

**Oral History Interview of
Nephtalí De León**

**Interviewed by: Daniel Urbina Sánchez
October, 18, 2013
San Antonio, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Hispanic Interview Project***

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Interview Series Background:

The Hispanic Interview Project documents the diverse perspectives of the Hispanic people of Lubbock and the South Plains. These interviews and accompanying manuscript materials cover a myriad of topics including; early Lubbock, discrimination, politics, education, music, art, cultural celebrations, the May 11th 1970 tornado, commerce, and sport.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Nephtalí De León, an artist, poet, writer and civic activist. He talks Aztec history and Aztlán (the southwestern United States of America prior to the European conquest.) De León discusses his involvement in civil rights, protests, and education. In particular he discusses the Brown Berets, La Raza Unida Party, *La Voz de los Llanos* (his newspaper), He reminisces about using his voice as a publisher, artist, and poet to contribute to the enlightenment of the public. De León is still actively working on indigenous rights, the immigration issue, and equality.

Length of Interview: 01:48:01

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Daniel Sanchez (DS):

Yeah, we don't—

Nephtalí De León (ND):

Okay, I didn't realize. I'm used to editing and I'm used to interviews where you edit and come back and *la ponens la quitas*, "put it on, take it off" or whatever. That's why I just broke into it, sorry.

DS:

It's all right. It's all right. We try to do what the customer likes.

ND:

Thank you, I appreciate that, Daniel.

DS:

After we finish I'll tell you about one that happened in an interview. Alright. My name is Daniel Sánchez. Today's date is October 18, 2013, and I'm at the home of Nephtalí De León in San Antonio, Texas. Nephtalí, thank you for inviting me over.

ND:

Gracias por estar aqui, Daniel, "Thanks for being here, Daniel." Thank you.

DS:

You know, we've already done an interview where we covered a lot about your family, but let's just do a few things at the front. What's your complete legal name?

ND:

Nephtalí De León.

DS:

And when and where were you born?

ND:

I was born in Laredo, *Tejas*, 1945.

DS:

And, you know, we're talking tonight about your artwork and your work with the indigenous peoples and rights like that. Can you tell us what about your life experience brought you to this point?

ND:

It's a very long, strange, epic-like story. I never knew I was going to be here. I come from very humble background, very humble roots—basically migrant worker. I was born in Laredo, Texas, but I didn't grow up there. I grew up with my family *en todo el valle mas para bajo* “all over the valley, and further south” —it's okay to speak Spanish or English, right? Does it matter?

DS:

Does not matter at all.

ND:

Okay, good. We grew up in South Texas Valley, Pharr, McAllen, San Juan, La Joya, La Casita, Rio Grande City, all kinds of cities over there in the valley of South Texas. Where they grew in those days, it's different now. In those days they grew everything from *chili, tomate, lechuga, sandias, melones*, “chili, tomato, lettuce, watermelons, melons” so that's basically where I grew. I had no idea that one day I would be an author of books, that I would be a painter creating such images like *La Virgen de Guadalupe* [1999], behind me. That came much, much later. As an evolution, as an outgrowth of curiosity, of *inquietudes* “restlessness”, but also because of the societal things that have occurred and have been happening in our community. As early as I realized that we were not considered full-fledged people, or citizens, or equal as a society, as a community in the United States of America, specifically in Texas, from South Texas to Central Texas, right now in San Antonio, Texas—and as you know, I spent a lot of time in West Texas, Lubbock in particular, out in Lubbock, I'd be out in Muleshoe, Tahoka, Plainview, Amarillo, all kinds of places. And I discovered and experienced the pretty bad awful racism of that part of the country. Very narrow-minded people at that time. It has changed some, not enough, but significantly. So of course I'm very happy about those changes. Society as a whole has changed, but certainly not enough.

DS:

You know, and you're dealing a lot with the indigenous people's rights right now. Can we talk about what got you down this path?

ND:

Very much so. In school, we never find out that we are native people. Somehow, we're only called “The Others”, we're “The Somebody Else's”, never that we are native people; and the reason for that is—to me it's obvious; to some it may not be—if we retain a memory of our nativity, that we are the native people of this part of the world, then we have a claim to the land. Then we have a claim to roots and to ownership of our homelands, and that we have been invaded, and through that invasion we are definitely an occupied territory, an occupied country, an occupied nation. So what brought me to this was the complaints that I got repeatedly, specifically out in West Texas, being a publisher, a founder of a newspaper called *La Voz de los*

Llanos, “The Voice of the Plains”. *La Voz de los Llanos* was one of the early newspapers in West Texas, in Lubbock in particular. That was bilingual bicultural and through that newspaper, the community began to read it, began to realize that there was a forum, an outlet, for their discontentment, to express their discontentment, to express the injustices that they were living in their own flesh, that they were experiencing from the other society, from the white Anglo American society. There were so many numerous, numerous, numerous injustices that were happening. So people would call me pretty much several times a day, every day of the week in West Texas—in Lubbock—when I was publishing and living there, *La Voz de los Llanos*. Through that I immediately realized that there were many, many ills, many societal injustices occurring against our community. So I would respond. I would go up to Muleshoe, to Abilene, to Tahoka, to Plainview, to Wilson, to Lamesa—all kinds of places—to see what was going on, to see what was happening. So I saw it firsthand. I would become directly involved with the various and different communities in West Texas and that part of the country, often creating groups, societies, organizations, and then I would take off and go to the next city or community and create another organization. The organizations just grew out of the need for a community to coalesce into voicing together, through the strength of the togetherness, the injustices that were occurring in schools, in the hospitals, in the society itself, just driving out in the streets, walking out in the streets, certainly the jails. I know at one time we had a pretty big march that we called *La Marcha de la Paz*, “The March of Peace” with the support of wonderful, wonderful folks and people of Lubbock, Texas—one of many that occurred in West Texas. People like Father Curtis Halfmann were there, *La Señora* Juanita Castro that was still living at the time was there—so many other people. This was also a result of a murder that had occurred of Ernesto Nerios [(1949-1971)]. Ernesto Nerios was a Lubbock citizen. He was about twenty-one years old, give or take, when he was murdered by the Lubbock police. So the community was very, very upset about it, along with many other things. This was just kind of the spark that made it all happen at that particular time, because of the atrocity that had occurred. I later, with the permission of the family, I wrote a play titled *La Muerta de Ernesto Nerios*, “The Death of Ernesto Nerios” [1972]. It was performed in Lubbock several times, and as well as many other cities. By the time—sir, you asked me how was I involved or what brought me to this. Well, it was also theater. By the time I was writing quite a bit, I published my first book there in Lubbock, Texas titled *Chicanos: Our Background and Our Pride* [1972]. In fact, I have a copy of it here. Let me get it from here. (Stands up and gets the book from nearby) I’ll just put it here for now.

DS:
Okay.

ND:
But this is the book that I wrote in Lubbock, Texas—*Chicanos: Our Background and Our Pride*. This is a new edition. This one comes out of *La Universidad de València en España*, “The University of Valencia in Spain” and of course you see the same image, *La Virgen de*

Guadaliberty. The first edition didn't have that image. It had a different cover. But in 1972, this book first came out. It was one of three books at the time, in those years, that had the title *Chicanos* on the cover. *Chicano* was still considered a dirty word. Today it's not that popular either, but now it's accepted. It's part of our accepted reflections of our culture. At the time, there were still questions about the validity of the word *Chicano*. People thought it was dirty, people didn't think it was proper, even members of our own community. So at any rate, when that happened, I also created a theater and we went to perform in reaction to the injustices, to the unkindness, to the criminal actions, actually, against our community on so many levels. Actions against us, people of all ages, young people, old people, school people, street people, working people. There was really an assault upon our culture coming from all angles, coming from all directions. We were just not wanted, period, and we had to fight for every inch of our territory, of acceptance of us as a culture, as a society. So we did it, and I wasn't the only one; the whole communities were very involved, very incredible people, very courageous people, very full of valor and justice and rightness. We didn't really know how to fight. We didn't know how to demonstrate, how to protest, but it was nature perhaps, maybe the ancestral memory within us, that helped us and guided us. We protested schools, we'd even protest some food stores that would sell us rotten things or would not respond to us properly. They were very gross, very unkind—racist, basically. So we'd even go pitch up protests and marches in front of grocery stores in Lubbock, Texas. And we would do this in other cities: Abilene, Muleshoe, Tahoka. Students began to have walk-outs all over West Texas, like they had done in California, like they had done in Denver, Colorado, for instance, and of course through my activities, perhaps because there was a great need of such expressions of our culture, our people, I was being invited to other cities across the country where I was doing the same kind of reflections. Specifically, I was reading a lot of my poetry, sharing a lot of my writings with different communities, different cities. I know that my book sold tremendously well. I had to have several printings of it. From there on I'd write other books, such as *Five Plays* [1972]. In that book, *Five Plays, La Muerta de Ernesto Neros* was published. In fact, we presented quite a few plays throughout the state of Texas and other places. Today, literally forty years later, a play that I wrote and we presented in Lubbock, Texas, titled *Chicanos: The Living and the Dead* [1972]—it involves Che Guevara, already dead by that time, and the writer/reporter, Ruben Salazar who was murdered and killed in a protest in the city of Los Angeles. A gas canister bomb was thrown into a saloon where he was waiting things out, or was sitting there, and they say that it was an accident.

