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## “The Ecological Dimension of Natalia Toledo Paz’s Poetry”

Ida Day

In recent decades, many contemporary writers and environmental activists have integrated notions of indigenous spirituality into their ecological framework, contrasting idealized ancestral heritage/wisdom as a model for sustainability with modern Western values, which they view as upholding the neoliberal capitalist order responsible for the current ecological crisis.<sup>i</sup> As observed by Leonardo Boff, one of the most significant contributors to the field of environmental ethics in Latin America, “In critical moments such as the one in which we are currently living, it is important to revisit the ancient teachings of different peoples, and also to learn from one another” (*Essential Care* 12). According to Boff, the anthropocentric ethics of our civilization, deeply rooted in Christian tradition, have disrupted the connectedness with the whole of the universe, causing ecological imbalance.<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, in the light of steadily increasing urgency of environmental problems, many contemporary scholars question Western science and religion and call for the reevaluation of traditional ecological knowledge. These ecocritical investigations propose a new system of ethics for our civilization: a decisive challenge to the modern paradigm characterized by anthropocentric and consumerist values. Simultaneously, the recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of indigenous writers, one of the most important cultural phenomena in Latin America. The mission of these authors is the recuperation of their native cosmologies, traditions, and philosophies, the central aspect of which is the intimate relationship between human beings and the natural world. 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.

This essay explores the position and contribution of Natalia Toledo Paz, one of the most recognized contemporary poets in the native languages of Mexico, to the field of environmental ethics in local and global contexts. I focus on her bilingual works, written in Spanish and Zapotec, *Ca gunaa gubidxa, ca gunaa guiiba'risaca/Mujeres de sol, mujeres de oro* (2002) and *Guie'yaase'/Olivo negro* (2005), which revive the traditions, the poet's memories, the nature, and the spirituality of her native Juchitán. Her focus on the Juchitec women have extended and deepened the mission of contemporary indigenous writers by incorporating the concerns of Latin American ecofeminism, which calls for the recognition of ancient wisdom and traditions: "Indigenous peoples everywhere are among the world's poorest; this is especially true of indigenous women. This situation will probably not improve until non-indigenous viewpoints of superiority and assimilation give way to respect and recognition of the value of indigenous lifestyles" (Ress 68). Even though a significant part of Toledo Paz's poetry is dedicated to women, the main objective of the poet is to address the threats posed by globalization to the environment and indigenous culture rather than to focus on the problems in gender relations in Zapotec society. Toledo Paz's work reflects ecological concerns that no longer apply to exclusively environmental problems (as originally defined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866), but also include "the relationships between individuals, communities, and their (natural and built) environments" (Gersdorf *et al.* 15). This essay demonstrates how the feminine and indigenous perspective of Toledo Paz contributes to the current ecological debate by emphasizing the importance of maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity.

Natalia Toledo Paz is the daughter of a Mexican graphic artist, Francisco Toledo, and was born in 1967 in Juchitán, Oaxaca.<sup>iii</sup> Until the age of seven, she lived in a Zapotec-speaking community, with her multi-generational maternal family. She recalls with affection various

activities that took place in her cozy, modest, and lively home, such as hammock weaving, preparing food, and listening to the stories told by her grandmother.<sup>iv</sup> Moving to Mexico City and starting school was a difficult adjustment for Natalia, since Spanish was her second language that she was only briefly exposed to in the Juchitán kindergarten. Insecure of her ability to communicate and lonely for her family, she took refuge in writing. The poet's childhood memories as well as the sensuality and musicality of her native language have had a profound influence on her artistic creation: "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 22). Toledo Paz's statement is supported by Carlos Montemayor, in "Poetry in Mexican Indigenous Languages" (2005), who observes that "the Zapotecs of the Isthmus have created what is arguably the most important modern literary tradition of all the Indigenous languages of Mexico" (2).

In spite of the intimate bond with her maternal language, Toledo Paz's first poetry book, *Paraíso de fisuras* (1990), co-written with Rocío González, was published in Spanish. The decision to write in Spanish was motivated by her desire to challenge herself, a formidable endeavor for a poet who "sings, laughs, and dreams in Zapotec" (Arciniega 1). It also served her need to communicate with the rest of the world and be part of a global community, which she summarized in the following words: "Estar apartados no puede ser nuestro discurso, como tampoco decir que somos puros. No somos puros, estamos hechos de mezclas, como todos. Tenemos un origen y seguimos hablando en esa lengua, que es una maravilla [...], pero estamos conectados con todo y al tanto de lo que sucede en el mundo. No tiene sentido estar aislados" ("Dibujar y hacer música con palabras"). Natalia Toledo Paz is also the author of *Ca gunaa*

