
The Self-Making, Worlding Processes of Contemporary Zapotec Literature

© Anna M. Brígido-Corachán

University of Valencia

Abstract: This essay considers the main features and status of contemporary Zapotec literature, an “ultramino” Indigenous literature in southern Mexico. Tracing its modern emergence through 20th century literary circuits that were preeminently local and politically-rooted, Zapotec literature has taken what Laachir et al. describe as a “ground-up and located approach” to literary production and circulation—one that clashes against the globalizing, capitalist, Western-centric relations prevalent in the field of World Literature. Shaping g/local readers and raising cultural and linguistic awareness, Zapotec authors write in their linguistic variant and self-translate their work and worldviews into Spanish—a major Western language with a strong colonialist legacy and presence in the field of World Literature. Although they translate their work as a form of authorial validation within the nation, they primarily seek to nurture autochthonous forms of expression and circulation that are key in Indigenous-led cultural revitalization processes in their territory. As examples of literary worlding, I engage two contemporary Zapotec texts: Víctor de la Cruz’s seminal anthology of Zapotec literature *Guie’ sti’ diidxazá/ La flor de la palabra* and Natalia Toledo’s poem “Ni guicaa T. S. Eliot / A T. S. Eliot,” published in her bilingual collection *Guie’ yaase’/Olivo negro*.

Keywords: Zapotec Literature, Indigenous literatures, World Literature, Víctor de la Cruz, Natalia Toledo, readership, cultural revitalization

CLC: I1 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2023)02-0039-19

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202302004

This essay considers the main features and status of contemporary Zapotec literature, an “ultramino” Indigenous literature in southern Mexico. Tracing its modern emergence through 20th century literary circuits that were preeminently local and politically-rooted, Zapotec literature has taken what Karima Laachir, et al. describe as a “ground-up and located approach” to literary production and circulation—one that clashes against the globalizing, capitalist, Western-centric

relations prevalent in the field of World Literature (1). Shaping g/local readers and raising cultural and linguistic awareness, Zapotec authors write in their linguistic variant and self-translate their work and worldviews into Spanish—a major Western language with a strong colonialist legacy and presence in the field of World Literature. Although they translate their work as a form of authorial validation within the nation (Chacón xii), they primarily seek to nurture autochthonous forms of expression and circulation that are key in Indigenous-led cultural revitalization processes in their territory. As examples of literary worlding, I engage two contemporary Zapotec texts: Víctor de la Cruz's seminal anthology of Zapotec literature *Guie' sti' diidxazá/La flor de la palabra* (*The Flower of the Word*) and Natalia Toledo's poem "Ni guicaa T. S. Eliot/A T. S. Eliot," published in her bilingual collection *Guie' yaase'/Olivo negro* (*The Black Flower*).

Engaging Indigenous-language Literatures: Context and Challenges

As a Spanish scholar that barely speaks the Zapotec language (other than some introductory lessons taken in Mexico City's Writers in Indigenous Languages' [ELIAC] cultural center and follow-up work through grammars and dictionaries), I must begin this study by acknowledging the challenges of cultural and geographical distance and the critical gaps and shortcomings that may ensue as a result. The analyses carried out in this article are based on my own close reading of the Spanish translations, which are produced and shared by Indigenous authors in their bilingual editions. Lacking a deep knowledge of the Indigenous language that is the primary vehicle for self-expression in these texts is a big handicap for non-Indigenous scholars which complicates our critical work. The importance of reading in the original language rather than in translation has been largely discussed by many scholars in the field of World Literature and it is not my intention here to take on that digressive path. It is important to note, though, that the Spanish versions of the texts have also been penned by these same (bilingual) Indigenous writers and they are also an expression of their cultural, poetic, and symbolic world. To address and fill some of the gaps in my analysis, I draw key ideas from contextual sources penned by Indigenous and local scholars and consciously avoid the colonialist imposition of Western concepts and literary expectations over their works. I keep the field of World Literature as a separate framework and only refer to it when/if engaged by these writers in a critical manner. To reach more in-depth conclusions, further work on the Indigenous-language versions of the texts would be required.

My understanding of the term *worlding* comes from the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, who argued that all literary texts are worldly, that is, they are "situated in the world, and about that world" (*Reflections* 375). Literary texts are "events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (*World* 4). Literary texts have a worlding, self-making capacity that has an effect on realities, traditions, and environments. As Pheng Cheah points out, literature is an "active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of processes

of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes” (2). When Zapotec writers engage the “world” beyond Oaxaca, and they often do, it is with the purpose of learning from these cultural exchanges and to critically intervene in national/global debates that have shaped and continue to shape their experiences and cultures.

Zapotecs originate in the region of Oaxaca, Mexico, but Zapotec communities can be found today in many areas of Mexico and also in the United States. Zapotec is one of 68 Indigenous linguistic groups in Mexico (the third most spoken) and there are 490,845 speakers of Zapotec over 3 years old, according to the 2020 Census (Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas).¹ In this revisionist study, I mostly refer to the literary production of the Binnizá, that is, Zapotec communities who live in Oaxaca’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec, by the Pacific Ocean, with the town of Juchitán playing a key role as a center for cultural and linguistic revitalization since the late 19th century. Binnizá communities speak a Zapotec linguistic variant called diidxazá² and refer to themselves as “people of the clouds.” They translate diidxazá as “cloud language” (diidxa-means tongue while zá is commonly translated as cloud).³ Zapotec poet Natalia Toledo describes this more-than-human, place-based connection in the following manner:

Zapotecs say that the diidxazá language descends from the clouds. . . . I can say that part of my identity comes from the clouds. I like that metaphor because clouds adapt to the soft and warm winds of Tehuantepec, but also morph under the brown winds that shake us in the winter. We are certainly changing beings; clouds go by and other clouds are formed. (qtd. in González 145; my trans.)