DS:

Yeah, that was during the zoot-suit [riots.]

ND:

Precisely. They say that it was an accident. It hit him in the head, and of course it killed him, and he was a reporter. He was kind of called the voice of reason. So anyway, he's also dead, in my play. So in my play, Che Guevara and Ruben Salazar are up in heaven looking down at us, at the

Chicano movement, and wondering and having their own dialogue about the proper way to find our justice and to find fair equality and equal treatment in this society, in the world. Che Guevara would say, “No, it takes a weapon, it takes arms.” Ruben Salazar, the reporter, would say, “Hey, we have to use reason. We have to use negotiations, a peaceful approach,” *et cetera*, “and so forth”. So that play it was performed first, that I wrote and performed forty years ago, is now being presented at the University—today—at the University of Santa Cruz in California. So I find it ironic that what happened yesterday is still very valid today. And part of the reason is of course the tremendous amount of deportations. So President Obama is now called the Deportation in Chief, because under his call, more people have been deported than under any other president in the total history of the United States of America. After all, he did promise that there would be “change you can believe in.” I always thought it was chains, *cadenas*, “chains” that you can believe in. That’s how I interpret him. But that was how I began to get directly involved in the search, in the quest, for fairness, in the quest for the right behavior toward us as a people. And we have to continue to do this, because the deportations are awful. We have laws I guess SB 1070 [Arizona SB 1070], in the state of Arizona, and they want to repeat those in Texas, they want to repeat those in so many other states, which would be very unfair to us, very unkind to us.

DS:

Yeah. And you know, when you’re talking about stuff like SB17—I mean SB10—

ND:

SB1070

DS:

Yeah, 1070—you know, it’s hate to me. I view it as hate disguised as legislation, legislative hate, because that’s all it’s about. They can say it’s immigration, but it’s like—

ND:

Legislative hate, like institutionalized hate, hatred against us.

DS:

Yes.

ND:

That is correct. There is no doubt that the Euro-illegals—and this is how I address the white European people that came to our country, to our homeland, our homeland being *Aztlán*. *Aztlán*, being the center of America, pretty much, and these are historical facts. Our ancient ancestors have maps, they wrote down with pictograms where we were born as a people, and by we I mean all the *Mechica* tribes. All of us in the north of the Rio Grande, in the north of the border, and in

the south of the border, if we are of *Mechica* origins, we are the same people. From *Mechica* came the word *Mechicano*. From *Mechicano* later it changed—five hundred years later—became *Mexicano*. But the original pronunciation was *Mechica* and *Mechicano*. Rémi Siméon [1827-1890], who created the best dictionary of the Aztec *Náhuatl* language, [*Diccionario de la lengua náhuatl o Mexicana* (1885)] a French philologist and linguist, he creates the best Aztec *Náhuatl* dictionary in the 1800s. He asked the natives in Mexico, the elder people, he says, “What do you call yourselves?” And they would respond, “*Mechicano, Mechicano, Mechicano.*” Because of our isolation here in the north, we kept the *Mechicano* sound, and so later the M-E was dropped, but even at that time, Rémi Siméon actually states and writes in his book, introduction to the Aztec language dictionary, that the M-E part of *Mechicano* was barely heard. You could hardly hear *Mechicano*, so what would come to the ear would be *Chicano, Mechicano. Aye, o yo soy Mechicano.* So we kept the *Chicano* part, and the people down south, through time and change, they became from *Mechicano* to *Mexicano*, so they became *Mexicanos*, and we kept the *Chicano* part. And so that kind of dispels the mystery, the questions, the wonder of where did the word *Chicano* come from? It came from *Mechicano*. From our home in Aztlán here in the north of this part of the world, which would be, you know, North America. *Aztlán*. It gives the names to the *Azteca* people. The Aztecs are from the land of *Aztlán*, so it’s all originating here in the north where we live today, and it is believed to be around the Four Corners area, where Utah, New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona meet. In those kinds of areas, that that would be kind of the heartland of *Aztlán*.

DS:

And so when did this first come across your radar? When did you first start to hear about this theory?

ND:

Actually, quite a long time ago. It is now being more echoed, and it is getting resonance among our people, because it is a mystery to most of us, and again it is part of the best-kept secrets held against us, and away from us. This society really wants us to be ignorant of our background, of our origins, again, for the same reason that I mentioned earlier: that if we know our origins, then we know that this is really our homeland. I mean, we always know it. I mean, our skin color, our features tell us that we did not come from Europe, and we did not come from Africa. Now maybe humanity came out of those lands, but we’re talking humanity. Now when we’re talking about specific groups of people, then we know that our specific group of people is totally native, and that this is our homeland. And so therefore we have the barbarity, the out-of-compliance behavior, of the American, white, Euro-illegal people, trying to deport—well, sometimes deporting us, and trying to deport us out of our own homeland. Here are invaders, occupants, that come to depopulate our own homeland and put us away from our own homeland, but if we know that we are from the land of *Aztlán*, and we are the *Mechica* people that also gave birth to Mexico, then this is definitely our homeland. We have always been migrating back and forth. We

are not immigrants, and there's a difference: an immigrant is someone that leaves their homeland and comes to another homeland and creates a different society, or stays and lives in another homeland. That's an immigrant. A migrant is a person that moves back and forth in their own territory, in their own homeland, like birds, like deer, like animals do in nature. So we are migrants, not immigrants. The immigrants are the people that left their homeland, that left England, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Russia, Denmark or whatever, and land they left. Those are immigrants, that left their home to come and create another home somewhere else, or to come to another people's homes. That's an immigrant. So those are the white Euro-illegal people that are the immigrants in America. We are the migrants in America.

DS:

Nowadays, you know, with the web and Facebook and stuff like Twitter, how do you use those resources to get your message out? And have you seen that it's taking effect?

ND:

I think that it is definitely very helpful, it is definitely very proper and it enlarges our scope of communication and it makes it very, very quick. For instance, we have fantastic wonderful brave people in The Dreamers. To be quite honest, I was always wondering if The Dreamers were going to hurt us, and what I mean by us, the *Chicano* people, our own native struggle in America. And the reason I say that is because we have had an influx of people from Cuba, Puerto Rico, South America. Or it can be any place from Argentina to Brazil to Chile to any place. They very often came and they did not have our experience. Those that came usually had an education. They were already prepared, mentally, physically, and generally they were well-off enough to fit into the American society as teachers, as professionals, as this, that, or the other. But their involvement with our society was basically kind of critical of us as *Chicano* people and basically assimilationist into the white American society, and often becoming teachers or professors in the educational systems. Well, they hurt us very much in that white America would say, "What are you people arguing about? Look, you've got your brown people that are teaching you, you've got your brown people in the hospitals in this other part of society." Well they were not acting like us. They were acting like the immigrants that came from somewhere else to be part of a melting pot, to keep the status quo pretty much. They were certainly not reflecting the injustices that we had suffered, and they did not care or understand the injustice that we had suffered. So yes, we were having people that spoke Spanish. Yes we were having people that sometimes, not often, were brown like us. Most of them were really looking more like white Europeans, the people that we were getting, from wherever these other lands might have been, including Puerto Rico or Cuba or the other southern nations. So they were more like *gusanos*, "worms" actually. They were acting more like *gusanos*, *gusano* being a negative term for people that got away from their community, not wishing to join either the revolt or the poverty of their nations, wanting to get away from the revolutions of their countries, or the poverty of their countries to come into a wealthier society/nation and practice and enjoy being wealthy and being educated. On the human

