"The Comal of Your Desire": Examining Representations of Isthmus Zapotecas through the Poetry of Natalia Toledo

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“The Comal of Your Desire”:
Examining Representations of Isthmus Zapotecas through the Poetry of Natalia Toledo

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
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by
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Introduction

In her poem “Huipil,” the Zapotec poet Natalia Toledo, who grew up in Juchitán, Oaxaca, paints vibrant images of womanhood, specifically of an indigenous womanhood. She writes poetry in her first language, Isthmus Zapotec, and translates it into her second language, Spanish:

**Bidaani’**

Ruyadxie’ lii sica ruyadxi guragu’ guibá’,
ribaque chaahue’ lii ndaani’ guiña candanaxhi

  guiriziña

guidiladé ruxhele guirá guirá guiee’ bizeecabe lu xpidaane’
guirá nguiiu ne biuluú zanda gueeda chiru ca’ naa

  yanna gueela’
guenda nayeche’ xtinne’ cadá nisa.
Ora riaa’ sa’ riguyaa’ ne pa guiaba nisaguie
ladxidó’ guiba’ ribee yaande gadxe

ni rutiee lu xpidaane’ ne guielua’
Ora guiruche ti guí ria’qui’ guiba’
Naa ruxhele’ ruaa’sica guragu’ ne rabe xpele.

**Huipil**

De cara al cielo como una lagartija,
te acomodo dentro del baúl con olor a ocote
mi piel revienta las flores que dibujaron sobre mi
vestido

pueden venir esta noche a pellizcarme hombres y
colibríes

mi alegría es néctar que emana.

A bailar voy a las fiestas y si llueve
el corazón del día arroja un arcoiris

sobre mis ojos y mi huipil,

Cuando un rayo cae, quema el cielo,

entonces abro mi boca de lagartija para beber su fuego.

Huipil

Facing the sky like a lizard,

I settle you in a trunk that smells of pine.

My skin bursts with the flowers etched upon my dress.

Men and hummingbirds can come and pinch me

tonight,

my happiness is nectar that flows.

I am going to the fiestas to dance and if it rains

the heart of day will hurl a rainbow

upon my huipil and my eyes.

When lightning falls, the sky burns,
I open my lizard mouth to drink its fire.¹ (The Black Flower 97)

Natalia Toledo’s poetry explores the pride and independence of Zapoteca power. She creates a picture of a vibrant Juchiteca woman, wearing her traditional *huipil*, dancing at *fiestas*, and welcoming the natural forces of the earth. Her *huipil*, an indigenous embroidered blouse, comes to life in this poem. Its flowers are lush and blooming. A rainbow in the sky gives the *huipil* its colors, and a hummingbird and lizard are embroidered on its black velvet. The woman Toledo writes about is one who, in many ways, contradicts the dominion of *machismo* in Latin America. She represents an indigenous Zapotec woman of Oaxaca—similar to one of the women who raised Toledo in Juchitán, a city on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Juchitán is a place known for its rich ethnic pride, as well as its powerful women, who have inspired countless paintings, ethnographies, and other forms of representation.

Natalia Toledo, born in 1967 in Juchitán, is one of the most recognized contemporary poets writing in a Mexican native language today. She is the first woman to write and publish poetry in the Isthmus Zapotec language. Toledo is the daughter of the famed Mexican artist Francisco Toledo and lived in Juchitán until she was seven, when she moved to Mexico City. In this paper, I use poems from two of Natalia Toledo’s books: *Guie’ yaase’ / Olivo negro* (2004) and *Deche ditoope / El dorso del cangrejo* (2016), both of which are published as bilingual Isthmus Zapotec-Spanish editions. *Guie’ yaase’ / Olivo negro* won the Nezualcóyotl Prize, Mexico’s highest honor for indigenous-language literature and was later translated into English by Clare Sullivan and

¹ This version of “Huipil,” as well as the other English translations of Toledo’s poetry in this essay, was translated by Clare Sullivan.

The Isthmus Zapotec women are notorious both nationally and internationally for their image as Amazon-like matriarchs. Starting with the first known written description of Isthmus Zapotec women in 1580, representations of these women have created and promoted a stereotype of women who are large, intimidating, overly-sexual, exotic beings (Campbell and Green 157). In many ways, this idealized assertive Zapoteca present in works of writing and art contradicts the popular stereotypes of indigenous Mexican women, which paint a picture of a submissive and violated figure. In this essay, I explore the many representations of Zapotec women created and distributed by outsiders (anyone who is not from the Isthmus), in this case, mostly observers from the United States, Europe, and Mexico City. The main representations that I examine in this essay belong to distinct groups of observers: feminists, Mexican artists, anthropologists, and white European male travelers. For these outsiders, the Isthmus provides an ideal location on which they can project their yearnings for a space outside the confines of patriarchy, Western-influence, and modernity.

According to the historian Howard Campbell, it is impossible for a representation of a group of people by anthropologists and other observers to be an objective account. “All ethnographic descriptions are considered representations… conditioned by the social positioning of the observer, the historical moment of the observation, the interaction between observer and observed, and the structures of unequal power” (Campbell and Green 155). The observers I present all come from extremely different backgrounds, centuries, fields of study, and countries, and therefore, have unique motivations and
audiences. It is apparent that many of these accounts often assume a stereotypical style and content that reflects familiarity with previous representations of the Isthmus (Campbell and Green 157). All of these outsiders, however, present their representations of the Zapotec community from an authoritative place of privilege, reflecting degrees of racism, feminism, Western ideals, and patriarchy.

Although often times outsiders that represent indigenous groups attempt to celebrate and spread knowledge about the culture, in some sense, they are one of the many forces that perpetuate the silencing of indigenous voices. As discussed in Diane Lewis’ article “Anthropology and Colonialism” (1973), anthropology was a field that emerged from the expansion of Europe and the colonization of the non-Western world (Lewis). The role of the “objective outsider” is an academic manifestation of colonialism, making the study of the “primitive” or non-Western world only possible when from the point of view of the Westerner or “outsider.” The anthropologist’s exploitation of these differences between him and the “other” (a group that is always accessible for study due to the conditions of colonialism) allows him to further his own advancement, both personally and professionally. At the end of this process of objectification, the subjects are hardly human beings, therefore the anthropologist feels no obligation to benefit the indigenous groups or their needs.

From colonial times to the present, Juchitán, of all regions on the Isthmus, in many ways bears the brunt of these stereotypes of a matriarchal land. Its geographical location in the southernmost region of North America, in between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, has made it a center of communication and trade since pre-Colonial times (see Fig. 1) (Chassen-López 293; Mirandé 12). Countless Mexican and
international artists and intellectuals have visited Juchitán for inspiration, among them are Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Miguel Covarrubias, Pablo Neruda, and Langston Hughes. Juchitán, one of the most culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse regions of Mexico, has a population of around 77,700 and is unique in that it has been very successful in holding onto tradition and resisting external powers (Mirandé 13). The majority of inhabitants are indigenous Zapotec and Huaves (Mirandé 13). About 73% of them are fluent in Zapotec, while 85% also speak Spanish, revealing that most residents of Juchitán are bilingual (Mirandé 13). Anthropologist Lynn Stephen states, “What has remained distinct about Juchitán through history is the importance of Zapotec ethnic identity and the use of that identity as a basis for regional political autonomy” (43). Juchitán is proud of its history of fighting off invasions by Aztec and French armies, as well as standing up against local Spanish rule in the Tehuantepec Rebellion of 1660 (Campbell and Green 157). The city gained fame both nationally and internationally in 1981 when the local Zapotec movement COCEI (Coalición Obrera, Campesina, Estudiantil del Itsmo) won municipal elections against the national PRI party, making it the first Mexican city to be controlled by the radical left since the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) (Campbell). Since then, Juchitán has become a symbol of indigenous resistance to political control.
The marketplace of Juchitán, a bustling two-story building that spills out onto the streets, is the most important public arena in Juchitán, as well as the most tourist-visited space. It is overflowing with Zapotec women buying and selling local and handmade products. The sights and smells of Juchitán’s marketplace are vibrant and rich; women make and sell iguana stewed in tomato sauce, sun-dried fish, gooseberries with chili and lemon, and totopos (large, crunchy tortillas) (Darling). One can find vendors with mezcal, fresh fruits and vegetables, cecina (dried beef), and the frothy pre-Hispanic drink bu'pú (made with cocoa, sugar, and toasted flower petals), along with many other delicacies specific to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Women also sell woven fabrics, such as blankets and hammocks, handmade jewelry, and household items. The men of Juchitán, many of who work as farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen, hand over their products to their wives,
who then sell them at the market. Outsiders’ written representations of the marketplace usually characterize it as an exclusively female space, where large Juchitecas stand proudly at their stands, joking and gossiping with one another (Brunjes, Darling). Many of these accounts have encouraged widely believed rumors that these matriarchal women control Juchitán’s economy.

Fig. 2. Graciela Iturbide. Conversación / Conversation. 1986.

Perhaps the most iconic image of the Isthmus was born right there at the marketplace in Juchitán. Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide captured this photo in 1979, and titled it Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas (Our Lady of the Iguanas) (see Fig. 3). Iturbide is one of the many outsiders that I focus on in this paper. As an internationally celebrated photographer, her visual representations of the Juchitecan people have been extremely influential in the formation of perceptions of the Zapotec community.
Iturbide’s photo has made its way around the world and can be found in a Los Angeles mural, a 1996 American movie starring Tilda Swinton (“Female Perversions”), an art exhibition in Japan, as well as in posters and postcards internationally (George).

However, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas* has also become an important image in Juchitán. Many families have posters of the photo up in their homes, and locals have even renamed it *La Medusa de Juchitán (The Juchitan Medusa)*. For the people of Juchitán, both the photo and the image of an iguana or a lizard have come to symbolize Zapotec female strength and independence.

Fig. 3. Graciela Iturbide. *Nuestra señora de las iguanas / Our Lady of the Iguanas*. 1979.
The lizard is also present in Natalia Toledo’s “Huipil,” which sets the opening and closing images of the poem, structurally framing it with the animal. In her poem, the actions of the subject are bold. She is open, welcoming all that comes her way, whether that be men, hummingbirds, a rainbow, or lightning that she drinks up. The rain doesn’t ruin her fiesta. Instead, she celebrates it.

As not only a poet, but also a chef of Isthmus cuisine and designer of jewelry and clothing, Toledo writes poems that are sensual and lush, existing in a world of their own. They are built from a constellation of dreams and memories, where every sense is awoken and engaged. Following the footsteps of her mother, a weaver, Toledo laces together words on a page. In The Black Flower, she presents us with erotic poems juxtaposed with poems about childhood games, poems that make the reader’s mouth water, poems that evoke nostalgia for something the reader has never had. Each of her poems is reminiscent of an individual painting, or a woven textile, splattered with the greens of the earth and red achiote. Put together, they form one cohesive work of art that reflects her world as a child growing up in Juchitán.

Toledo’s childhood in Juchitán was made up of speaking Zapotec, hammock weaving, cooking, and listening to stories told by her grandmother in their cozy and lively home (Kozlowska-Day 150). Her time in Juchitán was rich, and wealth was not connected to money or material goods. Apart from the abundance of food and aromas, her house was simple and modest, containing only necessities. Outside her home, private property and limits did not exist, so she was free to explore the world. Transitioning into a city of Spanish speakers was difficult and isolating. Lonely for her family and home, writing became a refuge for Toledo: “Cuando me quedé en la ciudad de México sola, con
mi abuela paterna y una tía, sentí la necesidad de escribir, de ponerme sobre el papel.
Creo que le llaman sobrevivencia” (“Natalia Toledo presenta ‘El dorso del cangrejo’”).

Many of Toledo’s poems center around the countless women that raised her: her mother, grandmother, and aunts being a few. This world of women reflects the support and love that surrounded her as a child. Through her poems, she pays tribute to them. In an interview, Toledo speaks about her home in Juchitán, recalling, “En esos espacios fui muy feliz, porque tenía además una abuela que se hacía cargo de los niños cuando mi mamá o mis tíos se iban de viaje a vender sus productos, que nos cantaba y nos dormía en zapoteco, que nos contaba cuentos, historias, y de esa tradición, con mucho, vengo yo… Esa es mi esencia, mi origen” (“Dibujar y hacer música con palabras”). We can feel these influences in her poetry—the women who shaped her, the stories that were told, and the importance of Zapotec language and tradition in her life. As felt through Toledo’s poetry, Juchitán has always been her true home. Her poems reveal that home is more than simply a place; it is the “smells of soursop and ripening nanche, / the sound of oil frying, fish smoke” (The Black Flower 27). It is the aroma of adobe houses, the sound of Zapotec in the air and the feeling of it on her tongue, a hammock holding her body, the loom under her fingers, and the endless freedom of nature, which was her playground. Home is in the kitchen, where the kettles are, her “mother’s womb” (The Black Flower 27).