Although this study delves mostly into the literary practice of the Binnizá, I also briefly allude to the textual creations of the Bene dilla xhon, the Zapotec communities of Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte, who speak a different linguistic variant of Zapotec (one that is barely intelligible to Zapotec Isthmus speakers). Both Zapotec cultural areas—the Northern Sierra and the Pacific Coast—present a growing body of literary work in their linguistic variants. Their authors have significantly contributed to the regional, national, and global reimagining of Zapotec literature as a literary tradition that is now well-known and “valued” in many places around the world.

Although many Indigenous-language writers in Mexico have ties to governmental institutions such as the Dirección General de Culturas Populares (General Office for Popular Cultures) or the Fondo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes (National Foundation of Culture and the Arts, FONCA),⁴ the burst of cultural awakening that took place in Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s must be linked to the ongoing wave of protests and political awakening that took place around the controversial quincentenary “celebrations” of the colonial invasion of the American continent in 1992 (Montemayor 11). The linguistic revitalization launched by contemporary Indigenous-language writers was tightly connected to the political anti-colonial vindications voiced by other local, national, and continental Indigenous associations and agents fighting for the right to the land, justice, equality, and bilingual education.

In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, however, these grassroots movements have to be traced back to at least the 1930s, when the Sociedad Nueva de Estudiantes Juchitecos (New Society of Juchitan Writers) published their newspaper *Neza* in diidxazá. The *Neza* generation included relevant intellectuals of regional and national “prestige” such as Andrés Henestrosa, Gabriel López Chiñas, Nazario Chacón Pineda, and Pancho Nácar—many of whom sought to revitalize Zapotec culture and literary expression from their new home base in Mexico City (de la Cruz, *Guie’* 45). The literary and linguistic efforts of this pioneering generation were continued and amplified by a new group of writers who launched a renewed literary journal *Guchachi’ reza* (*Iguana Rajada*) in the 1970s. Stirred by the local political accomplishments of the Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI), a grassroots, leftist, Indigenous-based political party that won several municipal elections at the time, the writers and intellectuals that emerged at this time consolidated a standardized alphabet for the didxazá variant opening the door to new generations of writers and cultural activists.⁵

Nahuatl intellectual and poet Natalio Hernández points out that the writers in Indigenous languages emerging in Mexico in the 1990s were a generation built out of “iniciativas personales” (“personal initiatives”) with little institutional support (159). In 1993, a year after the quincentenary protests, many of these writers from several regions in Mexico founded a national association Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas, Asociación Civil (Writers in Indigenous Languages, ELIAC). Their cultural center, Casa de los Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas (House of Writers in Indigenous Languages), was created three years later in Mexico City. Despite the occasional funds they receive from Mexico’s institutions, we could say that most Indigenous-language writers are situated outside the neoliberal, commercial schemes constraining literary production and readership in the West. Their main aim is not the profit and authorial recognition they may receive from awards and book sales but cultural and linguistic revitalization in their communities of origin. In parallel to their writing activities, most writers often work as cultural activists, teachers, translators, or civil servants in cultural and academic institutions in Mexico City or in their homelands.⁶ Together with other writers and activists in ELIAC, we could say that Zapotec writers have been carving an independent literary tradition, from the bottom up, since the 1980s.

Zapotec Literature before World Literature: Victor de la Cruz’s *Guie’ sti’ diidxazá/La flor de la palabra*

In 1993, a year after the massive Indigenous protests against colonialism and its legacy in the Americas, Zapotec scholar, poet, and translator Víctor de la Cruz posed the following plight: “The idea that indigenous peoples have history is now a scandal. It would appear that with this *recognition*, their past might come out of the shadowy and mysterious regions of fable . . . until it reaches the illuminating light of historical science” (“Indigenous” 29; my emphasis). De la Cruz also ponders on a second, ensuing dilemma: would not this “recognition” bring more “risks and

challenges for the poor indigenous people of America” if it forces them to “enter the channel of universal history, where civilized nations march within the rapid and irreversible currents of progress” (29)?

What happens when Indigenous people’s history, or their literature (our primary concern in this essay) has to “march within the rapid and irreversible currents of progress,” when it has a need to be recognized and validated through Western protocols and by Western institutions? Can a written literary tradition be forged outside of the hierarchical, racist “channels” and “capitalist commercial circuits” (de la Cruz’s terms; “Indigenous” 29, 32) provided by Western institutions and literary histories? Can it escape and/or bend hegemonic publics and reader expectations to its own autochthonous designs? The history of Zapotec literature has been a constant struggle against these questions because the origins of modern Zapotec literary production cannot be easily disentangled from colonial processes, forces, and agents.

Zapotec is actually one of the oldest literatures in the Americas. Zapotec hieroglyphic writing has existed since, at least, the seventh century before the Contemporary Era and its use and development was most likely fostered by the ruling groups as a power tool.⁷ Around 400CE the Zapotec city of Monte Alban had a population of 5,000 people and their leaders and relevant figures were often represented as enigmatic dancers in glyph form on stone tablets (Romero Frizzi 23). During the Post-classic period, the last five centuries of flourishing precolonial culture in the area, Zapotec communities also used phonetic and iconographic writing systems, with this latter form of writing being favored, as it was more easily read and understood by different language speakers (31). Mesoamerican writing was usually preserved on animal-skin parchment, murals, and stones, but no precolonial Zapotec codices managed to outlive the blinded destruction of the Spanish conquerors.