level you cannot blame them. On the other level of a search for dignity, a search for equality, yes they can be blamed very much. But anyway, going back to the Dreamers, I was afraid that these Dreamers, being from Mexico, would come and seek the dream of whatever they think is the American Dream, but basically education, lifting themselves into a better economic level, *et cetera*. I was afraid they were going to hurt us and be like these other people I just mentioned. I'm so happy that I have been proven wrong, and that my early consideration and thoughts were totally erring and wrong. I find them courageous warriors. I find them valiant people, who indeed are moving forward the struggle that we have been involved with for over fifty years. I mean, not that we're the only ones that have struggled. There have been many other people struggling before us, but I'm talking about our present, current struggle. And we did not invent *la lucha*, "combating" or *La Revolucion*, "The Revolution"; we are simply following it. We are simply living with it. We are sentinels of what our forefathers have done. Our forefathers have always fought. Our forefathers have always protested and affirmed who they were, but often they were not either successful or were not organized or had the wherewithal, or the resources to follow through on this reaffirmation of who we are as a people. It almost was left up to us. We knew resources, we had knew possibilities to continue their struggle that they pretty much lost. They lost a struggle, but they won their identity and passed it on to us. They passed on to us those genes. So, in that sense, they had another victory. They had many victories. But anyway, now it almost is like these new Dreamers are the new *Chicanos*. The Dreamers Nine, the Dreamers Thirty, the Dreamers Ten. I mean, people who chained themselves to the big giant wheels of a bus to stop it from deporting our community are very courageous, very brave. So they are reinventing a way to protest, a way to create confrontation, for passive resistance is not passive. Passive resistance creates confrontations, and this is what these young people are doing. So they are definitely in the tradition of great valiant warriors, and they are the ones now being pretty much at the forefront of the struggle that is so necessary for our liberation as a people.

DS:

And what can we do to ensure that their struggle and their strife is for naught? Make sure it's not—

ND:

Well, we need to support them. We need to be with them when we're able to, those that are able to. If it takes being chained to the wheels, we need to chain ourselves with them. Some of our State Representatives and Senators in Washington, D.C. are protesting with them and being arrested as well. So again, they're many, many things that we can do, and the most obvious one is being there physically with them, supporting them bodily, physically. When we're not able to do that, supporting with our funds. If there's nothing else to do, with a good word, with a good statement of we're supporting you. All of it helps. It's going to take the unity of all our resources in word, deed, action, physical presence to find our liberation.

DS:

And what point does political power—

ND:

I think that is political power. I personally do not have any trust or faith in political power. By that I mean that the politics of this nation, or the politics of occupation, they are the politics of an empire, having colonies. It will always be the politics of colonization. So for us to plug ourselves into that kind of politics is for us to sell ourselves down the drain. Now there are many such conflicts within those considerations. If it's the only game in town, what are we to do? These young people are inventing their own game. They are creating a new game. That's the creativity. That is the marvel and wonder of what they're doing. In other words—and they're saying it very boldly and beautifully, "If you, Mr. President, if you, Senate, if you, Congress, will not stop the deportation, we will." That's a powerful statement, but they don't just say it. I mean, if they're chaining themselves to the wheels of a car, you can't move it, and they're willing to lose their life doing it. I mean, I've seen them. The motor is running, there's a driver on top of this giant bus, and here's these wonderful folks, these wonderful people, underneath the tires, chained. They cannot move. And they put themselves—covers in their hands, in their arms, and they're joined so that nobody can just come and undo the chains and start hacking at the chain. They have to go through a big process to undo them, to break through those chains. Others had actually themselves to the doors of the political buildings, of the office buildings, where Congress had laws being passed, where senators, congressmen, representatives need to go in and out. They chained themselves to that. So there is such a thing as being creative in confronting the injustice. I suspect that we will eventually win. Almost everything will be just for us, and I believe the reason for that is that we have the moral correctness, we have the moral justice behind us, and that it's not hard to see that there is a right and a wrong, that to arrest a father, a mother, who is working to feed that child is totally immoral. It's an affront to the spirit of humanity. It's an affront to life itself. It's sinful. It's criminal. It's everything wrong that one can think of on such actions where, for power, to use that power in such a way that you will stop, that you will arrest someone from feeding that child, from being a family. This is what's happening, and this is what our young people are protesting and being against.

DS:

What do you think is the danger of, you know, when you're talking about Obama or somebody passing the legislation, how can we guard against a legislation being passed that really doesn't help, that might even make matters worse?

ND:

There's very little that we can do about it directly, if it's going to be done, other than what we're doing. Which is, I say very little, but it's also a lot, and it has already, to some degree, affected the White House, it has affected the seat of government, because their immorality is being shown

before the entire world. The injustice of their actions is being paraded before the entire world. How can Obama pick up his child, or his daughters, and go home to his wife and enjoy the wonderful comfort and loveliness of families, while he's telling other people to deport other people, to deport other families, split other families? How can you ignore a child saying "I want my mama? Please don't deport my mama." Or "Bring my father back." "Bring my mother back." "We want my brother." "We want our sister." Or parents saying the same thing, with signs all over America. This is happening all over America. The United States has a plan, a master plan, that they call "End Game." I have that manual. It's published. It is printed. I have it because I was able to download it from the Internet. It has now been removed. ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] has removed it. And in that manual, it states that it wants to deport ten million people, ten million people of our kind, away from the United States. That's a huge population. That's about a third of the population of the small countries in Europe. So that's like taking a European country and saying "I'm going to split it into three or four parts and I'm going to remove one of these parts." I mean, that's a lot. So it's very unfair, unkind, criminal, immoral, unjust, and the world is beginning to know about it. This is why it is so important that all of us project it, say it, repeat it, that we're not ignorant of the intent of the United States Government.

DS:

I think you mentioned the world—how did the UN weigh in on what's going on?

ND:

The UN is trying to ignore it. I don't think that it wants to deal with it. I know a friend of mine, Ralph A. Muñoz, an attorney and myself, we have attempted to present some of these conflicts to the United Nations. The Secretary General of the United Nations has responded to us that this is an internal problem to be responded to by the internal government of the country, that we are not a nation. We need to argue and present to the United Nations that yes, indeed, we are a nation as a people, that we are—we're not—those of us that think this way, we do not—I do not consider myself part of the United States of America. We have our own nation and that nation is named Aztlán, and this nation is being treated as a colony, and it is occupied by a foreign invasion, by a foreign regime and government, just like Sadaam Hussein invades Kuwait. That is what has happened here. Like Israel has invaded Palestine and taken over Palestine and created and divided walls and put up horrible inhuman walls in their country, in their part of the world, so that we have a wall of death to the south of us, between the United States and Mexico, and the whole border is like a warfront between two nations that are at peace, where no war is supposed to be existing. So there are many such injustices, things that are occurring between both countries, all affecting us as a people, and there is no doubt that we are a different people. We have a different culture, a different language, a different history, a different background. We're not white America. We have been brainwashed to believe that we are, and that we're part of it, and that there's equality, but it is quite obvious that we are the only people so profiled, so persecuted, in the United States of America, as the Jewish people were during the reign of Hitler.

Thank God that they haven't put us in ovens, but to split our families and to deport us is just as cruel, and is definitely a cruel and unusual punishment for us that have not done anything, that are not criminals.

DS:

You know, and all this is kind of repeated and cyclical. I mean, this is not the first time this has happened.

ND:

No.

DS:

Can you talk about some of those earlier efforts where they repatriated people?