Toledo is able to write from a unique perspective as a bilingual poet who has been shaped by two distinctly different languages, cultures, and homes: “Implica dos conocimientos y dos posibilidades, es bueno ser bilingüe porque tienes una obra que puede llegar a dos almas, dos pensamientos. Es una doble posibilidad creativa y una doble posibilidad de vida” (“Natalia Toledo escribe el libro de poemas”). Ida Kozlowska-
Day conveys the idea that the bilingual nature of Toledo’s poetry “brings into dialogue the indigenous and Western discourses, making an intercultural bridge between the two worlds. Due to her experience of living, knowing and belonging to both cultures…[Toledo] strives for preserving her indigenous roots, but also puts emphasis on communication and solidarity” (152). Toledo is in a unique position as the facilitator of bridging a gap between worlds that do not understand one another. Living in Mexico City allowed her to step away from Juchitán and view it with new eyes, in order to communicate it in ways people from around the world can understand.

Due to her position of privilege in Mexico, her poetry does not represent all indigenous, Zapotec, or Juchitecan people, nor does it represent the “indigenous experience.” It is crucial to keep in mind Toledo’s upbringing as the daughter of the prominent artist Francisco Toledo. She is a well-educated, successful woman who is now able to travel the world to read her poetry aloud in her native language. Additionally, Toledo’s relationship with Juchitán is one of both closeness and distance: “Yo creo que me hice poeta porque extrañaba todo lo que dejé cuando salí de Juchitán, una de las cosas que me orillaron a escribir definitivamente fue la de quedarme en un lugar donde ya no me reconocía. Tuve siempre la necesidad de mirar hacia atrás y ver ese tiempo, como Milton, este paraíso perdido que no logras nunca más recuperar” (“Natalia Toledo escribe el libro de poemas”). Through writing in Zapotec, she taps into the memories and nostalgia that live in her body. By placing them on the page, Toledo is able to reclaim Juchitán, while her body remains elsewhere.

The Zapotec language, which the people call Diidxazá (diidxa’ meaning tongue and za meaning cloud), is the oldest written language in the Americas (“The State of
Zapotec Poetry”). Wendy Call, responsible for the English translations of the Juchiteca Irma Pineda’s poetry, reveals the unique history behind written Zapotec: “Around 600 BCE, long before the Maya began carving words and stories onto stelae and pyramids, the Zapotecs began using a glyph-based system to record their history. This writing system persisted for fourteen hundred years, dying out half a millennium before Europeans arrived in the Americas” (Call). Following that, Zapotec poetry and prose once again became an oral tradition, until 120 years ago, when the Isthmus Zapotecs started using a “transliterated Latinate alphabet” to put their language on paper. However, today the language still remains largely oral.

Isthmus Zapotec is one of three Zapotec dialects, languages that are so distinct that a speaker of one dialect will likely have trouble understanding the speaker of another, even if they grew up just 60 miles apart (Call). Unlike Spanish or English, Zapotec is a tonal language with three pitches: low, high, and ascendant (movement from low to high) (“The State of Zapotec Poetry”). The language has both long and short vowels, which means that the syllables vary in length. These are some of the characteristics of Zapotec that make it particularly expressive and fit for poetry. Although an estimate of a mere 100,000 speakers exist in the world, somehow the Isthmus Zapotec language has produced what Mexican translator and critic Carlos Montemayor calls “arguably the most important modern literary tradition of all the indigenous languages of Mexico” (qtd. in Kozlowska-Day 141). Juchitán has produced many of these poets and writers, Irma Pineda, Victor Terán, Marcario Matus, Víctor de la Cruz, and Enedino Jiménez, to name a few. Additionally, many painters and musicians have their origins in Juchitán, which has a reputation as an epicenter of creativity. Toledo follows the path of
her elders in this tradition of the written Zapotec word. She believes the expressive qualities of the Isthmus Zapotec language have heavily influenced her as a poet. In Toledo’s words: “Zapotec is an invitation to metaphor; it is a language in which you paint a metaphorical picture of what you wish to express, Zapotec has a great aesthetic sensibility for creating images and beauty. I believe that is why there are so many poets in Juchitán” (qtd. in Frischmann and Montemayor 22). She sees it as a language that is full musicality and visual imagery: “Bueno, la lengua zapoteca es muy sensual. Si la escuchas, por las dobles vocales, por los acentos, por el tiempo que tiene hablándose en este mundo, sentirás que es una lengua musical, maravillosa; cuando hablas estás haciendo música, no estás hablando, y estás dibujando, porque está llena de metáforas” (“Dibujar y hacer música con palabras”). Toledo also explains that Zapotec is sometimes referred to as “palabras dulces”: “Tienen aroma, como las flores, todas las cosas que tienen un aroma, obviamente las palabras huelen, las palabras te sitúan en una atmósfera y tienen esa posibilidad de llegar a un olfato, de producir sensaciones” (“Natalia Toledo escribe el libro de poemas”).

Poetry is the ideal medium for the expression of memory and emotion. Yet, it does not provide the space to give meanings behind words like comal, petate, huipil, etc., some of which are everyday household items and ingredients that are unique to the Isthmus and Oaxaca. But this is important; because of this, readers that are not from the Isthmus are forced to do their own research. The poetry evokes a desire to know more about this seemingly mythical place into which Toledo allows her readers a peek, but the next step, a step that opens up into a world of Zapotec culture and history, is up to the individual reader. Although many images, smells, tastes, and textures in Toledo’s poetry
may feel unfamiliar and “exotic” to the average reader, the emotions she encapsulates are much more recognizable. What makes her writing relatable is her ability to capture the everyday that connects all humans, whether they are Zapotec or not.

Throughout this essay, Toledo’s poetry acts as a trigger, opening up into the history of the Isthmus, precolonial ingredients, plants and household items specific to the area, Zapotec mythology, as well as her own personal reflections on her childhood in Juchitán. Just as Toledo weaves together words in her poetry, I see my role in this essay as an unraveler of the many threads in her textiles, sharing the meanings behind her images and placing them in a larger historical context. In this paper, I facilitate a conversation between Toledo’s poetry, outsider representations, and representations written by Zapotecas themselves. In Chapter One, “The Outsider’s Gaze: Juchitán as a Matriarchy,” I explore representations of Juchitecas that portray them as aggressive matriarchs who rule over their men and the economy. I put these portrayals in conversation with the stereotypical passive and abused indigenous woman, embodied in Mexican archetypes La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe. I then introduce representations by Natalia Toledo and other Zapotecas, which contrast Juchitán’s idealized matriarchs and uncover a more complete picture of these women. In Chapter Two, “Woman Who Weaves”: On the Commodification of the Tehuana and her Traje,” I discuss the history behind the Mexican icon of the Tehuana (a Zapotec woman from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec), which became a symbol for indigeneity and national heritage in the early 20th century. I then explore the national and international commodification of the Tehuana’s traje (traditional dress), which has been appropriated by Mexican elite and turned into both a fashion item and a tourist souvenir. I examine Toledo’s poetry about
the presence of weaving and textiles in her childhood, which contrast the history of separation between Zapoteca and her traje. In Chapter Three, “My Flower Offers You a Drink”: On the Sexualization of the Juchiteca,” I look at outsider representations that have been responsible for creating sexual objects out of Juchitecas. In these portrayals, the entire landscape of the Isthmus is sexualized. I include testimonies from Zapotecas that shed light on the realities of female sexuality in Juchitán, which contradict stereotypes about the Isthmus as a utopia of sexually liberated women. I put Toledo’s poems in conversation with these outsider representations, revealing a different perspective on female sexuality in Juchitán—one that celebrates female pleasure and authority.
The Outsider’s Gaze: Juchitán as a Matriarchy

In *Juchitán de las Mujeres (Juchitán, A Town of Women)* (1989), a book containing text written by Elena Poniatowska and photographs by Graciela Iturbide, two celebrated Mexican cultural figures, Poniatowska paints an image of the women of Juchitán, who are often portrayed as matriarchal goddesses in outsider representations:

“You should see them arrive like walking towers, their windows open, their heart like a window, their nocturnal girth visited by the moon. You should see them arrive; they are already the government, they, the people, guardians of men, distributors of food, their children riding astride their hips or lying in the hammocks of their breasts, the wind in their skirts, flowered vessels, the honeycomb of their sex overflowing with men. Here they come shaking their wombs, pulling the *machos* toward them, the *machos* who, in contrast with them, wear light colored pants, shirts, leather sandals, and palm hats, which they lift high in the air as they shout, “Long live Juchitec women! (14) ²

In this quote, Juchitecas are portrayed as larger-than-life Amazonians who are praised and honored by their husbands. They are depicted as powerful figures in both the government and in their marriages; according to Poniatowska, in Juchitán, neither man nor woman fits their expected roles of authority, a stark contrast to the Mexican land of *machismo*. However, in sync with historical stereotypes of indigenous women, they remain the mothers, the “distributors of food,” the over-sexualized women with children

² Cynthia Steele and Adriana Navarro are responsible for the English translations of Poniatowska’s text in *Juchitán de las mujeres.*
and nature envisioned as extensions of their bodies. Poniatowska and Iturbide are two of the many intellectuals, writers, filmmakers, artists and anthropologists that have fixated on Juchitán as a city in which gender roles function differently from the rest of the world. Many of these outsiders have cast Juchitecas as liberated women and Juchitán as a matriarchal utopia. Natalia Toledo, among other Zapoteca writers, objects to some of the characterizations and descriptions of those outside the community and finds them to be simplistic and stereotypical.

Repeatedly, outsiders have described the Zapotec female body as large and intimidating, but still an object of desire. In these reports, Juchitecas’ supposed big, manly bodies are attached to the degree of power they have in society. French archeologist Desiré Charnay, who traveled through Mexico from 1857 to 1861, reflected on his visit to the Isthmus: “It is beautiful to see them standing like mannish women, with their heads high, their chests upright, walking proudly and defying the looks of other people; very seductive in spite of their virile aspect, they have, in addition to faces full of character, firm flesh and admirable silhouettes” (qtd. in Campbell and Green 165). Almost a century later, in 1947, Duncan Aikman, a writer from the United States noted that women from Juchitán were “bronzed and dominant goddesses [who] live with their lesser menfolk in a kind of perpetual polyandrous idyll” (qtd. in Campbell and Green 170). These observations, along with many others, emphasize women’s large, imposing bodies, suggesting that perhaps these Zapotec women possessed a superior biology than women of other ethnic groups or local men (Campbell and Green 166).

Juchitán has been framed as a simple inverse of a patriarchal society, in which the gender roles are switched. Therefore, it makes sense that the markers of male power and
dominance transfer over as indicators of female strength. The presence of large female bodies in Juchitán’s so-called matriarchy create an environment that is much more believable than if these women were small and conventionally feminine. Representations of Juchitecas often portray characters as a hybrid between intimidating, manly rulers and over-sexualized women. In these portrayals, both halves combine and create a quality of power: the Juchiteca controls men with her masculine attributes and sexuality. However, by characterizing all Juchitecas this way, they become mythological creatures that are stripped of their humanity. These representations take them out of history and erase the subtle complexities and variations that define them.