When European invaders spread through the Americas, alphabetical writing quickly became “an instrument of conquest that altered the Mesoamerican world and brought it closer to the West” (33-34). According to historian Serge Gruzinski, Western forms of alphabetical writing radically changed Indigenous worldviews and expression as they colonized their imaginaries. But for Mexican scholar Miguel León Portilla, this intellectual and ideological colonization was never complete. In fact, León Portilla traces a continuous tradition in thought and content, written by Indigenous authors—one that survived and overarched from the precolonial to the early colonial texts.⁸

In the Introduction to his seminal literary anthology *Guie’ sti’ diidxazá/La flor de la palabra*, the first compilation of Zapotec texts through the ages, originally published in 1983, de la Cruz critically delves into these colonial volumes, aiming to identify and appraise the worldviews, writing technologies, and literary styles practiced by his ancestors. Key colonial sources for precolonial Zapotec culture include those written by Fray Juan of Córdova (who published a Zapotec grammar and vocabulary in the late 16th century) and Fray Francisco de Burgoa (author of a geographical relation) in the 17th century.⁹

De la Cruz’s original introduction to his 1983 anthology begins with an anticolonial move—

a brief historical section titled: “Who are the Barbarians?” which precedes his selection of literary texts. This brief account of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, highlighting its unspeakable brutality and ethnocentrism, situates the literature that follows in a colonialist context that has asymmetrically shaped Zapotec culture. Placed at the beginning of the book, this account of violent colonial erasure explains, for example, the lack of Indigenous documents to ground de la Cruz’s study, the sparse number of works composing his anthology of Zapotec literature.

Significantly, in a second “Estudio Introductorio,” (“Introductory Study”) published in the revised 2013 edition of *Guie’ sti’ diidxazá/La flor de la palabra*, de la Cruz slightly reframes this violent history by placing it as a secondary, rather than primary force, shaping Zapotec literature today. Rather than beginning his new, expanded study with “the barbarians,” he chooses to open the 2013 anthology with his ancestors, the binnigula’sa’, emphasizing, rather than undermining, their historical and literary legacy and, therefore, strengthening his own decolonial, Indigenous-based methodology: “Are these my words,” he asks himself and the reader, “or are these thoughts inherited from my ancestors that I express through borrowed words” (7).¹⁰

When tracing the cultural origins and autochthonous literary traditions of their people, Indigenous scholars have often drawn from historical and linguistic volumes compiled by Spanish colonial writers in a palimpsestic manner. Digging into Córdova’s and Burgoa’s texts, de la Cruz identifies some precolonial Zapotec genres and discusses their features and purpose. The ancient binnigula’sa’, ancestors of the Zapotec people, were able to linguistically distinguish the action of inventing or telling lies and that of the people’s words (or history). Córdova referred to these historical texts as “quíchi tijacolaca” or “papers with words by or about the old people” to differentiate them from those that contained exaggerated narrations or stories. Córdova also recorded many writing terms in his Vocabulary including Zapotec words for letter, reading, book, written book, or book with Indian figures, among others (de la Cruz, “Estudio Introductorio” 9).

In his *Geográfica Descripción*, Friar Francisco de Burgoa argued that the binnigula’sa’, ancestors of the Zapotec people, often “spoke in parables when they sought to persuade” and clearly had a “metaphorical” or figurative use of language (qtd. in de la Cruz, “Indigenous” 33). De Burgoa considered these literary uses “deceitful” and de la Cruz attributes this Eurocentric bias to the fact that the Spanish priest did most likely not understand them. For de la Cruz, these statements in the colonial text are clear evidence that the binnigula’sa’ had their own literary traditions and very specific literary genres that differed from those in Europe at the time (33).

Guie’ sti’ diidxazá addresses these colonial gaps by further identifying and mapping some of these autochthonous literary genres. De la Cruz unearths them from Córdova’s texts but also compares them to the Zapotec oral tradition as a form of Indigenous-based, scholarly validation. Prehispanic Zapotec genres included chants or song-poems and also fictional stories: tozaayatij, tónia tochijñoa, toçóquáaya (translated by de la Cruz as “composing from one’s head” or “fabrications,” as opposed to recording real facts that happened; “Estudio Introductorio” 9).¹¹ Together with these literary forms, de la Cruz also mentions religious non-fiction genres such as libanas/sermons (10). He includes three of these surviving libanas and also excerpts from a pre-

Hispanic creation poem in his anthology, which was first published in 1983 by a regional press linked to the Dirección General de Culturas Populares.