ND:

They did that in the Twenties, in the Thirties, just like they did to the Japanese, but they stopped with the Japanese. They do have corrals for us. They do have detention centers. The largest detention center is just about in *Edinburgo, Tejas*, "Edinburg, Texas" I've been in it and visited and protested against it with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and quite a few other people. So they have detention centers for us all over the country in the United States of America. One of the other second-largest is in the state of Arizona. So we are being treated—definitely unwanted, just to be given the name of illegal alien. That's a terrible thing for a human being to carry, by way of a description, to be—either one—to be legal. We provide the backbone of everything that it takes to create America, in terms of nurturing, in terms of food, in terms of production—anything from cars to houses to buildings to streets—to clothes. We provide all of it, including taking care of people, children, restaurants, everything. We provide the whole infrastructure that it takes to create a working society, and yet we're called illegal. On top of that we're called aliens, as if we're from outer space. *Ni que fuéramos primo de E.T.*, "As if we were cousins of E.T." [E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (film 1982)]. I mean, hey wait a minute, we are definitely a very important sector and contributing factor of this society. Yet we're labeled with very ugly, negative names that have very bad connotations. So there is no doubt that something very serious is happening against us as a people. And that serves to reinforce the fact that we are a country, that we are a nation, that we are different, and that we need to continue to struggle to eventually free ourselves and become the autonomous sovereign nation that we have always been. We have never signed a treaty with anyone, and yet the damage done to us has been so severe that most of our native language is gone. Luckily we retain a lot of it, which is Aztec Nahuatl. We speak a lot of it, every time we say *elote*, *tamal*, *nopal*, *Chile*, *tecolote*, *guajolote*, *chocolate*, "corn, tamal, cactus, Chile, owls, turkey, chocolate." So you hear the rhythm, the intonation, *molcajete* [*molcaxitl*], *tomate*, *mecate* [*mecatl*]. "kitchen mortar, tomato, rope" So we have all these words that are

nature and natural to us. We have lost much of it but we still retain a lot of it, so therefore there is hope that we can regain our native speech.

DS:

Is there a record anywhere of that speech?

ND:

Yes, we speak it every day.

DS:

Besides those few words.

ND:

Yes. I have a big, thick dictionary of Aztec Nahuatl. It's in my other room. That's the dictionary I was referring to that was compiled by Rémi Siméon, the French linguist. We do have that language, so it is saved. We have the language. Thank God that there were some people that saved our language. And many people still speak it totally, like a regular language, south of the border. So there is hope that we will regain it.

DS:

You know, and one of the things that's helped is that oral tradition.

ND:

Very much so. If it were not for oral tradition, we would have lost it. Because it took a while for us to have our own books, our own literature, our own reflections of our authentic values and forms of art and culture that we now have, it was oral tradition that saved our culture. And much of it, we have to thank the musicians for a lot of it. When there was nothing else saving us as a people and making us be at least happy with ourselves, it was the courageous and strength and dedication of our traveling musicians, our troubadours, that kept our culture alive. People like Little Joe, like Gilbert Rodriguez, all kinds of people. Estaban Jordan, El Indio from Corpus Christi, Isidro Lopez.

DS:

And how would they do that?

ND:

Well, just by going out into the farmlands, into *los lugares donde estaba la gente trabajando, los labores, ranchos*, “the places where the people were working, the fields, ranches.” Everywhere. I mean, they'd go out on their own and create their *bailes*, “dances” their *mitotes*, *borlotes*—*mitotes* another Aztec word. It's not Spanish. *Mitote*, like *zoquite* (*zoquiltl*), *zacate*

(*zacatl*), those are not Spanish words *zoquite*, *zacatee*, *mitote*, those are not Spanish words. We speak a lot of Aztec every day and we don't know it, but we do. So we have a lot of our ancient culture that we practice every day and speak every day.

DS:

Yeah, because I was reading something where I think even like the word *Llano Estacado* is a derivative of the Aztec tongue.

ND:

Well in that case, no it's really more like *Estacado* being Spanish. The *Estacado* would drive stakes to mark and to not get lost, almost like a trail way, so they would drive stakes and that's why it was es-stake-ado, stakes put into the ground. *Llano*, *llano* of course being the planes. *Llano Estacado*.

DS:

Well, this guy was talking about it with the *astacado* being, like, stuck in the mud.

ND:

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Stuck in the mud. Well, that would be in the *zoquit*.

DS:

Yeah, he was talking about how there's been many thoughts on how that actually came about, and they think it was the closest that the Spaniards had come up to a description of the natives were—what they were calling it.

ND:

There's so much history that has been negated to us. In terms of that, we are probably one of the very few people in the world, if not the only people in the world, who created a new expression about themselves and of themselves, specifically through such things as *Chicano* art, *Chicano* literature, *Chicano* theater, *Chicano* movies, *Chicano* everything. Only forty years ago, this didn't exist. We were born in full bloom almost overnight. Overnight when there was nothing, suddenly there's a lot of something. *Chicano* poetry, *Chicano* literature, *Chicano* art, painting, art, *Chicano* theater. It was literally just born overnight in full bloom.

DS:

Yeah, because I think—

ND:

That is a tremendous achievement.

DS:

Yeah, because I think *Chicano Teatro*, “Chicano Theatre” was born about the ’70, ’72 somewhere.

ND:

About that time. It kind of grew at the same time, simultaneously, in many cities across the country. Milwaukee, Denver, San Francisco, California, Lubbock, San Antonio, Corpus, New Mexico, Arizona—it just happened simultaneously, everywhere.

DS:

The kind of plays you did, did they follow the guise of *Chicano Teatro*?

ND:

Well, there were no guides, which was wonderful. We created our own art form. We were aware of other plays, but there were no guidelines and there are still no guidelines. Whatever the *Chicano* person wants to do, it’s fair game. Anything and everything is valid, because nothing exists, so when there’s a dearth, when there’s a vacuity, whatever is created—and if it’s authentic, and if it really serves the community—then it will be valid. And that’s another part that *Chicano* art form plays. At one point, it is a shield. It is a weapon. It is a comfort. It is a reflector-off. It is a validation. It is a celebration. Our art form goes way beyond the former, or ancient, meaning or explication of what art is. Basically art, historically, has been pretty much only in the realm of aesthetics, meaning something that is made beautiful, something that is made pleasant, something that is made to be enjoyed, and that’s pretty much it. Something that gives us pleasure from its beauty and sense of aesthetics; *Chicano* art goes way beyond that. *Chicano* art is a way to affirm ourselves, reaffirm ourselves, to protect us, to fight for us, to fight with us. It has so many other realms that traditional art has never been part of.

DS:

And you as an artist and as a poet and a writer, how do you combine all those talents to help further the cause along?

ND:

I think it is because, not having been trained within the context of any boxes, I have the liberty, the freedom, to extend from one to the other, to the other, to the other, to the other, not only because I wasn’t trained, but also because first of all I was not formally trained by any educational system. I only went to high school and through high school, so therefore I was not given rules about what to do, how to do it, or how far to go in doing it. So I was very lucky in that respect. But then again, beyond that, those that did get the training, those that did get a college education for instance, they are still not constrained by what they can do within the realm of *Chicano* creation.

DS:

You know, you were talking about that formal training. You know, thinking about, they'll say, "This is how you symbolize this." But not having that training, you can figure out how you want to symbolize it, right?

ND:

Well if I don't, I will fail, and people will tell me. That's part of being a public artist, that you put yourself and your creation out there, and people will judge you, and that's only right, that is only correct. So therefore people will tell you about your authenticity. They will tell you about the quality of your work—the quality and the degree of finesse, or lack of finesse, will be out there shining in full light. So it's under the spotlight, so people will tell you, "Hey, this is good or this is not good." And then you act or react to that, and so that's only proper. That's how it should be.

DS:

You know, you were talking about your speaking engagements, and some of those are to colleges and universities across West Texas and around this area also. When you go in there, what is it you hope to accomplish?

ND:

I'm hoping that whatever I project is both sincere and authentic, and that there be a dialogue between myself and whoever is going to be the listener or the viewer, and that we can both learn from each other, that my ability to project the truth, the authenticity, the struggle of our community, the survival of our community, be as real to them as it is to me and vice versa. And so far so good. It has been very positive, but then again it's because whatever I do is not a pretension of being art. I almost do not see what it does as art, but rather as an extension of the culture of our people. I want it to be a reflection of who we are as a people, what we are as a people, rather than who I am as an artist, or what I am as a poet. Obviously there's a person in there that will never be detached from what I do, but it was after all the community that decided that I was a poet. I never knew I was a—like I said earlier, I was a farmworker, and I still see myself as a migrant worker. I still do not necessarily see myself as a poet, a painter, an artist, a writer, a playwright, or anything of that nature. I aspire to be that, perhaps. I mean, I want—I quest to be that, but it was the community that told me that's what I was. Not having a profession, not having a job, not having training, myself, it was West Texas that first decided, "Hey, you are a poet. You are a painter." It was the community that began to call me these things, and I without a job, a profession, or a direction, "Hey, I better listen to them. Maybe they're right. Maybe I am a poet. Maybe I am a painter." So I followed what my community was saying, that I either already was or was becoming.

DS:

Have you ever had people—or have you wanted people to come up to you and tell you that you've impacted them in some way?

ND:

That I have what? Impacted?