According to countless observers, Juchitecas are a distinctly different breed of woman; they are repeatedly portrayed as a superior foil to a weaker non-Juchitecan indigenous woman. Poniatowska expresses this opinion in Juchitán de las mujeres: “The women of Juchitán are strong-willed, in contrast with other regions, where women shrink back and cry...They have nothing in common with self-sacrificing Mexican mothers drowned in tears” (14). Andrés Henestrosa, a Oaxacan writer and politician, agrees that these women are particularly unique: “Among the Juchitec women there are no inhibitions, nothing that can’t be said, that can’t be done...The Juchitec woman has no sense of shame” (qtd in Poniatowska 13). Depictions like these give the false illusion that the Juchiteca is stronger and more courageous than other indigenous women. This perpetuates two stereotypes (passive indigenous women and powerful, assertive Juchitecas), creating a divide between these two groups of indigenous women by forcing them into separate boxes and characterizing them as opposites.
One of the reasons why travelers have perceived Juchitán as a female-run city lies within the traditional gendered division of labor. The Juchitecan men, many of whom work as fishermen, craftsmen, and farmers, give their products to the women, who then sell them in the marketplace. Juchitán’s marketplace is perhaps the most dominant public space in the city, and its Juchiteca vendors and buyers have been prominent aspects in outsider representations of Juchitán. Mexican painter and anthropologist Miguel Covarrubias adds fuel to the fire of the rumored matriarchy in his book *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (1946): “Whether the men go to the fields or work in town, from dawn until sunset Tehuantepec becomes a woman’s world. Everywhere there are busy women moving about, carrying heavy loads on their heads from the market, buying, selling, gossiping” (274). Emphasized in his words, as well as the descriptions of many others, Juchitecas are extremely visible in public spaces. Because they fill the marketplace (the most notable tourist attraction for visitors) and hold themselves with confidence, the women appear to be the ones running Juchitán’s economy. However, men are doing equally valuable labor; they are simply working in spaces that are not as visible to the public eye.

Juchitecas have been depicted as the “exception to the rule,” the rule being a *machista* country like Mexico that is known for its archetypes of the passive indigenous woman, notably, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche. These two figures have heavily influenced gender roles and perceptions of women in Mexico, especially indigenous women. They each represent a crucial piece of the Mexican national identity, Guadalupe symbolizing the good indigenous woman and La Malinche the bad. Each archetype is mapped onto a polarized binary that leaves little room for living, breathing
women to operate in their daily lives. La Malinche was an indigenous woman who served as a translator and mistress to Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. She was first portrayed through the accounts of Spanish soldier Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and has since been featured in countless works of literature and art. As a symbol of Mexican cultural identity, she has been used as an archetype to reflect the country’s history and ideals. La Malinche has been typecast as a submissive and selfish traitor by those defining the nation through a separation from the Spanish, colonial take over. Malinalli Tenepal, La Malinche’s given name, was a Nahua woman who was sold to Tabascan slave traders when she was fourteen years old, and was later given to the Spaniards in 1519 (L. Paz 15). La Malinche not only interpreted for Cortés, but she also bore a child to him, and was subsequently abandoned with the baby boy when Cortés returned to his family in Spain (L. Paz 15-16). Because of her role in helping the Spaniards, La Malinche is often viewed as a traitor who is responsible for the conquest of Mexico. Her body is often equated with the land of Mexico; both were conquered and stripped of their independence and history. Although rarely acknowledged in portrayals of La Malinche, she was extremely intelligent and could speak Nahuatl and several Mayan dialects at a young age. One interpretation of her actions is that she used her knowledge and resourcefulness to save herself in a life-or-death situation.

On the other hand, La Virgen de Guadalupe is typecast as giving, nurturing, submissive and pure. She is the patron saint of Mexico, representing all that is good about the country. These stereotypes help to form a polarized view of Mexican women. However, both indigenous women are submissive, and therefore both contrast the Juchiteca. There are a few fundamental differences between La Malinche and the
Juchiteca: La Malinche is a historical figure central to the mythology of modern Mexican national identity, while the Juchiteca is “envisioned as an ideal type, a utopian figure echoing the promise of what Mexico would be like if ‘she’ had not been conquered” (*Mexican Cultural Imagination* 102). The Juchiteca is a symbol for what is outside the Mexican national identity, something that Mexico tries to “capture and “wear” as a trophy,” while La Malinche symbolizes the “central yet disembodied interior core of Mexican national identity, the Indian, the feminine, shameful element that should be hidden from view” (*Mexican Cultural Imagination* 102).

Juchitán is a place of interest not only for artists, anthropologists, and travelers, but for feminists, who have latched onto the Juchiteca as the symbol of an ideal liberated woman. In these feminist works, Juchitán is often described as a matriarchal utopia in which men are weak and women are strong and independent. However, the reality is much more nuanced. As explained by the Juchitecan anthropologist Edaena Saynes-Vásquez in her essay, “Galán Pa dxandí.‘That Would Be Great if it Were True’: Zapotec Women’s Comment on Their Role in Society,” this feminist literature focuses only on the women who still do traditional work (selling at the marketplace, for example), and excludes the many who work in other economic spheres (185). She also expresses that most studies done on Juchitán ignore the gender discrimination that exists in their lives. Saynes-Vásquez writes, “The foreigners are only interested in what they are looking for, what they sympathize with, or what is most attractive or new to them. They romanticize it, exaggerating particular dimensions of reality, depending on their personal interests… For feminists this is solid gold!” (138).
For foreigners and Mexican outsiders alike, Juchitán represents something that they and their reader lacks, so these feminists have created an object of desire and molded it into what they would like it to be. These works have left out crucial parts of the lives of Juchitecas and portrayed Juchitán as a utopian land of female freedom, equality, and power. Campbell and Green believe it is ironic that feminists have continued a discourse that was originally started by white, upper-class men, figures they have repeatedly condemned over time (174). Although the feminist works are presented through rhetoric of “female solidarity and empathy for cultural difference,” their writings have merely “repeated images of primitive Amazonians deeply rooted in Western constructions of non-Western societies” (174). The complexities of these women’s lives have been ignored, as the Zapotec woman has become a product of the Western feminist agenda.

Elena Poniatowska is one such feminist. She has become one of the most prominent voices for Juchitecas and her writing in *Juchitán de las mujeres* has heavily influenced the common perception of Juchitán. Poniatowska creates images of the type of woman the reader has never seen before, a woman that almost doesn’t feel real. It is tempting to get caught up in and believe her representations of these women:

Everything is different; women like to walk embracing each other, and here they come to the marches, overpowering, with their iron calves. Man is a kitten between their legs, a puppy they have to admonish, “Stay there.” They walk touching each other, playfully. They trade roles: they grab men who watch them from behind the fence, pulling at them, fondling them as they curse the government, and sometimes, men themselves. (13-14)
As a well known cultural critic and journalist who has written about crucial topics of Mexican culture, politics and history, Poniatowska has an authoritative voice on Mexico. Her work is respected and trusted. Inherently, this is problematic because even though one could say that her writing celebrates the Zapotec culture, she is not an indigenous woman from Juchitán, but rather a Mexican writer with her own agenda. Although masked in alluring language, her descriptions of Juchitecas regurgitate stereotypes from previous representations and put these women into boxes.

Graciela Iturbide, too, is a famed Mexican figure whose work has been praised. According to Analisa Taylor, Iturbide’s photos “invariably center upon the piercing gaze of self assured Indian women” (“Malinche to Matriarchal Utopia” 820). In conversation with Taylor’s ideas, Stanley Brandes writes, “Photographic images such as these, in which women of a single Indian group are portrayed as forward and aggressive, function to reinforce the stereotypic representation of the submissive woman who prevails throughout Mexico generally” (99). Through these images, she promotes stereotypes of Juchitecas as elite Amazonian matriarchs, inevitably contrasting them with the typical stereotypes of indigenous women. This results in a limited reality in which indigenous women are either one or the other, strong or weak. This ideology perpetuates the idea that Isthmus Zapotecs are outside of the norm, and therefore all other indigenous women fit the passive role they have been cast.

In order to approach Graciela Iturbide’s photos critically, is crucial for the viewer to understand her perspective and process as a photographer. Rather than capturing life in Juchitán as she sees it, Iturbide creates mostly posed photographs (Brandes 95). Although this approach makes the work less candid, she explains that it allows her to get the
consent of her models, which is something that is very important to her. In an interview, Iturbide explains that for her, the camera is a tool to interpret reality. “Photography is not truth,” she expresses, “The photographer interprets reality and, above all, constructs his own reality according to his own awareness or his own emotions” (*Eyes to Fly With* 9).

Fig. 4. Graciela Iturbide. *Juchiteca con cerveza / Juchiteca with beer*. 1986.
Iturbide does not consider herself a documentarian, instead she uses the camera as an instrument to discover her own country and create a rendition of the Zapotec culture. She explains, “I don’t take pictures to show people the indigenous world or to show them my country, or so that they’ll tell me if the images are good or bad...It’s a passion or, rather, a necessity to go out with the camera; it’s like therapy” (Eyes to Fly With 23). In other words, her photography is self-satisfying. It can be thought of as more of an imaginative emotional and metaphorical work than an intellectual one. Iturbide’s images
almost always permit multiple interpretations, therefore fulfilling, in her own words, “the fantasy of each viewer” (Eyes to Fly With 12). There is nothing inherently wrong with this use of the camera, and in the interview she is transparent about what her work is and is not. However, most viewers of her photos have not read this interview and do not know this information.

Over many years working in Juchitán, both Iturbide and Poniatowska have formed close relationships with the women of its community. This adds to the credibility of their work. However, the text and photography in Juchitán de las mujeres is an extremely skillful work of art that cannot be considered an “honest” representation of Juchitán. Because it is presented as such, it perpetuates a warped image of Juchitán. Their audience is most likely unfamiliar with Juchitán, and if they are not, they have most likely been exposed to previous stereotypical representations that have promoted its rumored matriarchy. As outsiders who are portraying an entire community to readers who are strangers to Juchitán, Iturbide and Poniatowska have a responsibility to present the culture in a way that does not perpetuate stereotypes.

In contrast to the many works on Juchitán written by outsiders, there are few writings on these themes authored by Juchitecas themselves. In her essay, Edaena Saynes-Vásquez expresses her anger and discomfort with the stereotypes of Juchitán, explaining that she and many of the women from the Isthmus are concerned about the way in which their culture is portrayed. She writes that she feels disrespected when people approach her, assuming qualities about her based off of those stereotypes. Saynes-Vásquez writes, “There is a contrast in the way outsiders interpret Zapotec women’s role and the way we experience it” (184). She expresses that as a Zapotec woman and a
researcher, she would like to present her own reflections on the issue. Saynes-Vásquez poses the question “Are there any benefits for the Zapotec community when women are portrayed in such a way?” She explains, “Whereas outsiders argue for an egalitarian Zapotec society or for a society ruled by women, Zapotec women say: galán pa dxaní (that would be great if it were true). I think that this phrase expresses the personal feelings of Zapotec women, which have been ignored” (187). In her article, Saynes-Vásquez criticizes Juchitán de las mujeres and states that the work promotes a “misrepresentation of Zapotec life and evokes a warped image of Zapotec women, accentuating specific points, such as women’s power” (188). She also believes that the vision presented in the book portrays only a fraction of Juchitán today, as many Juchitecas see it as a tribute to a much older and traditional “Juchitán of the past” (188). Saynes-Vásquez reveals that many of the local women do not identify with Iturbide’s photos and feel that the images do not represent them. A few women expressed displeasure when they saw that their photo had been published; such is the case with Zapotec woman Na’ Marce, who had posed for Iturbide as a friend, but was unhappy when she saw that a photo of her that she didn’t approve of was in the book.

Another female writer from the Isthmus who published an article on this topic is the anthropologist Obdulia Ruiz Campbell, author of “Representations of Isthmus Zapotec Women: A Zapotec Woman’s Point of View.” She believes there are very few situations in which women rule over their men in Juchitán. She states that women do extremely difficult work during the day and many come home to a household in which their husbands are in charge. Ruiz Campbell explains that outsiders, whether they be anthropologists, writers, or sociologists, usually stay for a short period of time and are
only really exposed to the public arenas of Isthmus towns (the marketplace, the streets, fiestas, etc.), in which case they leave with an incomplete understanding of the culture. Often what goes on behind closed doors is quite different. Ruiz Campbell describes her own childhood, revealing that from an early age, she realized that “Zapotec women suffer from the temperament of their demanding, scolding, abusive, and drunken husbands. Isthmus men frequently beat their wives and children” (141). She writes about how her father beat her and her siblings, and describes her mother as “self-sacrificing, a hard worker, and an ingenious administrator of her few centavos to serve three meals a day to her seven children” (140). She reveals that her mother had “ni voz ni voto” (“neither voice nor vote”) when Ruiz Campbell was promised to a man in his fifties through an arranged marriage set up by her grandfather and father (141). She ultimately had to run away from home to escape it. Ruiz Campbell’s testimonies directly contradict the matriarchal utopia that has been described by countless outsiders.