De la Cruz's original anthology took up 151 pages while his revised book, published three decades later, had already grown to 228, evincing the expansion of Zapotec literature and of Zapotec-led research on these works. New texts, genres, and authors, plus a more comprehensive bibliography and enlarged study were added in 2013. A main aim behind this anthology was perhaps validation and recognition by the nation's public sphere—one dictated by the literary structures and institutions dominant in Mexico at the time (in particular, the Dirección General de Culturas Populares, which funded the work). In fact, in his "Estudio Introductorio," de la Cruz feels impelled to further justify his compilation with the following statement:

But given that this is not an anthology pertaining to a language with a long written tradition, such as those of Greek, Spanish, or English literatures, of which we know who their creators were; I believe it necessary to make a non-literary introduction to formulate hypotheses and elaborate theories about my ancestors, the *binnigula'sa'* and the *binnizá* ethnicity, so that the reader can situate the authors of these texts. (7-8; my emphasis)¹²

Who is this reader addressed by de la Cruz? De la Cruz deploys a pedagogical and also a decolonial strategy in his argumentation: he first instructs us all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, on a tradition that has rarely been given attention in the scriptural sphere; he validates its importance as he problematizes the very Western concepts chosen to describe it. For example, later in the essay he manifests a desire to create a Binnizá literary theory—"a literary theory of their own through the literary genres in *diidxazá*, according to all available information"—and he refers to this autochthonous literary theory as an "Indigenous Zapotec Rhetorics" (26).¹³

In her book *Indigenous Cosmolectics. Kab'awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures*, Gloria E. Chacón argues that "genres with a different linguistic code" have always been used by Indigenous people in Mesoamerica (8). And de la Cruz names, describes, and historically grounds some of these genres, which include myths, poems, sermons, stories, fantastic narratives, novels, and jokes ("Estudio Introductorio" 29-38). Indigenous literary traditions challenge the rigid division between orality and literacy, modernity and tradition, Western and non-Western forms of expression. Colonial power made alphabetical writing the only authorized form of textuality in the Americas but, as Chacón points out, "appropriating the Latin alphabet to write in Indigenous languages increased [Indigenous writers'] political breadth, as such writing became an important medium of affirmation of cultural identity and the preservation of heritage" (10).

In de la Cruz's anthology, literary authority is established through his methodical decolonial intervention over the colonial texts that stole, manipulated, and yet preserved such concepts. He also shows how Zapotec writers used alphabetical writing as a decolonial tool to voice their histories, literary creations, and political concerns, turning the so-called peripheries into active

centers of cultural and linguistic revitalization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Arturo Arias points out that Indigenous intellectuals from Abiyala practice decoloniality as “an everyday living practice, not something learned rhetorically to achieve a finite theoretical goal” (22).¹⁴ De la Cruz identifies pre-Hispanic Indigenous concepts that have a manifest continuity in contemporary Zapotec culture to reconsider their literary traditions, processes, and methodologies but also to establish links between these literary forms and contemporary Zapotec cultural praxis. He examines and reframes his people’s autochthonous literary production in a critical, decolonial manner that aims to “disrupt, transgress, and traverse Western thinking” (Arias 22). De la Cruz questions the colonialist logic and thought that have always regarded Indigenous cultural production as perennially premodern—a product of folklore that does not deserve a place in national literary anthologies and, even less so, in anthologies of World Literature.¹⁵ His book established a robust foundation for a distinct Zapotec literary rhetorics—one that could ground Zapotec literary continuity in the future:

More than four hundred years of colonization have passed, and some years of radio and television, and *diidxazá* is still alive. They destroyed the writing that was being developed, but not all literature. Sermons and proverbs survived for four hundred years before other Zapotecs picked up the pen and the letters in the alphabet that was invented by Phoenicians to write again in *diidxazá*. Now *libana* and *diidxagola* are not alone. Neither are the *binnizá*. (“Estudio Introductorio” 48; my emphasis)

Contemporary Zapotec Literature: Worlding Strategies—Local Roots

For Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch, ultraminor literatures are “a radical version of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘minor literature’” for they are “produced by a small linguistic community very much based in a specific territory,” generally an island (135). In order to determine whether a body of literature can be considered minor or ultraminor (although the border between these is indeed fragile and ultimately depends on the classifying agent), Moberg and Damrosch use the following criteria: 1. The small number of speakers of the literary language in question; 2. Its literacy rates; 3. The amount and relevance of the publication and circulation channels available; 4. The “vitality of [its] oral tradition” (134). Ultraminor literatures are spatially limited to small regional or even local territories with reduced numbers of speakers and dialectal fragmentation. They are also constraint by time because we are talking about endangered languages that may disappear in a generation or two (143).

Describing a literature as “ultraminor” in the global literary sphere can be, however, considered a colonialist move within the field of World Literature since, as D’Hagen has suggested, such terms (minor/major/small/ultraminor) take as their vantage point a Western (and

specifically an Anglo) center, which is the one selecting, anthologizing, *minoring*, *ultraminoring* (7; For non-Mexican academics and readers, Zapotec literary texts may be regarded as ultraminor but Zapotec literature may qualify as minor and even major in a Mexican or trans-Indigenous context). Moreover, in a scale of literary and historical “worthiness,” we should also bear in mind that, in Mexico, we can find Indigenous cultural hierarchies. That is, some Indigenous languages and traditions have been historically privileged over others in the foundational narratives and imaginaries of the nation (this would be the case of the Aztec and Maya traditions).

Indeed, the distinction between major, minor, and ultraminor is often reduced to the matrix of the hosting nation, its institutional and cultural policies in relation to its own literary traditions, and what Djelal Kadir describes as its level of *self-awareness* (265), that is, how their practitioners choose to present themselves to others in the world. But although languages with large numbers of speakers and diasporic communities are generally considered “major,” consolidated by the power of numbers, they also depend on (what Pascale Casanova has called) their “index or measure of literary authority,” which is associated with a language’s international prestige (20).¹⁶

As we have seen in the previous sections, modern Indigenous literary traditions in Mexico were not “recognized” until the early 1990s, as the country prepared for the celebrations of the Columbian Quincentennial. At the time, Indigenous-language writers struggled to be recognized as authors and their textual production as “literature.” In Oaxaca, the titanic political, linguistic, and scholarly efforts of the *Guchachi’ Reza* generation led by de la Cruz in the 1970s and the 1980s opened the door to another group of writers who began to develop their craft at the turn of the century.