DS:

If so, you know, why is that important to you, and if not, why doesn't it matter to you that somebody tells you, you know, "You've impacted my life"?

ND:

I feel very privileged. Yes, I have heard that many times. Of course, that makes me feel very, very privileged, very honored, very happy, very accomplished. But accomplished because, the way I interpret it, they're telling me, "You reflect me. You reflect our community authentically." So that is really what I want. They're basically telling me, "You speak for us and with us." And again, not so much for us but with us, and that's what I want to do; I want to speak with my community, not necessarily for my community, but with my community. And very often, when I'm up there doing a presentation, if there's ever any doubt or feeling that I may have, I always ask permission of our community. I will say, "With your permission, I will say these things" or "Will you give me permission to say these things?"

DS:

Yeah, and I've heard you say that, too. [Laughter]

ND:

Yes, because I had to respect our community, and whatever I'm going to say or do, hopefully comes from them. I mean that since I'm a conduit, I'm a passageway for whatever our community's thinking, doing, dreaming or questing for, or reaching out for. So I feel very privileged and honored when people tell me that. I guess because I've been in so many cities, in so many schools, in so many places, many people tell me. They tell me, "When I was a child, I was in fifth grade when you read us this poem," and now they've got their own families. So people that were children, I may have been in their classroom, perhaps even saying children's poetry, and/or other kinds of poetry, and now people have come and told me, "You know, when I was in seventh grade, or ninth grade, or this grade, or that grade, you came to our classroom." And some of them will quote little bits of whatever I told them, and I'm amazed. I'm astounded.

DS:

You know, you just said something that I think is really unique, where you said that you want to be a voice within the community, not the voice for the community. How did you come upon that?

ND:

I think it was from my early experience of being a publisher of the newspaper—a publisher/reporter for and with the newspaper. I realized that there is something invalid to want to be a voice, but there is something very valid to want to reflect a voice, as opposed to be a voice. Nobody knows everything, and nobody can truly say, “I represent this,” because it’s me saying it. We can aspire and hope, I would like to represent this, that. Because after all, we’re fly by night, literally, I mean, how long will any of us be around? Now, where you come from if somebody that lives up to a hundred years, a hundred and four, which is pretty fantastic and awesome. But that’s still a drop in the bucket, in the bigger history of humanity, of existence, even a hundred and ten years, and I hear somebody in your family is a hundred and four, that’s fantastic. That’s awesome. My mom just passed away at the age of ninety-four, and I think that’s long, but again, how long is it in comparison to existence itself?

DS:

To time itself, yes.

ND:

To time itself, precisely. Thank you. So therefore, if we can reflect a larger life, I believe we can be more accomplished. Now obviously, being human, we have to take some personal pride and personal satisfaction in being able to do this. And I feel very privileged, very gratified, I feel blessed, I feel very lucky, that I’m able to—And also, that I’m able to make a living off of this, and it’s very challenging, it’s very difficult. Because there’s no doubt that a writer, a poet, a painter, a dancer, a musician, we’re the last persons needed for anything in survival. Before you read a book—nobody gets up in the morning and says, “I’m going to buy a book of poems.” Nobody! I’m a poet and I don’t say that, either. Now we do say, “I’m going to go buy me some tacos. I need a pair of shoes, I need to go pay the light, the water.” We have all kinds of needs. Who needs a poet? Who needs a painter? Who needs a painting on a wall? It’s nice to have it, but it’s not needed. So we are the last people that anybody needs, so this is why it’s so difficult to make a living as an artist, a poet, a painter, a dancer—anything having to do with the arts. And that’s why you kind of have to be half insane to want to be an artist, and I know people have called me that and I would have to agree with them. [Laughter] And people—some younger people have told me, “Nephtalí, can we be a poet? Can we be a painter?” I say, “You sure can. Yes you can, but you’re willing to go hungry, you’re willing to go without. Yes, you can be a great poet. Yes, you can be a painter, and artist, all these wonderful things. Just remember, you will pay a great price for it. But yes, you can do it, and you should.”

DS:

So what kept you going, from those early years in Lubbock to where you are now?

ND:

The community. The community kept me going. Literally, economically, physically, spiritually, in every way, in every sense of the word. They are the ones that mobilized me. Why have I been in San Francisco? Why have I been in New York? Why have I been in Mexico City? Why have I been in Milwaukee, Chicago, Los Angeles? It is the community that has invited me. New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Dakotas, Bidal Aguero [(1949-2009)] from Lubbock, Texas, was going to North Dakota, the university there. He invites me out there, Bidal Aguero, editor publisher of *El Editor*, "The Editor" [Established: 1977] along with Olga Aguero. Before they met, he was going to school there. He pulls me off to North Dakota. So it was word of mouth—it's real people. It's like you sitting here in front of me. There's no mystery. It's a real community, and therefore this is why I feel so privileged. This is why I feel so emboldened and lucky and fortunate and blessed, that I couldn't do it on my own. Obviously there's no way I could survive on my own.

DS:

You know, and there's no way you could name everybody that's contributed to what you've done. But can you name a few people that were really key in helping you keep going and reaffirming—

ND:

I have to start with my mother. It was in Lubbock, Texas that it became the center, the hotbed, of activism. The poets would organize there. They would have Brown Beret meetings. We'd have the theater practices in my home, and my mother was always there to support us. The organizing marches, protests, helping with the newspaper, my family, my mother, and then of course so many incredible people in Lubbock, in West Texas. Andre Sandoval was originally from Laredo, he ends up in Lubbock, AFL-CIO [The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] organizer—Andre Sandoval. Mark Smith, attorney, out of Lubbock—another great supporter. Carlos Quirino, Sr., out of Lubbock. Bidal Aguero, a fantastic individual that also was—I'll think of his name in a minute. But at any rate, there being so, so many incredible people that were so many in so many cities, and of course I was fortunate and lucky enough to be close friends with people like Jose Angel Gutierrez, "Corky" Gonzales [Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales (1928-2005)] out of Denver, founder of the Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado. Cesar Chavez, [(1927-1993)] of course. I would go visit him at *La Paz* [*Nuestra Señora Reina de la Paz*, "Our Lady of Peace"] at Keene, California. Reies Lopez Tijerina, [(1926-)] in New Mexico, "El Tigre" of course. So I was directly involved with all these central, pivotal figures of our *Chicano* movement in a very significant way. So they, in a sense, were also my trainers. They, in a sense, were also my reflectors, people that I could communicate with on a very

personal level. And other people like Antonio Orendain leader of the farmworkers of the state of Texas [Texas Farm Workers Union]. Jesus Moya was the second in command of Antonio Orendain. They would march from Muleshoe, Texas, all the way to the capitol building in Austin, Texas, to protest the unfairness against farmworkers in the State of Texas, as we would do Coachella Valley in California. But I was thinking earlier of Gus Medina; Gus Medina who had *Noticias*, “News” out of Lubbock, Texas; an incredible, wonderful, intelligent man, who I would like to see a statue of in the city of Lubbock, Texas, of Gus Medina. He trained so many of us: me, in the newspaper business, Bidal Aguero, Carlos Quirino Jr., and others, so many others. He was our school for learning how to compose, how to create a newspaper, how to publish, how to gather news, how to reflect news, and so on. He was a very important person in my personal life, Augustin Medina, “Gus” Medina.

DS:

And I can’t remember if it was his son, but somebody was talking about how that was that unique experience, that, you know, there he was and there was this group of young guys, all probably nineteen to twenty-something.

ND:

Well, his son now is a Ph.D., Gus Medina Jr., son of Augustin Medina Sr.

DS:

—and how, you know, that was something interesting, that these guys just—y’all were a little think tank.

ND:

Those were fascinating times. It was particularly interesting—you’re not going to believe this, but we made the newspaper with lead letters, and we joined letter-by-letter, the T, the E, the E, the B, the H, and the L. Help, H-E-L-P. We’d have to put H letter, then get an E letter, join it together in little cubicles. We’d put the letter H, then grab the E next to it and put it in there, then grab an L, put an L, grab a P and we’d put a P. We made the word Help letter by letter by letter, made up out of lead. And so, now imagine the whole sentence, “Help comes to those in need.” We had to write “Help comes to those in need” and then put them in little rows, and then the whole thing would be tightened so none of the letters would fall out, then [claps] it’s turned over and pressed on a piece of paper. Just like in ancient China, literally. So that’s how we made the newspaper with Augustin Medina with letter-by-letter lead letters, with letter-by—and of course, “Help comes to—” There’s a space between, “Help comes to—” we’d need to have a space, a lead space between “Help comes to—” Now we needed two lead spaces. So in between every word, we’d have to put a lead space in there, in between words, and then of course the letter. Word, led space, then another letter, letter-by-letter-by-letter-by-letter-by-letter. Just totally amazing, but we did it that way. [Laughter]

DS:

It's much easier now, isn't it?