While examining the various representations of Juchitán, I was forced to question why we fall into the traps of stereotypes. When talking about the women of Juchitán, some of the stereotypes fulfill what we, as readers and viewers, were looking for and expected to find. They satisfy a desire, or even a need, that is often unconscious. We crave confirmation that these women weave, cook, and pass down traditions to their children. However, the rest of the stereotypes about Juchitecas are pleasantly surprising and catch us off guard because they contradict all that we’ve been taught about indigenous women. Most of these observations of Juchitecas don’t fit into the confines of the Malinche or Guadalupe archetype. In fact, they are quite the opposite, and this feels both refreshing and hopeful. Juchitecas represent an alternative to the self-sacrificing,
submissive indigenous woman, an alternative that many of us (as women and/or foreigners) would prefer. They also represent an alternative to the patriarchal reality we all live in. For many readers, it feels like a small victory to have “discovered” the existence of these matriarchs, who were hidden away in Southern Mexico. Although some of these stereotypes seem “positive,” they are still harmful and attempt to define a certain social group’s experience in the world. In many of the preceding examples of representations, including those of Poniatowska and Iturbide, Juchitán is portrayed as a utopia in which society functions extremely well and everyone is happy; if these magical, independent women can successfully rule a society in a country permeated with machismo, it feels like proof that the world can operate differently.

Yet, for Natalia Toledo, these stereotypes about the women of Juchitán are dangerous. The Juchitán she grew up in is a city of real people—a place inhabited by individuals who are inspiring, passionate, and worth learning about. As readers and outsiders, it is tempting to give in to the alluring images of Juchitecas that have been painted by skilled writers and artists over the years. It feels easy to buy into these stereotypes, when together they form a mesmerizing utopia that we desperately want to be true. One of Toledo’s inspirations for writing poetry has been to confront these harmful portrayals of her community: “Many people, from Eisenstein to Anaïs Nin, have disseminated their impressions of us. Through poetry, I decided to give my version of who we really are,” she declares, “without falling into the familiar stereotypes: that Juchitán is a matriarchal society, that we dominate our men” (Frischmann and Montemayor 22). Toledo admires the women of Juchitán “for their passion, hard-work,
self-sufficiency, and devotion to their professions, such as embroidery, weaving, trade, art, teaching, and healing” (Kozlowska-Day 143).

Toledo’s poetry complicates the assumptions of the power dynamics and gender roles in Juchitán. It also complicates the two opposing stereotypes of Mexican indigenous women: That of Juchitecas and and that of indigenous women from other parts of Mexico. In her poetry, Toledo writes about real women—the women who raised her and surrounded her as a child. They are strong and powerful, but not in a way that is larger than life, not in a way that turns them into fictional characters that are taken outside of the various complexities of their particular circumstances: “He querido dar mi versión del matriarcado que tanto se ha estudiado, quise verlo con amor pero también con una mirada de autocrítica, porque yo soy de ese lugar y porque yo escribí un libro que se llama Mujeres del sol, mujeres del oro que tiene que ver con todas las mujeres que yo conocí en mi infancia, en Juchitán, que me enseñaron algo, que me mostraron el mundo” (Toledo qtd. in Sosa).

Natalia Toledo comes from a unique position as a writer because she represents Juchitán and its community as both an insider and an outsider. She writes from the outside as a Juchiteca who moved to Mexico City at age seven, and as an adult who has returned to her childhood home through poetry and memories. She writes from a place of emotion, and although she’s writing from a distance, she bases her representations on real, personal experiences. Her poetry is an artistic work, just like Juchitán de las mujeres, but unlike the Iturbide and Poniatowska’s book, it does not present itself as a work of anthropology or reporting. Because of this, her perspective is extremely different from those of Iturbide, Poniatowska, as well as Ruiz Campbell and Saynes-Vásquez.
“Yo crecí en un entorno muy femenino. Mi abuela, mi mamá y en Juchitán las mujeres son muy visibles, están en los mercados en las plazas, trabajando, yo tengo un ejemplo de trabajo y de compromiso social, no sólo de mi padre, de mi mamá también,” explains Natalia Toledo (‘Natalia Toledo presenta ‘El dorso del cangrejo’’). Her poems are filled with comfort and safety, feelings that are deeply connected to the women in her life. The women who raised her not only taught her how to cook and weave, they taught her how to see the world, how the love the world. Her poem “Childhood Home” is a visual snapshot of a series of memories. Through it, she evokes home through everyday objects that are specific to her childhood in Juchitán:

**Yoo lidxe’**

Dxi guca’ nahuiini’ guse’ndaant’ na’jña biida’

sica beeu ndaani’ ladxi’do’ guibá’.

Luuna’ stidu xiaa ni biree ndaani’ xpichu’ yaga

bioongo’.

Gudxite nia’ strompi’pi bine’laa za,

ne guie’ sti matamoro gúca behua xiña bitua’dxi

riguíte nia’ ca bizana’.

Sica rucuiidxicabe benda buaa lu gubidxa zacaca

gusidu lu daa,

galaa íque lagadu rasi belecrú.

Cayaca gueta suquíi, cadiee doo ria’ ne guixge,

hayaca guendaró,
Cayaba nisaguie guidxilayú, rucha’huidu dxuladi,
ne ndaani’ ti xiga ndo’pa’ ri de’du telayú.

Casa primera
De niña dormí en los brazos de mi abuela
como la luna en el corazón del cielo.
La cama: algodón que salió de la fruta del pochote.
Hice de los árboles aceite, y a mis amigos les vendí
como guachinango la flor del flamboyán.
Como secan los camarones al sol, así nos tendíamos
sobre un petate.
Encima de nuestros párpados dormía la cruz de
Estrellas.
Tortillas de comiscal, hilos teñidos par alas hamacas,
la comida se hacía con la felicidad de la llovizna sobre
la tierra,
batíamos el chocolate,
y en una jícara enorme nos servían la madrugada.

Childhood Home
As a girl I slept in my grandmother’s arms
like the moon in the heart of the sky.
My bed: cotton from the fruit of the pochote tree
I made oil from trees, sold my friends
flamboyán flowers as red snapper.

We stretched ourselves out on a petate,
like shrimp drying in the sun.

The Southern Cross slept upon our eyelids.

Tortillas fresh from the comiscal, ropes dyed for the
hammocks,

food was prepared with the happiness of light rain
upon the earth.

We stirred chocolate,

and dawn was served up to us in a gourd bowl. (The Black Flower 15)

Toledo’s poem begins in the safety of her grandmother’s arms. Her grandmother, who taught her to cook and appreciate the pleasures of flavor, was an important figure in Toledo’s childhood. Toledo’s use of Zapotec and Nahuatl words in the Spanish and English translations reflect the abundance of Mesoamerican pre-Colonial imagery in her poetry. Many of the household objects that were specific to her childhood in Juchitán do not have a Spanish or English equivalent. “Childhood Home” celebrates the processes of cooking and preparing of food at her home in Juchitán, where daily routines and games connected her to the natural world. In this poem, Toledo and her friends drink the morning light from a gourd, and constellations rest on their eyes, as they lie outside together on a petate (a bedroll made of woven fibers from palm trees). “Light rain” is just another ingredient in their food.
The *pochote* tree Toledo writes about grew in the patio of her childhood home, and was a place where community would gather (Frischmann and Montemayor 72). The *pochote* is a species of *ceiba* tree, the sacred “tree of life” to many Mesoamerican cultures. The *ceiba* symbolizes the “father,” “mother,” and “superior,” as well as goodness, strength, and unity. It was believed to stand at the center of the Earth, connecting the terrestrial world to the spiritual world. Inside its fruit is a soft cotton that easily scatters with the wind and spreads its seeds. Symbolically and physically, the *pochote* tree functions as a protector; young *pochote* trees have spiny trunks, literal protection built into them in the form of sharp thorns. Both the cotton of the *pochote* and her grandmother’s arms were places of rest and nurture for Toledo, places on which she could sink into softness and security, and places on which she could dream. In the haven of her grandmother’s arms, Toledo is “the moon in the heart of the sky”—something in its natural place, something that belongs.

“Childhood Home” celebrates the act of doing by hand, as well as a collective “we.” So much of her experience in Juchitán was one of community and belonging. The memories she holds today and the ones she writes on the page must also live within others. The love she has for this community, which was overwhelmingly female, overflows from her poetry. So does the love they have for her. This intimacy and love for real women in her life, based on memories that still live in her body, contrasts the stereotypical accounts written by outsiders.

Toledo’s poem, “Olga” is a tribute to her mother, Olga de Paz. It is clear through this poem, along with others, that her mother was a formative person in her life:
Olga

Nacu’ gunaa bigaze naa

Guriá ti guiesampa’ nisa dxa’ beleguí ne bidxi’

Ndàani’,

Ni runi ti nduni guicha galaa ique’,

Ni bidii naa dxitayuguí’ nisa’ ne sidi.

Xiie’ naca ti guiiche rapa xho’ xuba’ yachi ne

Bandadinaxhi.

Ni bisiiidi’ naa ganaxhiie’ ca guiiba’ randa diaga

Gunaa

Ne ca lari lase’ sicarú,

Nacu’ gunaa bisaanda guirá ra biziaa naa ne xhaba

Bidxiguí.

Chupa si diidxa’ jña:

Za guiibá’ ne xigagueta nalu’ guxana naa.

Olga

Eres la mujer que me bañó

A la orilla de una pileta llena de estrellas y sapos,

La que formaba en mi nuca cebollas con mis

Cabellos,

La que me daba huevo tibio con limón y sal.

Mi nariz de metate guarda los aromas del arroz y la canela.
La que me enseñó a amar los aretes y la gasa de seda,
Eres la que curó mis heridas
Con el tejido de las arañas.
Sin duda dos cosas, madre:
Las nubes y tus brazos de jícara me engendraron. (El dorso del cangrejo 77)

In this poem, her mother is portrayed as a caring and healing woman who deeply shaped the person Toledo is today. Toledo writes of childhood memories, from before she was old enough to bathe herself. These memories have stayed with her; they live in her body—in her hair, her nose, her mouth, her wounds.

Olga es como la poesía para mí. Es mi mamá. Es la respiración misma. Es la que me enseñó, junto con mi abuela, todo lo que sé. Ellas son muy importantes en mi vida y les debo muchísimo, igual a los ancianos y ancianas de mi pueblo. Se nota mucho que yo no hubiera querido salir de Juchitán, entonces, quién sabe si mi destino era ser poeta, estaría ahí añorando otra cosa.” (“Natalia Toledo regresa a la poesía”).

Through her poetry, Toledo honors the knowledge of her mother and grandmother, as well as that of the generations that came before her. In Toledo’s words:

Algo que sí celebro y que tenemos las juchitecas es que somos independientes, económicamente hablando, del hombre; por eso desde chiquitas te enseñan a trabajar, a juntar tu oro, a comprar tu traje, a tener lo propio, y eso también es una enseñanza y no tiene que ver con la actualidad, con movimientos feministas, tiene que ver con un grupo que funciona así, que trabaja, que guarda, que sabe administrar, somos grandes comerciantes.” (qtd. in Sosa)
The women Toledo chooses to write about are independent and intelligent. Through raising her, they taught her these same values, emphasizing the importance of women and girls taking the reins of their own lives and futures. Outsider representations also label Juchitecas as strong and independent; however, they promote generalizations and exaggerations about the entire female community of Juchitán. Toledo’s poetry may touch on some of the same characteristics, but she writes about these women through her distinct relationships with each of them, portraying them as individuals with specific talents and traits.
“Woman Who Weaves”: On Commodification of the Tehuana and her Traje

The indigenous Zapotec women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, or the Tehuanas, and their unique style of dress have been a fascination for both Mexicans and foreigners alike. In countless reports of travelers dating back hundreds of years, there are lengthy descriptions of the Tehuanas, their beauty, and the exotic, artistic elegance of their dress.