Key contemporary Binnizá writers in the 21st century include poets Natalia Toledo, Irma Pineda, or Víctor Terán and they are all relatively well-known in Mexico and abroad. With numerous translations of their poems and some of their books into English and other major and minor languages, these authors can often be seen in book fairs and festivals in Europe or giving lectures and poetry readings in Canadian and US-based associations and universities. They often disseminate their work through national literary venues such as *Ojarasca*, the literary supplement to the national newspaper *La Jornada*, or through *Nuni, granos de maíz* (the literary journal published by ELIAC). They also share their literary output with their communities of origin in Oaxaca’s libraries and cultural institutions, or in Juchitán’s municipal cultural center (lidxi guendabaaani/casa de la cultura), founded by internationally-acclaimed Zapotec painter and cultural promoter Francisco Toledo (father of Natalia Toledo). Their work can also be heard in community radios at the regional and national levels such as “La Flor de la Palabra” (“The Flower of the Word”) in Radio Educación (with broadcasts in Mexico’s Southeast) or “Las Plumas de la Serpiente” (“The Feathers of the Serpent”) later known as “De raíz luna” (“From the Root Moon”) in CONACULTA’s national TV Channel 22.

We should note that the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, homeland of the Binnizá, “has long been a crossroads of culture since it was a potential trade route between continents . . . the peoples there have been in contact with other cultures for centuries” (Sullivan, “‘I Am’” 202). However, rather

than nation, hemispheric or globally-bound literatures, Indigenous-language literatures emphasize the regional as a signifying territorial unit—one that is relational and open to other neighboring or distant literary practitioners while keeping a grounded focus on the local.

A revealing example of cultural contact and literary indigenization is the poem “Ni guicaa T. S. Eliot”/“A T. S. Eliot” (“To T. S. Eliot”) penned by Natalia Toledo. Straddled between Oaxaca and Mexico City (and a frequent participant in international literary events), Toledo has published several books of bilingual poetry and was granted the Nezahualcóyotl Award for Literature (Mexico’s Indigenous-languages’ Pulitzer Prize) in 2004 for her book *Guié Yaasé/Olivo Negro*. Toledo openly embraces literary ideas from a variety of cultures, including Spanish, and believes in the importance of creating new literary myths for the Binnizá out of classical texts from different traditions. As she poignantly states, “I don’t believe contemporary indigenous poetry has to give up absolutely anything, everything is a part of your life, everything influences you” (qtd. in Chacón 81).

Guié Yaasé/Olivo Negro tackles Zapotec traditional culture, Indigenous spirituality and the cosmos, gender issues, and childhood. Some poems are tinged with a certain veil of nostalgia but they also emphasize cultural strength and affirmation. In the bilingual poem “Ni guicaa T. S. Elliot,” the last piece in the volume, Toledo purposefully transgresses literary boundaries and reframes Zapotec literature within the context of World Literature. Drawing from T. S. Eliot’s mythical framework in *The Waste Land*, she divides the poems into two scenes or acts, wherein she examines the linguistic challenges faced by Zapotec communities in the 21st century. The first act uses mostly the past tense, but each line of verse is filled with land-based healing symbols that are grounded in tradition. Toledo’s poetic ecosystem includes human and more-than-human communities interconnecting in an organic and ceremonial manner. At the very end of the section, the past tense gives way to the present (what *are* the roots / what branches *grow out*) and extends into the future, as the poet wonders about the language that will be spoken by her children.

Ni guicaa T. S. Eliot

Ndaani’ batanaya’ gule jmá guie’ naxiñá’ rini
 ziula’ ne sicarú,
 qui zanda gusiaanda’ dxiibi guxhanécabe naa guirá ni gule niá’.
 Guzaya’ xadxí ne batanaya’
 bitiide’ guidilade’ ra dxá’ beñe
 ne ndaani’ guielua’ bidxá yuxi nuí.
 Gula’ quicabe láya’ Mudubina
 purti’ gule’ luguíá nisa.
 Guriá yaachi naxí gudó yaa’ ti beenda’ cayacaxiñi’ naa
 ne guca’ Tiresias biníte’ guielua’,
 qui niquiñe’ guni’ xhí’ ora guzaya’ stube ndaani’ ca dxí ma gusi.
 ¿Guná nga ni bisanané binniguenda laanu?, ¿xí yuxi guie

bisaananécabe laanu?

Ca xiiñe' zutiipica' diidxa' guní' jñiaaca' ne zazarendaca'
sica ti mani' ripapa ndaani' guí' xhi', ne guirutu zanna tu laaca'.

A T. S. Eliot

De mis manos crecieron flores rojas
largas y hermosas,
cómo olvidar el miedo con que fui despojada de toda certeza.
Caminé con las manos
y metí mi cuerpo donde había lodo
mis ojos se llenaron de arena fina.
Me llamaron la niña de los nenúfares
porque mi raíz era la superficie del agua.
Pero también fui mordida por una culebra apareándose en el estero
y quedé ciega, fui Tiresias que recorrió sin báculo su historia.
¿Cuáles son las raíces que prenden, qué ramas brotan de estos cascajos?
tal vez soy la última rama que hablará zapoteco
mis hijos tendrán que silbar su idioma
y serán aves sin casa en la jungla del olvido.