ND:

Can't believe it. But then I remember being on University Avenue, the cafés around there, at three o'clock in the morning, drinking coffee with Gus Medina and talking about the newspaper, about what we still had to do, and it was three o'clock in the morning. So those are my wonderful, great, positive memories of Lubbock, Texas, and this grand old man who taught me and us—like you said, a group of young people—how to deal with society with language.

DS:

And then something you really—it's a craft that all of y'all really mastered.

ND:

That was taught to all of us, and we learned it, and hopefully we're still learning. Hopefully we're still improving. After I wrote some of those books, I wrote this other storybook also, in Lubbock, Texas, *I Will Catch the Sun*, also now translated into *Quiero pescar el sol*. Now this is also put out of Spain. I just got three books published out of Spain. Here's the other one, *Poemes de la resistencia chicana*, "Poems of Chicano Resistance." This one is translated, all of it, into Catalan as well. Here's a code-switching language I write in, and now every page is in Catalan. The red is in Catalan, which is the language of Spain—a different kind of language, not Spanish, but Catalan. So all of it is in Catalan and Spanish. This one also is in Spanish, on the other side, *Quiero pescar el sol, I Will Catch the Sun*. This one, now, is required reading. See, it has things for the children. It is now required reading in Spain. It is a required test for anybody that wants to become a teacher for children in the nation of Spain, which is very ironic in that, I wrote this in America, it is about *Chicanitos*, and yet it is in Spain that it is now a required textbook for anybody that wants to get a degree to teach children in Spain. And thanks to this wonderful lady—to these two wonderful ladies—Dr. Carmen Manuel who did the introduction, and she translated this into Catalan, these two doctor ladies out of Spain who promoted my work and moved my work out in Spain.

DS:

What do you think that's—what's the message in there that they thought was important enough to make it part of the curriculum?

ND:

I think it says very clearly that we are a unique people, that we are—

DS:

Let me put in a new tape?

ND:

Sure.

(video tape switched out)

DS:

I'm Daniel Sanchez. This is tape two of my interview with Nephtalí De Leon in San Antonio, Texas, on October 18th, 2013. And we had left off talking about – *que es lo que estabamos hablando? "What is it we were talking about?"*

ND:

Estabamos hablando de la, *le gente que an tenidos influencia sobre me vida, y lo ultima cosa que Agustine.*"We were talking about the people that have had an influence upon my life. And the last thing was Augustine."

DS:

Medina and that little think tank y'all had.

ND:

Yes, and I would love to see a statue of him, and another statue of Bidal Agüero. In other words, we cannot become a people unless we have real reflections of ourselves. Authentic reflections, not made up reflections, not invented reflections, not dreamed up reflections, but obviously the real thing, *la neta – lo que deberas as susedido en el Pueblo. La gente que deberas ah exisido. La gente que humildaminte se vuelven gigantes. The whole truth – what has really happened in the Pueblo, the people who have really existed, the people who humbly became giants.* Those that never intended to be anything became something through their actions. Those are the important people in our community. And our *pueblo*, "People" is very good about acknowledging and recognizing that. Selena [Selena Quintanilla-Perez (1971-1995)] is a perfect example. She struggles as a little girl and they're very poor, all of them. Yet with time, she was so good, so excellent, she just floated to the surface. Of course, I think she's a perfect metaphor, too, about what happens to us, very often. We die too young. Our dreams never reach the total potential that they could have. Cesar Chavez died too young. "Corky" Gonzales dies too young. So many of our great happenings, intense doings, actions, activities, reflections, they don't get to flower because they're interrupted too young. Including, perhaps, what we have all been about as a movement, as a reflection of art, poetry, music, all these wonderful things. We need to have a true reflection of who started it, who got us that road. In Lubbock, Augustine Medina. There will be others in other cities. They need to be the ones to say who, and they need to create their own reflections. In Lubbock, Bidal Agüero, I think that those are two powerful people that cannot and should not be ignored. They were and have been our infrastructure for Lubbock and West Texas.

DS:

You know, and you mentioned something there about the attainment. You know, and there's a word that's used in all these things because it's just part of what it is about, and it's *la esperanza*, "hope" and I'm wondering, so what's it going to take to go from *la esperanza* to fulfillment?

ND:

I think more activity, more of the same, more persistence, *no agüitarnos*, *not getting down*, not giving up. I don't think we will. But what does happen—we have to pass the mantel on to another generation, which is nature itself. The elders, we will die and disappear. Hopefully some of what we have created and done will not die or disappear. We physically will, but hopefully we will pass the mantle, the changing of the staff, of the flag, on to another generation, and we are seeing it happen now. Our generation is dying. I have lost most of my contemporaries, my colleagues. I have lost most of them. My poet friends, I miss them dearly, Carlos Sanchez, Abelardo Delgado, Jose Montoya, Ramon "de Tigre" Paris, "Corky" Gonzales, Jose Antonio Burciaga, Jose Montoya, I mean Jose Montalvo, from here, from San Antonio, and Jose Montoya from Sacramento, California. So some of our giants, our great people, writers, creators, have passed away. But then great new ones are springing up. San Antonio is in incredible turmoil of poets and activities here in San Antonio. We have tremendous, wonderful poets here in the city of San Antonio, and they are coming up in other cities throughout the whole nation, as a matter of fact. Something wonderful has happened. I remember the times when here, in San Antonio, and other places also, throughout the whole country, there were so few of us that we would be floated around the entire country because we were the poets—Chicano poets of America. So they would just be pulling us and taking us and exchanging us in so many cities in America. Now, there's a great number of poets almost everywhere, which is pretty fantastic. So that is a big, tremendous, powerful change. I have seen that, so in that since, a lot of good has already occurred.

DS:

And amongst those new poets, is there a couple of shining stars that you can see?

ND:

Surely. There's people like Anthony the poet here, in San Antonio, Texas. A new one that I met recently, Juan Antonio Mesa, tremendous slam poet. Out of El Paso, a girl that goes by the nickname of La RaNa, also [known as] Griselda [La RaNa] Muñoz. La RaNa, she's a tremendous, incredible poet out of El Paso, Texas. Mariposa out of *Edinburgo*, Texas. So we do have tremendous poets just rising out of—

DS:

What is it about their work that makes them, you know, stand out?

ND:

Authenticity, power of delivery, focus on who and what we are, their ability to deal with language, and also their code-switching abilities and their powerful delivery as persons, as poets, as vocal performers. So their combination is just awesome, of some of these people.

DS:

So do you like or not like people that use both languages, or three languages at once to convey a message?

ND:

Oh, the more the merrier, of course. Yes, yes. There is a fantastic ability that some people have, and not necessarily just poets but just people in general, to code-switch in such a way that they carry the conversation completely, in a fully understandable way, in a fully communicable way, where there's no grammatical problems in either language. The code-switching is just natural, fantastic, awesome, containing reflections of both cultures in a very well, welded, beautiful manner, very harmonious manner that is totally possible.

DS:

Because I mean I'm thinking of things like, you know, here's somebody that used the word—you know, instead of saying sandal or *zapato*, "shoe" they'll say, like, *la chancla*, "thong" because everybody gets it that knows it. It's a totally different mood, a totally different thing, and you can't say it with any other word.

ND:

No, and it doesn't have the same meaning or significance or sound in English, you know. So yes, code-switching is just a powerful way for our people to communicate. And what's interesting, when we code-switch it's not just English and Spanish, it's very often English, Spanish, Aztec, occasionally which is often referred to Caló [see José Antonio Burciaga] But occasionally there is a gypsy word, *a una palabra gitana*, "a gypsy word" like, say, *vaisa*, "hand", *chavalo*, "lad", *chavala*, "girl" those are gypsy words, so we have a wonderful mixture of fantastic languages.

DS:

Do you use that?

ND:

Yeah, *vaisa*, *cora*—, *corazone* "heart", *vaisa*, *tandito*, hat, *calcos*, shoes, *trajo*, *cigarro*, "cigar" *trola*, match So we do all kinds of words.