![Fig. 6. Tehuana Dresses, Mexico.](image)

Over time, the Tehuanas became a fascination internationally and nationally, and their image became an icon for an ideal indigeneity and national heritage. The Tehuana’s
traje (dress), which is now mass-produced and in-style, has been repeatedly commodified and consumed by tourists and Mexican elites. The Zapoteca Natalia Toledo writes poetry that explores weaving and textiles through a personal and emotional lens. She captures the artistry and skill of the weavers she grew up surrounded by, one of whom was her mother. In this chapter, I put Toledo’s poems, which celebrate the process and individuals behind the traje, in conversation with the historical commodification of the traje that inevitably separates it from the Zapotec community.

Toledo wears Juchitecan traje and chooses to present herself to the public in a huipil (blouse) and enagua (skirt). For Toledo, the traje is representative of her childhood and the nostalgia that remains after she was taken out of Juchitán and placed in a new culture. It brings her back to a home where her mother’s fingers wove on the loom. Just as poetry is a way for her to connect with her Juchitecan identity, wearing the traje is a way for her to hold onto that piece of who she is and proudly display it to the world. In her poem titled, “Quiénes somos y cuál es nuestro nombre” she asks, “¿Quién soy, si ya no me envuelvo en enaguas y huipiles? / En esta casa nadie conoce mi idioma de niña” (“Who am I, if I no longer wrap myself in enaguas and huipiles? / In this house no one knows my childhood language”) (El dorso del cangrejo 69). Here, Toledo expresses that her “enaguas y huipiles” are intimately linked to who she is as a person, even questioning who she’d be if she didn’t wear them. Toledo then connects this crucial piece of her identity to the difficulty of her move to Mexico City, a place where people didn’t speak Zapotec. The words “wrap myself” evoke feelings of warmth and protection. They are gentle, nurturing, and strong all at once, reinforcing Toledo’s connection to Juchitán.
However, outsider accounts tend to objectify the Tehuana subject and note her traje as evidence for superiority over other indigenous women. These representations contradict Toledo’s use of the traje. One of these outsider representations is that of the Frenchman Mathieu de Fossey. In 1844, he wrote that Tehuanas “wear a very particular dress, which is undoubtedly the most elegant of all the Americas...The first time I saw a group of young women of Tehuantepec in their national dress, I thought they looked divine” (qtd. in Chassen-López 281). Around the same time, the Italian engineer Gaetano Moro reported that the people of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are “incomparably superior to those in other parts of the Republic” and the women, “celebrated … for their good looks,” are “notable for their graceful carriage” (qtd. in Chassen-López 281). For international travelers and Mexicans from other parts of the country, the Isthmus became a popular destination for those who wanted to see the preserved pre-Columbian culture, where indigenous women in gold jewelry looked like royalty.

Following the 1910-1920 Mexican revolution, urban Mexican intellectuals and elite sought to create a new national identity that would unify its people. This resulted in an “ethnicized” interpretation of Mexicanness that incorporated elements of regional indigenous cultures (López 2). In nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses on indigeneity, urban intellectuals wrote about Mexican indigenous peoples from two contradictory perspectives, often moving from one position to another quite easily, even in the span of a single article (Poole 39). This discourse reveals blaring discrepancies: The indigenous Mexican is simultaneously the “other” and sentimentally “ours,” both “noble” and “degenerate,” and a symbol of the past that hinders progress, as well as the
dignified “original Mexican” and a symbol of a modern Mexican identity that celebrates cultural and racial difference (Poole 39).

“While Liberals of the Reform period (1854–1867) and the Porfiriato (1876–1911) were ready to leave behind the white patria criolla (creole fatherland) and to envision the mestizo as the symbol of Mexico, they still could not bring themselves to imagine the living Indian as representative of the nation,” explains Francie Chassen-López (285). However the exotic, beautifully dressed Tehuana was a contrast to the stereotypes of indigenous Mexicans that aligned with the perception of indigenous Mexicans as the ignorant, dirty peasant. Urban Mexican intellectuals and elite were fascinated with the idea of the pre-Colombian “royal indian” and by the 1920s, the Tehuana had become a national icon (Chassen-López 282). The elegant Tehuana was perfect for this role, in her embroidered, artistic huipil, flowing velvet enagua, lace headdress, and gold coin necklaces. She was a romanticized taste of an imagined aristocratic indigenous past, as well as a symbol for Mexico’s future.

Mexico has always celebrated the music, dance, and crafts of its indigenous cultures, but many of the indigenous communities, who make up more than half the population of Mexico, continue to live in a reality of oppression and poverty. The icon of the Tehuana was composed of only the most respectable parts of indigeneity; her features are European, she is tan but not too dark, attractive, and her dress is exquisite. For her role as the symbol of Mexico’s national heritage, it was necessary that she be sufficiently exotic but not so “other” that she would be inaccessible. It was also crucial that she be a woman: “A virginal yet seductive female symbol could promote a growing emotional, passionate attachment to the new nation so that men would sacrifice their lives for “her”
(Landes qtd. in Chassen-López 287). Because of this, the Tehuana was the perfect indigenous woman for the role.

Fig. 7. Tehuana in Wedding Dress.

The Tehuana could be found everywhere in Mexico—in advertisements, on postcards, and as a stock character in theater productions. Additionally, her clothing could be seen at any celebration; Mexico’s elite women began wearing the outfits on national holidays and at festivals, while movie stars had themselves photographed in Tehuana clothing. The traje was politically safe because its popularity allowed it to transcend any racial or social class association. It quickly became detached from any real people or real lived experiences, and was appropriated to build an imagined national
identity. Wearing the Tehuana dress became simply a way to celebrate one’s own Mexican identity (López 36).

However, the Tehuana image and her traje were not only used as a means for celebrating Mexican heritage, they were, and continue to be, used as a tool to market tourism to Oaxaca. The Tehuana dress is a popular souvenir for visiting tourists, and machine-made trajes can be found in markets throughout Mexico and even online stores (Howell 13). The Tehuana’s traje is marketed as both an authentic piece of Mexican culture and a fashion item. Deborah Poole states, “Fashion marks an identity that can be borrowed…Although the Tehuana retains her importance as a marker of place (the Isthmus), her fashionable traje becomes available for the selective assumption of at least two broader identities—Oaxacan and Mexican” (67).

Fig. 8. Oaxaca, Mexico with Pan American World Airways, Agents for Mexicana de Aviacion, circa 1950s.
The Zapoteca Obdulia Ruiz Campbell explains the value of the traje for the indigenous women who make and wear them:

The traje [costume] is very expensive and not easily obtained. Zapotec women must work hard, buying and selling things in order to get the money to buy a traje. It is a product of work, of a woman’s tremendous effort. That is why we appreciate the traje more than outsiders do ... It has great social significance within the community in fiestas and weddings. It gives us pride in who we are. But we are poor people and it costs us much to obtain a traje. We are not like movie stars who can easily dress up in fancy clothes. (Ruiz Campbell qtd. in Campbell and Green 175)

When examining the traje and the history of its use in Mexico, one can see a historical paradox in which elite Mexican women adopt traditional indigenous dress as a fashion item, while indigenous communities surrender their attire in response to modernity, Western influence, and pressure to assimilate. “Post-revolutionary indigenismo\(^3\) sought to go beyond merely glorifying the pre-Conquest past and the Indian in the abstract, to state action in land distribution, education, and other areas in attempts to integrate contemporary indigenous peoples into national life” (Aragón 534-535). However, often these efforts failed to take into account indigenous agency and self-representation,

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\(^3\) “Indigenismo” refers to a broad grouping of discourses—in politics, the social sciences, literature, and the arts—concerned with the status of indigenous peoples in Latin America. Although present throughout Latin America in the 20th century, indigenismo was particularly influential in Mexico, a country with an indigenous population of 12.45% (Cepeda). The ideology, largely led by non-indigenous Mexicans, celebrated indigenous culture as part of the country’s history and affected the country’s state policy in education programs, land reform, political reform, and economic development. Although beneficial for creating a platform for discussing indigenous issues, indigenismo functioned under colonial paradigms of racism and further promoted stereotypes of indigenous groups.
resulting in “the modernization of colonial relations rather than their elimination” (O’Connell cited in Aragón 534-535).

Natalia Toledo’s poems on textiles and weaving contrast the mass-produced and consumed Tehuana traje. She writes of the women in her life who weave and embroider by hand, create art, work hard, and value tradition. Just as Toledo’s mother taught her to weave, the women in her poems have learned it from their mothers and other Juchitecas. It is skill that is passed down, generation by generation, and for Zapotecas, traje is not something that is “in style.” For many Zapotecas, choosing to wear the traje is representative of the pride they have in their culture. Flor, a Oaxacan woman from the Isthmus, has worn the traje her whole life: “I'm proud to wear the traje. I carry the culture, the tradition, the customs with me. And it's not just about me. It's about everyone there. I'm proud...I'm proud that [people] know I'm Zapoteca” (Howell 15).

In Toledo’s poem “Woman Who Weaves,” she tells the story of a woman who brings textiles to life:

**Gunaa riguiiba**

Randá xtí gueela’

rire lade xco’relu’.

Caguibu’ lu ti gueta biguii xiaa yaase’,
caguiche xhiñi guie’ lu lari.

Cuira bandaga ma biaba xa ñeeu

nisi xhidxi yaga bioongo’ biaana.

Cabee lú ti guxharu lade neza

rigapanalu’ ne ruchi’bu’laa.
La mujer que teje

La sombra de la noche
sale de tus piernas.

Tejes sobre un totopo de terciopelo oscurro,
germinan los hilos de las flores sobre la tela.

Las hojas caen bajo tus pies,
sólo le quedan senos a la ceiba.

Un chapulín asoma en el callejón
aplaudes y se va asustado.

Mojas el hilo con saliva
mástil que atraviesa el ojo que borda.

Estás embarazada de flores
y llevas una niña
que dibujará flores sobre el papel cuando crezca.

Duérmete mamá, duerme y deja que tus sueños abran
su boca.
Woman Who Weaves

A nighttime shadow
emerges from your lap.

You weave upon a tortilla of black velvet,
flower children germinate upon the cloth.

Leaves fall at your feet.

only the ceiba tree still has breasts

A cricket appears in the alley

you clap your hands and he runs scared.

You wet the thread with saliva

a mast that travels through the embroidering eye.

You are pregnant with flowers

and you carry a girl

who will draw flowers upon paper when she grows.

Sleep, mama, sleep, and let your dreams open their mouths. (The Black Flower 93)

Like many of Toledo’s poems, this one is full of movement. The tortilla she
weaves upon is the black velvet of a huipil, and on this cloth, flowers are born. Beauty
appears and is born from the weaver’s body—velvet from her lap, flower children from
her hands, and a girl from her womb. Similarly, all around her, motion springs from her
environment. In this poem, Toledo writes from the perspective of the second person,
using “you” ("tu"), rather than observing this woman objectively from the outside. This
choice conveys an intimacy between Toledo and the weaving woman, contrasting the
way in which the Tehuana has been exploited, and her *traje* separated from both her body and her history. Throughout representations in history by non-indigenous outsiders, the weaving woman has symbolized a stereotypical female indigeneity. Toledo reclaims the image of the weaving woman because, for her, this woman is not a representation of an indigenous woman in a painting or movie; the “Woman Who Weaves” is her mother and many of the Zapotecas who raised her in Juchitán. In an interview, Toledo explains that because her mother was a weaver, her childhood was full of colors and textiles: “Fue rodeada también de muchos hilos y telas porque en casa mi mamá tenía un taller de hamacas y había un corredor de bastidores con muchos hilos de todos los colores” (“Dibujar y hacer música con palabras”).

The abundance of movement and physicality in this poem reveal the active process of weaving a *huipil*. Here, it is not a manufactured costume, tourist souvenir, or a fashion item. The *huipil* she speaks of is knowledge that has been passed down and an expression of Zapotec identity and pride. This *huipil* is a craft, a tradition, and a means of making a living.

The poem “The Weaver” also reveals the intimate link between Toledo’s childhood and textiles:

**Ni riguiiba**

Xa’na’ baca’nda’

xhidxi xiaa nari’ni’: carenda doo.

Naga’nda’ neza yoo sica nisa coco ndaani’ miati,

ri’ ndani doo lugia ti yaga dxiba

ni nuá’ guxharu ne bacaanda’,
La tejedora

Senos de algodón tierno
bajo la sombra: hila.

Corredor fresco como el agua de coco en el estómago,
enjambre de hilos ancla sobre un bastidor
sostenido por sueños y chapulines,
abanico surcálido sobre el rostro
una aguja de plata atraviesa siempre
la seda de mis recuerdos.