For T. S. Eliot

Red flowers, enormous and beautiful,
grew from my hands,
as if to ward off the fear of being robbed of all certainty.
I walked on my hands
and buried my body where there was mud
and my eyes filled with fine sand.
They called me the waterlily girl
because my roots were the water's surface.
But I was also bitten by a snake mating in the stream
and was blinded, I was Tiresias traveling his story without a cane.
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this strong rubbish?
maybe I'll be the last branch that speaks Zapotec
my children will have to whistle their language
and they'll be homeless birds in the jungle of forgetting.¹⁷

Inspired by T. S. Eliot's desperate attempt at meaning-making through literary intertexts from the declining Western culture, Toledo strategically inserts two well-known lines of verse from *The Waste Land* in the middle of her poem. This intertextual reference appears in a section

significantly titled by T. S. Eliot “The Burial of the Dead”:

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.* (Lines 19-24; my emphasis)

Like T. S. Eliot, Toledo reconsiders a culture on the verge of collapse and ponders on a deeply moving question: what holds a culture together, what roots, “what branches [can still] grow out of this stony rubbish?” The poem’s first section does not end, however, as a lament, but as a warning that activates commitment and responsibility towards one’s language and cultural knowledge. As Clare Sullivan argues: “[m]ore than a metaphor for the musical quality of Zapotec, the idea of whistling their language is a warning to both her community and the wider world of what will be lost with her native tongue” (“I Am” 199).

In the second part of the poem, Toledo continues to conjure up land-based metaphors that are reminiscent of her place of origin. She situates herself in Juchitán through dreams and memories that have the potential to conjure up tradition, presence, and futurity in such sites. She consciously switches to future tenses and active verbs to ground her decision: to invigorate Zapotec culture through a self in relation to her community and landscape.

Guirá beeu nuá’ neza guete’
balaaga riza lú nisa cá tini, ni rini’ xcaanda’ guielua’ pe’pe’ yaase’.
Zabigueta’ zigucaaxiee xquidxe’,
ziguyaa xtube xa’na’ ti baca’nda’ ziña,
chupa bladu’ guendaró ziaa’ zitagua’.
Zadide’ laaga’ neza luguiaa, ni bi yooxho’ qui zucueeza naa,
zindaaya’ ra nuu jñiaa biida’ ante guiruche guirá beleguí.
Zaca’ xti bieque xa badudxaapa’ huiini’
ni riba’ quicabe guie’ bacuá íque laga,
xa ba’du’ ruuna niidxi sti guie’
zabigueta’ xquidxe’ ziaa’ si gusianda’ guie lúá’.

En todas las estaciones estoy en el sur
barco herrumbrado que sueñan mis ojos de jicaco negro:
a oler mi tierra iré, a bailar un son bajo una enramada sin gente,
a comer dos cosas iré.
Cruzaré la plaza, el Norte no me detendrá,

llegaré a tiempo para abrazar a mi abuela antes que caiga la última estrella.
 Volveré a ser la niña que porta en su párpado derecho un pétalo amarillo,
 la niña que llora leche de flores
 a sanar mis ojos iré.

In all seasons I am in the south
 a rusted ship dreamed by my black jicaco eyes:
 when I smell my land I'll go, to dance a song alone beneath woven branches,
 to eat two things, I'll go.
 I'll cross the plaza, the North wind won't stop me, I'll get there on time
 to hug my grandmother before the last star falls.
 I'll be the girl again who wears a yellow petal in her right eyelid,
 the girl who cries the milk of flowers
 to cure my eyes, I'll go.¹⁸

Toledo addresses the tense geopolitical relations between the north and the south through symbols of emplaced resistance such as roots and flowers, the village square, or the grandmother (the repository of Zapotec language and culture in Juchitán's matriarchal culture). Against the sightlessness and forgetfulness of a Western culture in crisis, she permanently sees herself in the South, dancing the traditional song, eating, embracing her grandmother. Unlike Tiresias in Eliot's poem, she heals her blinded eyes with flower milk. She critically resignifies classical myths and World Literature to ground local culture.

As Moberg and Damrosch point out, ultraminor literatures often have to develop "survival strategies" to compensate for their shortcomings (135). And the most significant "survival strategy" launched by Indigenous-language authors in Mexico is to engage in acts of "self-translation" or "auto-traducción," where each text functions as a different "version" of the same story (Pineda). Indigenous-language writers translate their poems into the "major" colonial language, which functions as a kind of lingua franca to access national and global markets but also as a key channel of communication with speakers of different Zapotec linguistic variants and Indigenous languages in their multilingual region. According to Sullivan, who has translated many of Toledo's poems into the English language, in collaboration with the poet:

The intricacy of sound in the Zapotec language creates poetry that is complex and difficult to translate. One might say that sound itself is a character in each poem. This is because apart from syllabics (which it shares with poetry in Spanish) and metrical accentuation (which it shares with poetry in English), Zapotec also possesses vowels of two lengths and three tones. These characteristics contribute to a rich, musical poetry. In fact, audiences as far away as Thailand have been attracted to Toledo's poetry based on its sound alone. (208)

In *Guié Yaasé/Olivo Negro*, Toledo's self-translations into Spanish are strategically positioned after each Zapotec version. By highlighting this internal linguistic struggle that mirrors the violence of the acculturating process and its resistance, her bilingualism serves as a reminder that transculturation (one that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, cultural, epistemological) does not unfold as a harmonious encounter for these cultures. Minoritized languages are now fighting back with words as weapons. As Lila Bujaldón de Esteves et al. point out, by placing Indigenous languages first a "power turn" is activated to "defy cultural hegemony and make the tensions between minoritized and majority languages visible" (12). They are two dynamic versions of one double-edged story.¹⁹

Through their bilingual texts, Zapotec authors "engag[e] in notional or narrative acts of worlding" (Kadir 268), they become *worlding* agents or practitioners of literature—textually rebuilding their world through revised imaginaries and meaning-making forms. But contemporary Zapotec literature takes what Karima Laachir et al. have called "a 'ground-up' and located approach that seriously considers local production, circulation and theorization" above all else—thus questioning the periphery/center relations prevalent in the field of World Literature (3). Indigenous-language authors create new "self-legitimizing narratives" (Kadir 264) that aim to intervene in the g/local sphere but, most importantly, to ground their cultures and languages for the new generations of Zapotec speakers to come.