DS:

And, you know, you use your speech and also, you know, your handicraft behind you, in the artwork. Are we were talking, earlier before the interview, about how you didn't want to draw the *Virgen*. Tell us how you came upon the idea that's behind you.

ND:

Well, it's almost like we have so few—have had—things are changing—we have had such few reflections of our true quest for identity, for a people that we are, something that encompasses the union and sometimes conflict of two cultures—the American culture, the Mexican culture, the use of English, the use of Spanish, along with the earlier, older, native use of language, such as the Aztec Nahuatl language that we've been talking about – *la Virgencita*. *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, she was so named by the Spaniards. Our native people had, in the same location, in the same place, their own virgin whom they called *Tonantzin* which means "Our Little Mother." *To* [=] our, *nan* [=] nana, *nantzin*, mother, from there we get our word *nana*. *Tata-tatzin*, we get *tata*, father. So *nana*, *nantzin*, mother, little mother—every time there's a -*tzin* it means love, endearment, *cariño*, *nana*, mother, *natzin*, *mamacita*, *tata*, father, *tatzin*, *papacito*, so there's a difference. And *to* is "our". So, *Tonantzin*, [=] "Our Little Mother." Just like the word *tocayo* "namesake". *Tocayo* it means—why do people say two *Pedros*, "buts" they're called *tocayos*. *Pedro*, *Pedro*, they're *tocayos*. *Carlos*, *Carlos*, they're *tocayos*. It means "our name." *To* [=] our, *caitl* [=] word for name. So it means "our name." And from there we get the word *tocayo*. Originally, five-hundred years ago it was *tocaitl*, but it became *tocayo*. So we're *tocayos* because it's our name we have together. So—

DS:

That's a word that I've used, I've heard, and now I know how we got it.

ND:

That's how we got it. We speak a lot of Aztec but we're not aware of it. I once mentioned to a friend—we were talking about tamales—and in some other word, meat came up, and I said, "Yeah, *nacatl*." He said, "What?" "Nacatl." "What's that?" "Meat in Aztec word." And he says, "Oh, no wonder. In Nicaragua, we used to call our tamales *nacatamale*, a meat tamale." He says, "I never knew why we called them *nacatamale*, but in Nicaragua we called them *nacatamale*. It's a meat tamale. *Nacatl* is an Aztec word for meat."

DS:

Wow.

ND:

(Laughs) So yeah, it's a meat tamale.

DS:

Isn't that powerful?

ND:

Yeah, it's powerful. It's magic.

DS:

It reaffirms what you know, you know.

ND:

Yes.

DS:

A few thousand miles just South.

ND:

Exactly. It's totally amazing. Language is totally amazing. But anyway, we were talking about this image, *Tonantzin*. So the origin of a virgin is really a native Indian origin. Her name was Tonantzin, Our Little Mother. So her significance is way beyond the significance of most saints, of most *virgencitas*, "virgins" in this sense. The time she appears, 1532, ten years after the destruction, not the conquest, but the destruction—see here's another problem. We often talk about conquests. We repeat the words of the empire. We are considered a colony. We repeat the words of the empire, conquest. Nobody was ever conquered, not in Mexico, not here. There was destruction, there was occupation. There was occupation here, but never a conquest, not over there, not over here. To be conquered is to have no memory. To be conquered is to be molded and made into whatever the conqueror wants out of you. That has never happened, not over there, not over here. We still resist. We have a sense of identity. We know who we are. We have not been molded into something that we don't want to be. We retain our identity. We have never been conquered. Occupied, destroyed, hurt, genocided, yes. Conquered, never. We'd rather die than be conquered. We'd rather be dead than be conquered. That's it. But at any rate, so she appears to *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, later name Juan Diego [1474-1548] by the Spaniards. His original name was *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, which means, "He who speaks like an eagle." *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, he who speaks like an eagle. So *Tonantzin* appears to be who speaks like an eagle, ten years after the destruction of Tenochtitlan, and what was happening at the time, our people were so despondent, so unhappy, so distressed, so hurt, so destroyed by a people—I mean the people in Tenochtitlan—that they had no more reason to live. Their gods, their beliefs, their way of life, their world was totally destroyed. They wanted to die, like I said earlier. "We'd rather be dead than somebody else, than to become somebody else." They wanted to die. If they had a cold they would die. *Se clavan una espina, se muerían* "if they pricked themselves with a splinter, they would die" They literally wanted to die. They were seeking ways to die and just forget about it

all. We were in danger of total disappearance from the face of the earth. If they had died we would not be here. So precisely the time when the people had lost all hope and desire to live, *Tonantzin* appears on [Spanish] Hill [Tepeyac Hill] to *Cuauhtlatotzin*, and she says, “Am I not the one who’s here to protect you? Have I not always loved you? Have I not always protected you? If you build me a temple on that hill over there, I will protect you forever and love you forever.” And so he takes the message to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, and Bishop Juan de Zumárraga does not believe him. Nobody believes him. So he has to do this about three times, and he goes back to *Tonantzin* and tells her, “Little Mother, they didn’t believe me. Nobody believes me. Why did you choose me? I mean, choose somebody else.” But at any rate, she says, “It is you that I want to take this message,” so she gives him the sign of the roses. So when he gets to Bishop Zumárraga and he undoes his – what do they call it. Well I’ll remember in a minute – opens it, and the roses fall out, and there is the image of *Tonantzin*, and that’s how we get the whole legend and story. But the significance of it is, it was she who gave our people faith, hope, belief, backing ourselves as a community, as a people. After that appearance and after that promise that I will love you and protect you forever, our people began to flower again, and we came back into the world, into the civilization. And that’s how our community survived as a community, through her and because of her. That’s in the old-time legends. So now we come back to the Twenty-First Century with our experience—Mexican-American experience. And incidentally, her promise was unconditional love. “I will love you because you’re my people, just love me, protect me, build me a temple and I will love you and protect you and encourage and save you and keep you, *et cetera*, and shield you.” This image, *La Virgen de Guadaliberty*, a big change from *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. She represents now a different kind of love, which is an affirmative love. Affirmative, laws. The book actually—the Statue of Liberty carries books of laws in her left arm, in the real statue. There are books of laws that represent promises of justice laws—the rule of law, literally. And, of course, the light to shine forever—hope, *la esperanza*, that you mentioned. “But now,” she says, “now there’s no longer unconditional love. This is affirmative love. I will love you, *mis hijos*, “my children” but you need to stand up for your dignity. You need to defend your rights. You need to use the law and guide yourself. Stand up for who you are. Defend your rights. Affirm yourself.” So now she represents affirmative love as opposed to unconditional love, so that’s the big change—the radical change here. This particular real image here has been in I don’t know how many marches and I don’t know how many cities. That’s why it’s weather-beaten. It’s almost like a battle casualty. It’s torn here, *manchas*, “spots” here. It’s been under the rain, weather, blah, blah, blah. So now people tell me, Nephtalí, now we know. We understand why we’re Mexican-American. This is a Mexican-American image, the American Statue of Liberty, the Mexican *Virgen*, and that’s how it came about. And this is what I wanted to create, something that would reflect our dual experience, that would reflect the dual conflicts that we have, that would reflect our need, our struggle, our search, our quest, for fitting between, and being that bridge between two opposing cultures, two opposing ways of life, and this is what she now represents, *La Virgen de Guadaliberty*, It’s come out in many, many

books, it's been published in many ways, in many prints. It's sold in prints, in t-shirts, in flags, in all kinds of ways.

DS:

You know, when something makes a radical change like that, in meaning and so forth, and when you change an iconic image like a *Virgen* did you meet resistance?

ND:

Only one little, old lady in Lubbock, Texas. Only one in all these years, in Lubbock, Texas. *Aye mijito eso no. Eso no esta Bueno mijito. Todo esta bien mi gusta todo, pero esa unión haci como la pintantes no.* "Oh mijito not that. That is not good mijito. All is good. But that union - as you painted it - no." She was the only one person. My reaction to her—

DS:

I'm surprised, you know, because you would think something that in-your-face, and somebody that—so I guess people get it.

ND:

And it's been used in churches, by priests, around priests, with priests, with ministers, out in society, everywhere. So it's accepted everywhere, except this one little lady. And my reaction to her, "Well, *esta bien señora*. "that's okay ma'am" I see *tambien*, "also". "because, you know, what else could I do given her age. And she had the right to reflect her opinion. And since it was only one time, I accepted it as gracefully as I could, and agreed with her.