The Weaver

Breasts of tender cotton
in the shadow: she spins.

Corridor cool as coconut water in its belly,
a swarm of threads anchor on the frame
held there by crickets and dreams,
warm southern fan upon its face
a silver needle always crisscrossing
the silk of my memories. (The Black Flower 91)
In both “Woman Who Weaves” and “The Weaver,” weaving takes place in a very female-centered world. In the former, the weaver as well as her surroundings are feminized. In the latter, the first line immediately throws us into a world of femininity and motherhood with the image of breasts. The weaver’s body is made up of the material she is using; the textile and her body are one. In the last line, Toledo’s memories are also made of a material, silk. This reveals the intimate tie between weaving and her childhood in Juchitán.

Similar to Natalia Toledo, Frida Kahlo also wore Tehuana traje during her lifetime as an artist in Mexico (see Fig. 9). Kahlo’s use of the traje, however, was different than that of Toledo’s. Although for Kahlo, who was not an indigenous woman, it may have been a celebration of her Mexican heritage, she was inevitably furthering the commodification of the traje. Because of her status as an icon, she gives visibility to the traje, almost serving as a living advertisement. However, Frida Kahlo is a complex character because, similar to the Tehuana, she has also become a commodity. Beginning in the 90s, she became a cult figure internationally, her outfits being a crucial piece of her image as a symbol of feminism and Mexicanidad (Aragón 520). Kahlo can be found worldwide on posters and clothing, and her image has become a popular halloween costume. Alba F. Aragón writes that Frida Kahlo “can be seen as both agent and object of such appropriations in her relationship to the equally iconic “Mexican look” of the Tehuana (534). Her use of the traje helped to rid it even further of any racial or regional association and recharge it with a meaning of national identity.
As artists and public figures, both Toledo and Kahlo are consciously performing in a way through their wearing of the attire. Toledo travels the world to read her poetry aloud to international audiences. Therefore, her traje has become a part of the performance and a crucial part of the way it is consumed. Presenting herself in the traje means something different for her than for the audience. For the audience, it is a confirmation of authenticity. It satisfies our need to not only hear about her experiences as a Zapotec woman, but to see a woman who physically fits our idea of a Zapotec woman. For Toledo, it is an expression of how she identifies and how she chooses to
present herself and her body to the world. The desires of her audiences are the same as those of tourists visiting Oaxaca and buying the traje as a souvenir; they are all seeking authenticity. Both audiences arrive expecting to see and experience a certain thing, something they presume based off of years of exposure to representations of indigenous people through history textbooks, literature, and media. The ironic part is that tourists who buy the traje at marketplaces are buying textiles that are far removed from “authenticity” because they have been mass-produced for exactly this type of customer.

Just as Toledo fulfills her audience’s desire for an authentic-looking indigenous woman, she satisfies that craving for authenticity with poems like “Woman Who Weaves” and “The Weaver.” Her poetry explores images of indigenous women from her own life in tandem with stereotypical images of indigenous women. Her poems feature women weaving, cooking, and selling at the marketplace. These women are mothers and grandmothers, they are sexualized and deeply connected with nature. In many instances, Toledo is giving us what we want and expect to find as readers and as outsiders. I cannot say that I have an answer to why Toledo chooses to do this, but perhaps she is attempting to reclaim these stereotypical images, contradicting the disembodiment of traje that is present in Mexico and the rest of the world.
“My Flower Offers You a Drink”: On the Sexualization of the Juchiteca

In 1994, a damaging article in the fashion magazine *Elle* came out and caused an uproar in Juchitán. In the article, the British journalist Jocasta Shakespeare writes about the women of Juchitán, describing them as “red-hot mamas” who regularly keep two husbands, pay young teenage boys for sex, and spend their days drinking beer, dancing, and making money (Acosta). She depicts them as “huge and sensual” and notes “fatness is a sign of a woman’s sexual energy and lack of inhibition in bed” (Shakespeare). She explains that their “string of medieval gold coins” symbolizes their “erotic merit,” while in reality the Juchitecas’ gold necklaces are passed down generation by generation. Juchitecan men, on the other hand, are described as lazy and meek, begging their wives for beer money. Shakespeare’s exploitative story, which perpetuates the stereotype of a matriarchy in which women rule over their men economically and physically, deeply enraged and offended the community of Juchitán, as well as the rest of the Isthmus population. It prompted a conversation between Juchitecans about who should be allowed to tell their story and eventually led to a legal suit in which a Oaxacan organization sued *Elle* magazine.

Although the *Elle* article is one of the most exaggerated examples, it is preceded by a long tradition of outsiders, overwhelmingly male, that portray Zapotecas as sexually liberated women, with loose, natural attitudes about sex, free of any modern or Western influence. These accounts depict their bodies as dripping with sex appeal and spread rumors of their non-traditional polygamous relationships. In this mythical lush paradise, the entire landscape is sexuliazed; men are unable to resist their sexual urges, while animals spend their days and nights mating. Outsider representations juxtapose the
Zapotec community with primitive animals, arguing that the Zapoteca’s beauty and sexuality is a product of her primal environment. Historically, indigenous women have been linked to nature in a way that emphasizes their “otherness” in relation to all that is Western and “civilized.” Beginning with colonization, when sexual coercion and violation were utilized as tools for conquest, indigenous female bodies have been used as vessels for male pleasure and control, as well as instruments for reproduction (in colonial times, this was often through rape). As seen in outsider representations of the Isthmus, indigenous bodies are still over-sexualized, and consequently, these women are stripped of humanity, a voice, and a history.

One of the classic scenes that is repeated in representations is that of Isthmus women bathing nude in the Tehuantepec river. Diego Rivera was one of the artists to include this image in his work of Zapotec women. During his stay in the Isthmus, he painted *The Bather of Tehuantepec* (1932), which depicts a naked Zapoteca bathing in the Tehuantepec River (see Fig. 10). She is naked from the waist up, her voluptuous breasts positioned as the centerpiece of the painting. Another work that featured the bathing Zapotec woman was Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's 1930's film *¡Que Viva México!*, which captures half-naked Juchitecas sprawled out in hammocks, as well as frolicking and sensually bathing together. Miguel Covarrubias’ paintings depict the bathers as having beautiful faces, long hair, and sexualized, curvy model-like bodies (see Fig. 11). They strike poses that could be seen in a Playboy magazine. In his book, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec*, Covarrubias writes, “The relations between the sexes are natural and uninhibited, free of the puritanical outlook on sex of the Indians of the highlands, and the Spanish feudal concept of the inferior position of women” (338). He
contrasts the Zapotecs with other indigenous cultures, implying superiority in their “free” and “natural” sexual relations, which are untainted by Western influence.

Fig. 10. Diego Rivera. Bañista de Tehuantepec / Bather of Tehuantepec. 1923.
Edaena Saynes-Vásquez, a Juchitecan anthropologist, responds to the representations of Zapotecas bathing in public rivers and seas, expressing that these women are not bathing to be watched nor to display their “sexual liberation” (200). These representations turn them into exotic figures whose public nudity and beauty justifies an exploitative male gaze. They invite an unwanted fetishization by outsiders and pose the Zapotecas’ bathing practices as evidence for their supposed loose sexual attitudes.

Paintings like those of Covarrubias almost resemble National Geographic photos of animals at a watering hole, which perpetuates the exploitative male gaze that renders them un-human like. These representations also celebrate the idea of a preserved past and
promote a romanticized distance from modernity. They glorify an “untouched” culture from “the good old days,” in which women were freer with their naked bodies. However, not all outsiders have viewed this apparent sexually liberated land as enchanting. A few of them, German explorer Von Tempsky, for example, lament the Juchitecas’ apparent immorality: “Her moral condition is deplorable,” Tempsky writes in 1858 (qtd. in Campbell and Green 166). Representations that praise the Zapoteca’s supposed sexual freedom, as well as those that condemn it, function to turn these women into something “other” in comparison to Western women and norms.

In their essay “A History of Representations of Isthmus Zapotec Women,” historians Campbell and Green explain that these representations by male European explorers, such as Charnay, are an example of the “Wild Women” discourse. Tiffany and Adams define this trend of the “Romance of the Wild Woman” as “a constellation of images, metaphors, and meanings about women and their sexuality set against the contrast between civilization and the primitive” (Tiffany and Adams 20). In these portrayals, the “Wild Woman” is a natural, savage being with a large sexual appetite. Her beauty is rooted in its connection to nature of non-western, primitive lands. White men invented this discourse in order to strengthen male supremacy in Third World societies. Tiffany and Adams convey that “the dream world about women in exotic other worlds, where the imagined comes true, is seen through men’s eyes. Men use remote places as playgrounds for their psyches. They enjoy experiences in a reality they have created far from home, while women in these male-defined worlds are rendered silent and passive” (Tiffany and Adams 98). In the representations of Zapotec women, “their otherness in
relation to European women is a product of the primal physical environment they inhabit” (Campbell and Green 166).

For outsiders visiting Juchitán and the rest of the Isthmus, a notable aspect of the culture has been the overt sexual language used casually by Zapotecas. In representations, it has been a feature of Zapotec society that has served as evidence for female sexual liberation and loose attitudes around sex. Saynes-Vásquez writes that their erotic humor is part of joking relationships and does not reflect truth about their actual sex lives (200). As an anthropologist, she confirms that the outspokenness that Zapotec women display when they talk about sex is not exclusively a Zapotec feature, but can be found in other cultures around the world, especially native cultures. Obdulia Ruiz Campbell, another anthropologist from the Isthmus, also writes about the reality of allusions to sex in everyday conversations between Zapotec women. “From my point of view, this serves as a kind of psychological relaxation or therapy for Isthmus women because they free themselves from the tensions and pressures of their daily responsibilities,” she expresses (138). She explains that in many cases, this wordplay is only a distraction from work and their abusive, adulterous husbands (138).

Although so far this chapter has only presented male observers, men are not the only ones responsible for creating overly sexual characters out of Zapotecas. Elena Poniatowska represents Juchitecas as exotic and sexual subjects in the book Juchitán de las mujeres. According to Poniatowska, “Their hands are as used to handling the kettle as a man’s sex. Their bottle of beer is also the male organ, and they take it to their lips over and over again” (16). In this excerpt, an everyday household item becomes a penis, revealing that in Juchitán, having sex is as much of a casual part of their lives as using a
kettle. A reader can only imagine that sexual acts define the day-to-day in Juchitán.

However, Poniatowska does not stop there:

Zapotec women have always been openly erotic, and they wear their sensuality on their shirtsleeves. Sex is a little clay toy; they take it in their hands, mold it as they please, shake it, knead it together with the corn of their *totopos*. Everything reminds them of it, the humming of the *zanate de oro* bird, the fluttering of the butterfly, the color of the red snapper. So much that foreigners—and in Juchitán everybody is a foreigner, except the people from the Isthmus—are either scandalized or fascinated forever. (14)

In this description, Poniatowska describes sensuality as an integral piece of who these women are and how they self-identify. Sex is so important in their lives that Poniatowska gives it a physical form of its own, which Juchitecas play with and manipulate while they do their daily work. Poniatowska assumes the role of an omniscient narrator, claiming that everything around them, even the sight of a butterfly, reminds them of sex.

Poniatowska also declares, “In Juchitán, Oaxaca, men don’t know what to do with themselves except to put themselves inside women. Children hang from women’s breasts, and iguanas gaze at the world from the top of their heads...Women are very proud of being female, because they carry their redemption between their legs” (13). This depiction, as well as many others in Poniatowska’s writing, turns the people of Juchitán into primitive animals who are always busy mating because they don’t know what else to do. Supposedly, the men are so animalistic that they can't help but constantly give into the urge of having sex. By using the phrase “put themselves inside women,” she builds a narrative in which sex is a primal act, void of any pleasure or love. She creates a scene
where children hang from their mothers’ breasts, almost like monkeys, and both iguanas and children appear to be extensions of their bodies. In the final line, Poniatowska writes about the Juchitecas’ pride. In fact, Juchitecas are very proud of being women, but connecting that pride to their genitals and sex appeal takes away from the validity of that sentiment. Through these portrayals, Poniatowska asserts that these women are only valuable and powerful because of their sexuality and reproductive ability.