In that sense, Binnizá literature serves a variety of practical and emplaced "worlding" purposes which I will briefly unpack:

1. Because literary texts are key in processes of cultural and linguistic revitalization, they are used as key instruments to reinvigorate the diidxazá language, to incorporate borrowings and neologisms, to dynamize multilingual relations in their region in a decolonizing manner.

2. Indigenous-language literatures contribute to ongoing projects that seek to reinforce bilingual and multicultural education in their regions of origin, their texts become much needed materials to be used in and to reinforce the bilingual classroom.

3. Diidxazá-language texts contribute to strengthen Zapotec communities' "territorial integrity" (Friggieri's term; qtd. in Moberg and Damrosch 135), for they open an affirmative cultural space which, though fragile, aims to reinstall ethnic pride and futurity.

4. In their local, regional, national public spheres, Indigenous-language texts become decolonized platforms wherein to reflect on a variety of cultural and political affairs affecting Indigenous communities in Mexico. Indigenous-language literatures thus become cornerstones of what Leanne Simpson has described as Indigenous resurgence and survival; they "map a way out of colonial thinking by confirming Indigenous lifeways or alternative ways of being in the world" (279).

Stefan Helgesson argues that "[t]exts have a paradoxical capacity to constitute their own publics. These can be purely notional, restricted to just a handful of readers, or can accumulate and grow across time"—they can even create an audience "in the future" (1). There are differences,

however, between a public that is being addressed through the rhetoric of texts and one that is a “targeted public of circulation” —that is, a public defined by market interests (Warner 72). Sadly, as vividly expressed in Toledo’s poem, many Indigenous writers see themselves as the last generation of speakers in Native languages (Sullivan, “State” 45). Indeed, it is key to note that, despite the Mexican government’s seeming promotion of bilingual education and cultural revitalization through specific programs, Indigenous-language book series, or awards, there are very few Indigenous-language readers. In fact, “indigenous books are rarely found in indigenous households” (Faudree 21). Most Indigenous readers rely on the Spanish version of these bilingual texts, as they are unable to read across their own linguistic variants. Thus, 21st-century Zapotec writers are deeply aware that greater linguist efforts must be done to consolidate reading publics which can help preserve the language for future generations.

In his last years, de la Cruz showed a certain degree of pessimism regarding the future of Zapotec language and literature in some of his writings. But he also recognized the continuous energy and growing awareness of Indigenous communities towards their language and culture. For him, the 21st century has in fact brought some hope. The interethnic fights in countries of the former USSR and in Europe, together with Indigenous rebellions in Chiapas, Ecuador, or Bolivia can “make us think that perhaps the globalizing model that unifies cultures and languages is in crisis; perhaps it’s time to settle scores with the civilizing, colonialist, European model, time to open new perspectives for ethnic minorities and their forms of literary expression”²⁰ (“Reflexiones” 499). With their writing, Zapotec intellectuals and writers like de la Cruz and Toledo contribute to build new decolonial frameworks that rescue, reinsert, and reconfigure Indigenous-based epistemologies and methodologies that “supersede Western critical paradigms” (Arias 31). They appropriate and indigenize the Western tradition, but can also “integrat[e] Indigenous cultural categories to broader historical and cultural analyses” while “resignifying critical outcomes” (31).

Drawing from the work of Pheng Cheah, Helgesson describes world-making processes as a “a form of relation, belonging, or being-with” (8). Through their world-making impulses, Zapotec writings contribute to the creation of new *ground-up* critical locations within decolonized networks of cultural exchange. They seek to intervene in intellectual and political debates taking place in the *g/local* sphere, while supporting the specific political aims and epistemological vindications of their communities of origin.²¹

Notes

1. Detailed information on Mexico’s linguistic families and groups can be found at the site of the INALI, the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI) in Mexico. See Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas, “Catálogo de las Lenguas Indígenas Nacionales: Variantes Lingüísticas de México con sus autodenominaciones y referencias geoestadísticas” [“Catalog of National Indigenous Languages: Linguistic Variants of Mexico with Their Self-denominations and Geostatistical References”]. *Diario Oficial INALI*, 14 Jan. 2008. In 2003, Mexico approved its General Law on Linguistic Rights of Indigenous peoples. Revised in 2012, it granted Indigenous languages full official status in administration, education and legal affairs. It also

aimed to defend Indigenous communities' rights to a bilingual education.