DS:

Oh wow. That's one iconic image of you, that's behind you. I mean, you can't look at that and not think of you. How does that make you feel to know that—

ND:

It makes me feel very, very wonderful, very, very accomplished, because I have actually been told, "Wow, you are the one who painted that? I've seen it in classes, I've seen it in books, but I never knew the painter. I never met you." And so people tell me that, and/or many teachers or people say, "You know what? I use that in my classroom. And you know what? I put that on the door of my classroom. You know what? I have it in my room, in my house." Some will actually wear it and say, "Look, look, Nephtalí. I'm wearing your image." So I feel very, very honored, more than anything else that I was allowed to do this by the great spirits. Somebody guided me to do this.

DS:

And this is kind of a tangent maybe, to what you were talking about, in the struggle to stay a people, you know, all is lost. I was talking to somebody who talked—that within their own family, they discuss about how the Native Americans, the *Indios*, “Indians” they didn’t disappear when they were being killed off in Texas. They became Mexicans. A lot of them, that’s what they did. They realized the Mexican had it bad, but at least they weren’t being killed, at least at that time, so a lot of them just moved in and became *Mexicanos*.

ND:

We’ve had to play so many roles of being so many different peoples. Some will call themselves Italians, or something else. Some that are very light, “Oh, I’m German, or I’m Spanish, I’m French.” We’ve had to play so many roles to survive. Is that supposed to be dark or not? Is there supposed to be an image there?

DS:

Did it just go off?

ND:

I was—I’ve been noticing for a while that it was dark.

DS:

Oh, really?

ND:

Um-hm.

DS:

Well that means it stopped recording. Ah!

ND:

It was not on? Maybe?

DS:

I think the battery might have died. How long ago did—good thing we get that running.

ND:

I don’t really know. [Laughs] I meant to ask you earlier, but I just thought, Maybe it just goes dark sometimes.

DS:

Well I'm glad you did. We probably missed some of the more important stuff you said.

ND:

I guess. I don't—yeah, yeah.

DS:

Well we have it on tape so I'm not going to try to recreate it because we have it on that right there.

ND:

Oh, okay.

DS:

We have one. [electronic ding] That's what it was. It was the battery that had already died. We were seventeen minutes into it *cuando se paró* "when it stopped." What does that counter say over there?

ND:

One thirty-five.

DS:

One thirty-five. So that means we probably lost about twenty minutes. Well, we'll just pick up where we're at and just re-cap a little. [Electronic ding] *Que lastima*, "What a pity". *Que lastima* [Laughter]

ND:

One of those things.

DS:

Lo que estamos hacer, "What we need to do is" we'll need to talk about that image again. Can you just, you know—feel free to restate everything you just said about the image and how it came about.

ND:

[Laughs] *Si*. But you have it here.

DS:

I do, but just kind of like a slight recap. We can get it on here.

ND:

Sure, sure. Well basically, what it was, we talked earlier about what does it represent. Well, pretty much it represents a radical change from the original and traditional *Virgen de Guadalupe*, and that she came up at the time when our community, the Aztec community, had been so destroyed, was so despondent, so hurt, that they were willing to die—they wanted to die—they were seeking ways to die. They would trip on a stone, they would fall, and try to die from that fall. They would cut a finger, they would try to die. Stick a sticker, *Una espina de nopal* “a needle from a prickly pear cactus” because their religion, their spirit, their gods, their houses, their homes, their way of life, their families, they were so destroyed, they no longer wanted to live as a people or here on the earth. And *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, named so by the Spaniards, originally known and named La Virgin—Tonantzin, “Our Little Mother”, by our ancient people, she appears ten years after this destruction to *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, who was later baptized Juan Diego, but even the Pope today recognized that his real name was *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, and now they call him *Cuauhtlatoatzin*, who has been incidentally made into a saint, as you know—an official saint of the church. Juan Diego, *Cuauhtlatoatzin*. She appears to him and tells him, “*Mijito*, “My son” if you build me a temple over there, I will protect you, I will love you. Have I not always been here for you? Have I not been true to you and have I not protected you and loved you?” Because she had been appearing there for ages and ages. Everybody, the Indian people, knew that that’s where *Tonantzin* would be. They would go and pay homage and tribute to her there. So he goes back to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga and tells him of the apparition. They don’t believe him. He has to do this several times and goes back to *Tonantzin* and tells her, “Little Mother, they don’t believe me. Give me a sign.” That’s when she tells him to take some roses and he takes them in his *tilma* [or *tilmàtli*, outer garment worn by Aztec men]—and he opens it and there is the image of *Tonantzin*. She appears at the time just to give another reason to live, and now she was a new hope, the new *esperanza*, the new—something to impel them—the new cause for them to survive and live, the new force and strength and energy for our community so they’re able to survive. But that’s that legend of that time, and that appearance. Today, nowadays, we have a different cause and reason. Her love was totally unconditional. “*Mis hijitos*, “My little children” I will love you. I will care for you. I will protect you.” This one, this image of *La Virgen de Guadaliberty*, as opposed to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, is now a radical change in terms of attitude of *La Virgen* to her people, to us. She says, “I will protect you. I will love you, but affirm yourself. Fight for yourselves. Stand up for your rights. Use the book of laws in your left arm and the glory and light and direction of new hope with the torch. Now the torch *nopals* “prickly pear cactus” on fire coming out of the torch, as opposed to just a regular torch, because this is a native virgin. So this is affirmative love as opposed to unconditional love of the traditional *Virgen de Guadalupe*. This is why now she is *La Virgen de Guadaliberty*. With this image, which has become very, very popular, people have told me, because this particular image has been in I don’t know how many marches throughout the country—this actual real canvas. People tell me, “Nephtalí, now we know why we are Mexican-Americans. This is a Mexican-American reflection and it joins the experiences in this side of America, in the United States, and

the icon of Mexico, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, welded together to reflect our two different experiences, of the American culture and the Mexican culture often in contrast and contradiction—in conflict—but now in a harmonious image that unites both in a positive way, seeking justice for all.

DS:

So what do you feel about your part in creating something that, you know, helps lift a people again? We talked about how that original person behind the message was—when they were about to give it all up. Centuries later we needed something to—sparks people's imaginations again to get them going forward.

ND:

I am hoping it has done that, Daniel, because many people have told me, "You know, I use this in my classroom." "You know, I have this in my home." And it has been published in many books on a world-wide scale, and people tell me, "You know, I've never met you! I've seen the image, I loved it, I used it, but now I'm so happy to meet you." So I feel very, very blessed, very, very happy, that I was allowed to do this, that somehow the spirits helped me, guided me, to do this type of creation.

DS:

Well I know we've been going for almost an hour and a half, right? A little bit over. Is there anything that we haven't covered tonight that you think is important that we need to talk about?

ND:

You've pretty much asked me and covered a lot of ground, but basically my real true hope is that we begin to see ourselves as the different nation that we are, as the unique, sovereign, autonomous nation that we are, which is this nation of Aztlan. And my real, true hope is that someday we will have our own ambassador in the United Nations, representing the nation of Aztlan, speaking for and on behalf of, and being a representative for us as a people and looking out for our interests, because neither the Mexican government nor the American government that wants to deport us, nor the Mexican government that doesn't even want to recognize us, will be our advocate. So we need the true advocates of our own particular people, nation, history, culture that we are—different from Mexico, part of Mexico, an extension of Mexico, but not Mexico and certainly very different from the United States—part of the United States, and in the United States, but certainly not the United States, not when a nation wants to deport us, and not when another nation is not coming to our defense. If we are the people of Mexico, they would already be advocating for us and defending us and screaming up to high heaven and sending delegates to the United Nations and delegates to the President of the United States, saying, "Stop this inhumane treatment. Stop these criminal actions against the Mexican people in the United States—the *Mechica* people that we are, the Chicano people in the United States." So no country,

no government, will defend us, protect us, shelter us, or advocate for us. Not the United States, not Mexico, so we have to do it ourselves and for our own, and for that, we need to realize that we are a nation, that we are a different people, and that we need our own representative in the United Nations, our own ambassadors at the United Nations, our own flag, our own education, our own institutions, our own government, and hopefully that's what someday we will have.

DS:

Okay. Thank you, Nephtalí .

ND:

Thank you very much, Daniel. *Gracias*, "Thank you".

DS:

Gracias.

End of Interview

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