In *Juchitán de las mujeres*, not only are the people of Juchitán sexualized, but also the entire landscape of Juchitán itself. Poniatowska claims the sexual power of the Juchitecas is so potent that even animals are affected: “The songs of the crocodile, the jaguar, the crab, the parrot flock turn them into domestic animals ready to succumb before the charms of women” (13). She continues, both portraying Juchitán as a land permeated with sex and comparing it to the Garden of Eden: “Love scatters itself over the cornfields, in the watermelon shrubs, along the river banks; people make love outdoors. Juchitán is the sorceress of primary passions in a world conceived before original sin” (16-17). She even goes so far to claim that in the meaning of “Juchitán” (“place of white flowers”), the whiteness refers to semen (17). Poniatowska’s essay concludes with multiple paragraphs of lengthy, erotic narratives of animal mating rituals. These over-the-top portrayals are graphic and bizarre and liken the Juchitecas to animals in heat. By juxtaposing this depiction with representations of Juchitecas, Poniatowska is inevitably comparing the two.

*Juchitán de las mujeres* is not the only work of literature that equates Juchitán with the Garden of Eden. Many works of art and literature compare the two, claiming Juchitán is a lush utopia in which beautiful women and animals roam freely. Filmmaker
Eisenstein wrote in his journal, “A portion of the Garden of Eden remains before the closed eyes of those who have never seen the unlimited Mexican vistas. And you are left with the tenacious idea that Eden was not located somewhere between the Tigris and the Euphrates, but, of course, here, somewhere between the Gulf of Mexico and Tehuantepec!” (qtd. in Poniatowska 14). In his film ¡Que Viva México!, “the flirtatious rituals of parrots and monkeys are juxtaposed with scenes of young lovers anticipating their honeymoon” (“Malinche to Matriarchal Utopia” 819). Graciela Iturbide’s photos of Juchitecas follow in a similar vein. In her photography, fish spring from their hands, iguanas arise from their heads, and crabs cover their faces. Nature is an extension of their bodies and their beauty comes from the uninhibited vegetation that they inhabit.

Despite the sexualization of her community, Natalia Toledo does not steer clear of including sex in her poems. Instead, her poetry provides us with a different perspective on sexuality in Juchitán. One of the sections in her book The Black Flower is titled “A hand in the bush makes for sweet work in the kitchen” (“En la cocina, el que juega su sexo tiene buen sazón”), a Juchitecan saying that refers to masturbation. This chapter is packed with rich images of sensuality and food. “According to Toledo...cooking is one of the ways of expressing love” (Kozlowska-Day 144). “Guiñá’ dxuladi” (“Chocolate Chili Pepper”) is one of those poems, combining the pleasures of local Oaxacan ingredients and sex:

**Guiñá’ dxuladi**

Sica ruxhalecabe ti bacuela
naguchi yaa ne ruzaani’,
secaca ruxhele nda’gu’ guiropa chu xco’relu'
ora zuba’ ndaani’ guixhe
ti zaque chu’ ndaani’ guixhe
ti zaque chu’ ndaani’ xhigalú’
xquiña dxuladi xpa’du’lu’
ne guzulú guchaahuilu’
biziaa birubú’ lu dxia sti xquendaracala’dxilu’.

**Chile chocolate**

El totomostle abre luminoso
amarillo y verde.
Tú descubres de par en par tus piernas
cuando te sientas en la hamaca
para que en tu jícara entre
el chile-chocolate de tu hombre
y así batir el cacao
que doraste sobre el comal de tu deseo

**Chocolate Chili Pepper**

Yellow and green cornhusks open
filled with light,
You open your legs wide
when you sit down in the hammock
so that the chocolate chili of your man
may enter your calabash
and stir up the cocoa beans
browned on the comal of your desire. (The Black Flower 47)

This poem is an extended sexual metaphor in which the erotic human body and vegetable life are in sync. For Toledo, this is a very intimate link. The sexual metaphors in her poetry are not the least bit subtle, and they serve as an example of the sexual humor and joking that takes place in Juchitán. The yellow and green cornhusks open just as the woman’s legs open. This peeling of layers off a phallic ear of corn could also represent the removing of clothing. Here, Toledo connects sex to the ripening of food. Through this exaggerated nature of metaphor, she plays with her readers.

In “Chocolate Chili Pepper,” Toledo presents us with an array of traditional ingredients local to Oaxaca. Through using local ingredients specific to her childhood in Juchitán, she reveals smells and tastes that are strongly linked to a familiar place. She combines these ingredients and the product is pleasure—an action that feels alchemical. One of the ingredients in this concoction is a calabash, a type of gourd that was historically not only eaten but also often dried and carved out to be used as a container to hold water. It is a hollow vessel, waiting to be filled. Just as it is filled with water, it is filled with the “chocolate chili of your man.”

Another ingredient in the poem is cocoa, which the Aztecs believed was a gift from the heavens. According to mythology, cocoa beans were brought down by the god Quezalcoatl, who was responsible for the creation of the world. In Mesoamerican times,
cocoa beans were also used as currency and seen as a luxury. Mythology suggests that cocoa beans, as well as maize, were two of the ingredients that Quezalcoatl used to make the first human body.

This poem is reminiscent of mole, which is a notoriously rich sauce that can contain hundreds of ingredients. Mexicans have been making it since pre-Hispanic times, however, it is especially significant for Oaxacans, who have popularized many different variations of the sauce. Most moles start with a chili paste, and then various seeds, nuts, and spices are added, along with a starch like plantain or maize. Many moles are defined by a prominent ingredient, chocolate. In Toledo’s poem, cocoa beans are roasted on a comal, a smooth griddle that has been used since pre-Hispanic times to cook tortillas, toast spices, and sear meat. This poem evokes flavors and smells of mole, which typically includes all of the local ingredients Toledo mentions (corn, chili, and cocoa beans). In the poems, she brings to life the process—one of harvesting, mixing, heating, and stirring in order to produce a rich sensory pleasure.

“Chocolate Chili Pepper” portrays female sexuality, but not in the way that we are often exposed to when learning about indigenous women. In contradiction to the representations of the submissive and violated Malinche figure, Toledo shows us a reality of Juchitecas owning their pleasure. Her poems on sexuality are open and joyous. They are a celebration of womanhood, indigeneity, and sex, which, for Toledo, are always deeply in sync with the surrounding natural world. They praise rich flavors and sensations, and, as many of Toledo’s poems do, they activate the body’s senses. Everything about “Chocolate Chili Pepper” screams out sex, in a way that almost feels funny. However, at the same time, her poem is an undeniable act of rebellion. This
defiance to the world’s expectations of indigenous women can even be found in the Zapoteca’s body position; She sits in the hammock in a nontraditional way by spreading her legs, vulnerable to world, but also open to it. Toledo’s focus on indigenous female pleasure is an act of rebellion in and of itself. This poem is a good example of the sexual humor and joking that takes place in Juchitán. Comfort with sexuality is different from over-sexualizing, and using common activities, like cooking, as a playful way of describing sex is different from exoticizing.

In another poem, Toledo writes of a hummingbird sipping nectar from a flower that can also be read as a sexual metaphor:

Sica ré’ biulú niidxi sti’ guie’ rica lu yaga
sacaca re’ guie’ stinge’ xnisalu.’
Riuulu’ ndaani’ ra nari’ni’ xcú
ne ruyubilulu ti guie huána’ guini’ la’ lu.’

Como los colibríes a una orquídea
liba mi flor por ti.
Entras a donde el tallo es dócil,
bucas un espejo que pronuncie tu nombre.

Like hummingbirds to an orchid
my flower offers you a drink.
You enter where the stem is tender,
in search of a mirror that says your name. (The Black Flower 61)
For centuries, hummingbirds have been particularly important for Zapotec and other Mexican indigenous cultures. For pre-Columbian mesoamerican cultures, they have often been associated with gods of fertility, reproduction, and war, as well as being symbols of magic and healing (Arizmendi and Berlanga 23). In addition, hummingbirds are a symbol of masculinity, and specifically, the penis (Hernández). In Toledo’s poem, the hummingbird’s beak is the phallic, the petals of the flower are the woman’s vulva, and the stem is her vagina. The act of “offering” a drink, or offering him her body, is one that is extremely consensual. Just as “Chili Chocolate Pepper” brings up the image of a woman opening herself up to partner, this poem celebrates women experiencing sex on their own terms. The subjects of these poems actively confront the stereotypical weak, abused indigenous female body, like that of La Malinche.

Octavio Paz, the prominent Mexican poet and diplomat, wrote about La Malinche and the concept of being open versus closed in his 1950 collection of essays El laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude). In one of its chapters, “Hijos de la Malinche” (“Sons of La Malinche”), Paz examines the word “chingada” through common Mexican expressions such as “hijos de la chingada,” which translates to “sons of the raped woman.” In the case of Mexico, he argues that “la chingada” is La Malinche, Cortés’ mistress and translator, whose body was exploited and conquered by the European enemy. Therefore, the sons of the chingada are the Mexican people, who were born as the result of a violation by an outsider. He then analyzes the verb “chingar,” characterizing it as a “masculine, active, and cruel” word that “provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction” (O. Paz 21). According to Paz, “The person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who
inflicts it...The verb *chingar* signifies the triumph of the closed, the male, the powerful, over the open…” (21). The *chingada* embodies the epitome of passivity. “She does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust...This passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the *Chingada*. She loses her name; she is no one” (O. Paz 25). In his essay, Paz equates the act of being closed with male power and violence, specifically sexual violence. The verb relates to the idea of breaking or ripping open. Openness, on the other hand, is not much better; one who is open is passive to the point of losing her identity. She is defenseless against the exterior world, who is torn open by the man, even if she gives herself willingly. Paz’s concept of openness directly contrasts the celebration of female openness that Toledo explores in her poetry. In her poems, opening oneself for sexual pleasure is an act that is done willingly and beautifully. The Juchiteca’s sexuality leads to pleasure for the women themselves, while in the example of La Malinche, her sexuality results in pleasure felt by the colonizer. This poetic celebration of female sexuality and pleasure conflicts with the deep rooted history of the indigenous woman as a figure who is stripped of a name, history, and identity through the physical violation of a man.

Virginity is highly respected in Zapotec culture, and even today, many girls are expected to keep their virginities until marriage. *El rapto* (the abduction) is a traditional Mexican marriage ritual that contradicts the mythical sexual liberation and female dominion in the Isthmus. *El rapto* occurs when a young couple wants to get engaged; the boy will “kidnap” the girlfriend, bring her to his house, and take her virginity (V. Toledo). His family then comes to see “proof of virginity,” in the form of blood on a handkerchief or bedsheets. If there is blood, there will be a huge multiple-day-long party
of drinking, dancing, and eating. However, if there is not any evidence of blood, the girl is seen as a shame to her family, who will then place a broken jug over their doorway so everyone knows. The boy may still decide to marry her, but if he does, it is against his family’s wishes (Richardson 52). *El rapto* may take place if one set of families disagrees with the marriage, the couple wants to honor Zapotec tradition, or sometimes, if the girl initially disagrees to the marriage, in which case she is taken against her will (Ruiz Campbell 139). The Zapoteca Saynes-Vásquez points out that sexual assaults by husbands are ignored in the discourse around sexuality in Juchitán. She believes it is unfair to leave out this aspect of their sexual lives and selectively emphasize other aspects (200). Ruiz Campbell notes that, in her opinion, the Zapotec women are under a lot of sexual pressure: “She has to have children (or otherwise the marriage fails) and, likewise, be ready to meet the sexual needs of her husband when he requires it, regardless of how tired she is from her many daily tasks” (140)

Iturbide captures a photo of the aftermath of *el rapto* (see Fig. 12). Her photo *El rapto* shows a fatigued young woman lying in the bed in which she recently lost her virginity. The flowers scattered across the bed reveal that she has passed the test.
Ruiz Campbell expresses her feelings about the practice, declaring it a “shameful and denigratory action for women” (139). She explains that several of her friends felt “embarrassment, fear, and pain during the rapto, and that sexual pleasure was secondary” (139). It humiliated them to know that the families of their boyfriends were waiting to see the “proof of virginity.” They were also afraid that the boys would declare that they were not virgins, even if in fact they were, due to ignorance or bad intentions. Ruiz Campbell discloses that her mother and other female family members were abducted with such “violent force, that they received blows to their legs so they would not resist so much and were later pulled by their hands to the houses of their boyfriends where they were deflowered” (139). As of late, *el rapto* has become increasingly less acceptable in the Isthmus, and many towns have given up the practice.