2. The Zapotec language/alphabet is not fully standardized, depending on the language variant or the author, this spelling may change. I try to use *diidxazá* whenever possible. This is the spelling favored by de la Cruz and Toledo.
3. For a historical explanation of the term “zá,” see also Wilfrido C. Cruz, *Oaxaca Recóndita* (145), and de la Cruz, “Estudio Introductorio” (14).
4. Mexico's General Office for Popular Cultures (Dirección General de Culturas Populares) was founded in the late 1970s within the Ministry for Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) and hired many Indigenous language writers as cultural promoters and ethnolinguists. It is now known as Dirección General de Culturas Populares, Indígenas y Urbanas and their main aims are to support the historical memory, traditions, and cultural productions of Mexico's Afro-Indigenous population through studies, preservation efforts, publications, pedagogical actions, and dissemination. FONCA (National Foundation of Culture and the Arts) offers annual fellowships to Indigenous-language literary practitioners and publishes some of their work.
5. On the processes of literary self-awareness and strives for recognition of the *Neza* and *Guchachi Reza* generations through the 20th century see de la Cruz's *Guie' sti' diidxazá/La flor de la palabra*, Carlos Montemayor's *Los escritores indígenas actuales*, or Gloria Chacón's *Indigenous Cosmolectics. Kab'awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures*.
6. See Inés Hernández-Ávila, “The Power of Native Languages and the Performance of Indigenous Autonomy: The Case of México” (*Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*, edited by Richard A. Grounds, et al., UP of Kansas, pp. 35-74) for a more detailed history of ELIAC and their collective efforts to strengthen literary endeavors and linguistic resistance at a national and international level.
7. See Marcus Winter's *Monte Alban: Estudios recientes* (INAH, 1994) or Romero Frizzi's *Escritura Zapoteca* for more details on Zapotec writing's early history.
8. See Serge Gruzinski's canonical volume *La colonización del imaginario*, Miguel León Portilla's *El destino de la palabra* (52-55), and Romero Frizzi's discussion of this historical debate in the context of Zapotec writing (34-35).
9. De la Cruz describes the colonial texts written by Friars Córdova and de Burgoa as boring and lacking—having been composed merely with the purpose of colonizing and exploiting the Indigenous communities as a labor force (“Estudio Introductorio” 13). He uses these texts reluctantly because these are the only available documents from that earlier colonial period and finds no other option than “squeeze” these books as far as he can (14).
10. “Estas, mis palabras, ¿o son los pensamientos heredados de mis ancestros los que expreso a través de estas palabras prestadas” (this and all subsequent translations from de la Cruz's anthology are my own, unless otherwise noted).
11. In Spanish, “componer mentiras o poner de su cabeza o forjar” (de la Cruz, *Guie'* 9).
12. “Pero dado que no estamos ante una antología perteneciente a una lengua con una larga tradición escrita, como podría ser una antología de la literatura griega, española, o inglesa, de las cuales sabemos quiénes son sus creadores; creo que es necesario hacer esta introducción no muy literaria, establecer hipótesis y elaborar teorías sobre mis antepasados, los binnigula'sa' y la etnia binnizá para que el autor sepa ubicar a los autores de estos textos.” (7-8). This justification was not part of de la Cruz's original introduction in 1983.

13. “una teoría literaria propia a través de los géneros literarios in diidxazá, de acuerdo con la información disponible, a la cual podemos llamar retórica indígena zapoteca” (“Estudio Introductorio” 26).
14. Arias grounds his ideas on decoloniality as “an everyday living practice” in Claudia Zapata Silva’s book *Intelectuales indígenas en Ecuador, Bolivia y Chile: Diferencia, colonialismo y anticolonialismo*. Abiyala is a Guna term that refers to the American continent and which is commonly translated as “land in mature plenitude.” It is currently used by many Indigenous communities and associations to replace the word America as a way to politically reframe and challenge colonialist conceptions of territory and its national borders. See history of the term and its adoption in many Latin American countries in Arias (25).
15. On the huge gap currently existing between the fields of World Literature and Indigenous literatures in Latin America see my co-authored book chapter (with César Domínguez).
16. This index is based on a series of factors such as age, amount of literary works written in that language, level of international recognition, how many translations have been carried out, or its history and association with “high culture”, among others (Casanova 20). Moreover, as D’Hagen explains, “(t)he truth simply seems to be that in any ‘major’ history of the world’s literatures there is no room for ‘minor’ literatures unless they serve ‘major’ interests” (125). Following Even-Zohar and his polysystems theory of translation, D’Hagen illustrates his comments with a poignant example: what is translated too often depends on the needs the (major) target culture has for such text (125).
17. Translation by Aura Estrada and Francisco Goldman.
18. Translation by Aura Estrada and Francisco Goldman.
19. In the case of Javier Castellanos, a Zapotec author who has published four novels in *dilla xhon*, these two versions of the text often vary in length and style as they are actually intended for two different kinds of readers. See Brígido-Corachán’s Chapter 2 for a more in-depth reading of these double-edged versions in Castellanos’s work and also Gloria E. Chacón’s concept of the Indigenous “double gaze” in *Indigenous Cosmolectics*, pp. ix-x.
20. “La reactivación de las luchas interétnicas en las exURSS y en la vieja Europa, la rebelión indígena en Chiapas y Ecuador, hacen pensar que a lo mejor el modelo globalizador y unificador de culturas y lenguas está en crisis; a lo mejor se acercan tiempos de ajustar cuentas con el modelo civilizatorio colonizador europeo y de abrir nuevas perspectivas a las minorías étnicas y a sus formas de expresión literaria” (499). See also Brígido-Corachán and Domínguez, p. 93.
21. This article was written under the auspices of the research project “Reconfiguraciones de género, raza y clase social en la literatura étnica norteamericana de la era Obama/Trump” (GV/AICO/2021/249), funded by Valencia’s Regional Government.

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