals. Despite the violence and tragedies she had witnessed, and the disappointments and hardships she had endured, she succeeded in the thing she cared about the most, being constantly in the company of people with talent, broad vision, and great ideas—people like herself.

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