In Natalia Toledo’s newest collection of poetry, *El dorso del cangrejo* (*The Back of the Crab*), published in 2016, she examines the ritual of *rapto*. These poems explore
“las cosas que pasan algunas mujeres que son rituales donde no necesariamente nos vemos como personas, sino como objeto” (“Natalia Toledo escribe el libro de poemas”). Toledo writes these poems from the perspective of a Zapoteca who did not have to experience el rapto first hand because of her move to Mexico City. However, many of her friends back in Juchitán were forced go through with it. In an interview, Toledo explains, “Los poemas nacieron porque tengo una amiga que no sangró y automáticamente la devolvieron a casa. Cómo puede ser más importante teñir un pañuelo que el amor.” She reflects on the importance of virginity in her hometown and the supposed honor of taking part in el rapto: “Las mujeres en Juchitán nos enseñaron que eso te honra, que es un motivo de orgullo, mi abuela me enseñó que eso era importante” (“Natalia Toledo escribe el libro de poemas”). She considers these poems, such as “Tumba primera” (“First Tomb”), to be a form of protest, noting, “Soy una mujer rebelde” (“Natalia Toledo escribe el libro de poemas”).

**Ba’ tobi**

Nexhu’ daapu’ biruba xiñá’,

guidila’du’ nusiasi balaana laa.

Nacu’ ti guie’ biele gasi ne ti bicuini ná’,

ti xho’ cubi cayuu ndaaya’ ra birá gueela’.

Lexu cayé’ niidxi sti’ beeu naya’ni’ dxindxi.

Guirá niza cuyaa ne bi xti’ yoo li’dxu’.

Zedanda saa ne zuyaacabe ne xhelu’,

rendu ti larigueela’ ne ca i’cu’ pora guiluxe s:

guirá’ ni nari’ni’ naguenda rirá.
Napu’ ndaani’ ladxido’lo’ ti guendaracaladxi’
caluxe
ma’ qui zagui’tu’ buñega ne ca biza’nu’
ne ma qui zaba’quilu’ lari ndase bichonga ne
dé quichi’
dxí gaca’ nanda’lu’.

Tumba primera

Duermes cubierta en tulipanes rojos,
al cuerpo lo anestesia el honor.
Eres una flor recién abierta con un meñique,
un aroma nuevo se bautiza terminado la noche,
el conejo bebe la leche de una luna transparente,
la milpa baila con el viento de tu casa.
Llegará la música y bailarán con tu esposo,
desde tu envoltura quieres que dé fin la fiesta:
toda la virginidad es efímera.
En medio del corazón tienes un deseo que expira,
jamás volverás a jugar con muñecas
y jamás caminarás la calles en calzones
    almidonados
cuando tengas color. (El dorso del cangrejo 11)
The red tulips present in this poem represent the red flowers that are given by friends and family after proof of virginity is displayed. These red flowers, representing blood and virginity, are then made into garlands worn on the heads of party-goers during the celebration (V. Toledo). They are also traditionally scattered on the bed of consummation, which the girl often rests in for days after the rapto takes place. The poem expresses a level of distance between the girl and the celebration taking place. She remains wrapped up in her bed, her “envoltura,” while elsewhere, music plays and other people dance with her soon-to-be husband.

Toledo’s use of the words “honor” and “anesthesia” together turns the ritual into a procedure. Suddenly, the bed becomes a hospital bed, sex becomes a painful operation that requires numbing, and the boy is the one operating on her. According to Toledo’s opinion on the humiliation of el rapto, the anesthesia is also present to numb the embarrassment many girls feel after the ritual. This directly conflicts with the love and pleasure present in Toledo’s previous poems. Toledo writes about a “meñique” (“pinky finger”) opening a flower, which references the traditional practice of el rapto, in which the boy takes his girlfriend’s virginity with his finger. The image of opening a flower with one’s finger reflects an unnatural interruption of a life cycle, in which flowers are meant to open in their own time, by their own will. The last lines mourn the loss of virginity, and with it, the loss of childhood and play. The ritual of el rapto, a tradition that does not allow individual girls agency over their own bodies, contradicts with the stereotypes of Juchitán, as well as Toledo’s empowering poetry.
Conclusion

In recent decades, there has been an emergence of Latin American indigenous writers, creating literature in their native languages. Zapotec writers (many of whom are poets), however, stand out. In a time of increasing globalization and threats to indigenous cultures and environments, “the mission of these authors is the recuperation of their native cosmologies, traditions, and philosophies” (Kozlowska-Day 142). Indigenous poets from Juchitán, like Natalia Toledo, preserve, celebrate, and spread knowledge about Zapotec culture and tradition through their words. They also combat the threats of external Western pressures to assimilate and let go of their native language.

Although previously an overwhelmingly bilingual community, Juchitán currently faces rapidly decreasing numbers in the amount of Zapotec speakers in younger generations; According to historians and linguists, Juchitecan youth under the age of 20 are no longer very likely to be bilingual and the Zapotec language could be extinct in 100 years time (Manzo; “The State of Zapotec Poetry”). Wendy Call, translator of the Juchiteca Irma Pineda’s poetry, discusses this linguistic emergency in her article “Endangered Language.” She shares that “50 percent of the world’s languages are similarly endangered,” which means that “half of our global repository for recording human experience, naming the world around us, and understanding our place in the ecosphere might soon be lost to us” (Call). This is a frightening reality, and one that Natalia Toledo reflects on in her poetry: "Perhaps I am the final branch who will speak Zapotec. / My children, homeless birds in the jungle of forgetfulness, / will have to whistle their language" (The Black Flower 117).
Clare Sullivan is the woman behind the English translations in *The Black Flower*. In this process of translation, Sullivan worked with both Toledo and Irma Pineda. Sullivan conveys that what makes Toledo’s poetry so beautiful is also what makes it so hard to translate. Her poetry centers on the specific traditions, smells, tastes, and nature of her people—realities that are unfamiliar to other Mexicans, and even more unfamiliar to English speakers. This element introduced the challenge of attempting to translate or communicate Zapotec words that do not have an English (or even Spanish) equivalent. Sullivan often found herself debating over finding an English word that is similar, leaving the word in Zapotec, or explaining the meaning of the Zapotec word (“Translator’s Note” 119). This translation was a difficult process without any correct answers. “Poetry translation, especially from indigenous languages, is never a neutral task,” writes Sullivan (“Translator’s Note” 122).

Another aspect that is lost when Isthmus Zapotec is translated into another language is the sound and musicality of the language. Zapotec, being a tonal language, sounds different from English and Spanish, which are not tonal. Therefore, Zapotec’s inherent musicality is lost. “I can, however, strive to imitate her patterns of sound and the way sound echoes meaning,” Sullivan explains (“Translator’s Note” 120). She believes that “the strength of Toledo’s poetry lies in the energy she puts into each picture she draws with color, sound and story” (Translator’s Note” 121). This energy can be difficult to recreate in another language, especially as a woman who had a very different upbringing from the one Toledo had in Juchitán.

In addition to fighting for the survival of her native language through her poetry, Toledo runs “El camino de la iguana,” a program that teaches Zapotec to children. The
15-day workshop, which is also lead by historian and linguist Víctor Cata, takes place in various Isthmus towns and has spread to other parts of Oaxaca, as well as areas of Los Angeles, where there are communities of Oaxacan immigrants. In the workshop, Cata teaches about the origin and alphabet of Zapotec, while Toledo shares the cultural richness of the language through writing, reading and listening (Manzo).

In recent years, glaring monuments of Western globalization and modernization have moved into Juchitán: Bodega Aurrera (a chain owned by Walmart) and fast food restaurants like McDonald’s and Burger King representing a few (Call). The employees of these chains only address customers in Spanish, while television shows and radio programs also promote the use of Spanish (and sometimes even English) over Zapotec. Toledo’s poetry offers the world an alternative to Western consumerist values. In her own words: “Es la gran diferencia entre dos concepciones del mundo: desde el punto de vista de los pueblos autóctonos, todos en realidad necesitamos muy poco para vivir, pero hemos empezado a creernos el cuento de que necesitamos más y hay que consumir, tener una serie de cosas, comprar y comprar, trabajar y trabajar para sólo comprar” (“Dibujar y hacer música con palabras”). In contrast to happiness through material gratification, Toledo’s poems celebrate joy through the simple pleasures of being in nature and playing outside.

Another recurrent theme in poetry written by Isthmus Zapotecs, as well as other indigenous writers, is the connection between humans and the natural world. The ancient wisdom and indigenous traditions featured in this poetry challenge Western science, serving as a second model for sustainability. Ida Kozlowska-Day believes that in a time of environmental crisis, “their writings offer a valid alternative for a new environmental
ethics, based on a relationship of mutual respect and duty with the lived environment and the biotic community” (142). As the Juchiteca poet Irma Prineda says, “I create poetry as a way to keep collective memory of my culture alive and to reflect on what is happening to our culture. When I say ‘our culture,’ of course I’m also referring to the earth, to the sea” (qtd. in Call).

This tradition of indigenous poetry is about our duty to listen—to the earth that is dying, to its indigenous cultures that are fighting for survival, as well as to the wisdom and knowledge of past generations. These indigenous poets, including Natalia Toledo, call on fellow Zapotecs to join the fight for the future of their language and culture. They also speak to non-indigenous readers, letting them know that this fight is their responsibility too, as inhabitants of the same earth.
Personal Reflections

When I first read Natalia Toledo’s *The Black Flower*, I found it beautiful and inspiring. I decided to look into Juchitán, which was such a crucial piece of her poetry and identity. That search initially led me to Iturbide and Poniatowska’s *Juchitán de las mujeres*, as well as a host of internet articles that featured Juchitán as a matriarchal land of powerful female entrepreneurs. I was instantly fascinated; Juchitán was unlike anywhere I had ever heard of and I was hooked on reading more about it. I bought into the stereotypes of Juchitán because everything I was reading confirmed them and supported them with new “evidence.” Obviously I trusted the voices of accomplished anthropologists and intellectuals who had spent years studying and living in the city, building close relationships within the community. Why wouldn’t I trust them, as someone who had never been there? But the further I looked into Juchitán, different opinions, ones that were hidden behind the allure of this mythical paradise, began to rise to the surface.

One day it hit me: It was suddenly clear that I could no longer characterize Juchitán as a matriarchal society run by sexually liberated women, much less write an entire paper based on those ideas. I realized I had been naive in accepting everything that was put in front of me. It was a fairly slow process coming to this realization because, internally, I was reluctant to let go of that imagined reality and the captivating essay it would dictate. I was also resistant to giving up the hope of a matriarchy, an idea I felt empowered and inspired by. I spent a couple of weeks trying to confirm my previous beliefs, searching for evidence that would prove all I had initially read about Juchitán was in fact true. However, the further I looked, the more I sources I found that contradicted
those stereotypes. I felt stuck, so I decided to return to *The Black Flower*, something I could trust as a personal representation of one woman’s lived experiences in Juchitán. Toledo’s words gave me a new direction, and from then on, I decided to let the poetry lead the way. I realized I didn’t have to let go of the exotic tales of Juchitán and its people; I could include them in my essay by challenging them—tracing them back to the source, examining who the players were behind them and how their positions in the world influenced them. This approach would make for an even more fascinating paper, and more importantly, an honest one.

Throughout this process, I have needed to repeatedly check myself, examining the way in which I, as a white non-indigenous woman from the United States, present information and analysis to my readers. Countless times I have caught myself portraying Juchitán and its community in a folkloric way, unintentionally promoting the stereotypes I’m attempting to challenge. There have been times when I’ve felt uncomfortable writing about these topics as a woman with this identity and position in the world, as someone who’s never been to the Isthmus. I have questioned whether or not I have a place in this discourse, and if what I’m doing is putting just another harmful portrayal of the Isthmus Zapotecs out into the world. However, I have tried to be transparent with myself and my readers, constantly questioning my influences and motivations. I hope to have shared some of the beauty and importance of the Zapotec community with my readers.


---. *Nuestra señora de las iguanas / Our Lady of the Iguanas*. 1979. Photograph. SFMOMA.


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