*gubidxa, ca gunaa guiiba'risaca/Mujeres de sol, mujeres de oro* (2002), *Xtaga be'ñe'/Flor de pantano* (2004), and *Guie'yaase'/Olivo negro* (2005). Her poetry has been published in numerous anthologies all over the world, translated into various languages, and presented at international conferences. In 2004, she was awarded the Nezahualcōyotl Prize for Indigenous-Language Literature. Apart from her bilingual literary production, Toledo Paz uses other forms of artistic expression to promote the Zapotec culture - as a gourmet chef specializing in the cuisine of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, an embroiderer of *huipils*, and a jewelry designer.

The emergence of contemporary indigenous writers has evolved from the rising political, social, and cultural awareness of the indigenous peoples of Latin America since the 1970s, after centuries of oppression and marginalization. Erick D. Langer y Elena Muñoz, in *Contemporary Indigenous Movements in Latin América* (2003), examine how the process of globalization instigated the ethnic movements and activism. The first organizations that united diverse indigenous groups on national level appeared in the 1970s, and two decades later, due to the accessibility of transport, telecommunication, and the Internet, the process reached the international scale. The five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage of discovery to the Americas in 1992 was a crucial moment for the indigenous activists, who counteracted the celebrations of that event, claiming their political and economic rights. The same year coincided with the granting of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Guatemalan indigenous rights defender, Rigoberta Menchú, and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro - "a highly publicized event in which indigenous peoples created new awareness on the international stage" (Langer xvi). On January 1 of 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force, the purpose of which was to eliminate barriers to trade and investment between the US, Canada, and Mexico. The effects of NAFTA turned out to be detrimental to farmers in Mexico who saw food prices fall

due to the cheap imports from the US. Concerned with the economic and environmental situation of rural indigenous people in Chiapas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation rebelled against the Mexican state on the same day the trade bloc was formed. The Zapatista activism has had enormous implications on the political, cultural, and linguistic autonomy of the indigenous people of Mexico. Among its important achievements is the General Law of Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, approved by Congress in 2003, which recognizes the indigenous languages of Mexico as national languages.

The rebirth of indigenous activism focused on the preservation of ancestral land, language, religion, and cultural heritage, was accompanied by claims that the aboriginal peoples “had unique belief systems and knowledge, and that these needed to be considered as part of the growing idea of Indigenous sovereignty” (Pierotti 158). Consequently, various academic studies of that period portrayed Indians as “proper stewards for tribal lands” and created “a series of romantic images linking Indians to conservation and environmentalism” (158).<sup>v</sup> These idealized visions of indigenous cultures can be destructive because they reduce traditional knowledge to the category of myth, superstition, and folklore (considered intellectually inferior to Western science); which, therefore, cannot offer a legitimate alternative solution to our ecological problems.

In light of these events, many contemporary authors have joined Toledo Paz in challenging the common and stereotypical images of indigenous cultures. Shawn William Miller, in *An Environmental History of Latin America* (2007), questions the myth of “the Indian as proto-ecologist” (26), claiming that the native inhabitants of the American continent, like all humans, exploited and manipulated nature to meet their material needs. Raymond Pierotti, in *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (2011), also deconstructs their

caricature as “natural ecologists” (23), which “ignores the fact that ecological understanding was as dearly earned and difficult to obtain for Indigenous people as it is for any contemporary field ecologist” (23). Offering a genuine and realistic view of native societies of Latin America has also been the desire of many contemporary indigenous writers.<sup>vi</sup> Natalia Toledo Paz embraces that mission by avoiding conventional images of indigenous cultures even while nostalgically recreating the nature and the traditions of her motherland: “I decided to give my version of who we really are, without falling into the familiar stereotypes: that Juchitán is a matriarchal society, that we dominate our men” (qtd. in Frischmann 22).

The poems in *Ca gunaa gubidxa, ca gunaa guiiba 'risaca/Mujeres de sol, mujeres de oro* celebrate the women of Juchitán, whom Toledo Paz admires for their passion, hard-work, self-sufficiency, and devotion to their professions, such as embroidery, weaving, trade, art, teaching, and healing. As observed by Elena Poniatowska, in “Juchitán, a Town of Women” (1993), the Juchitec women are powerful and strong-willed: “Isthmus women impose themselves with the white ruffles of their skirts, the tinkling of their jewelry, the golden lightning of their smiles [...]. Because of them traditions are not lost...” (135). Toledo Paz’s book reflects this ethnic pride and respect for tradition that the Juchitec women have by recollecting the mystic experiences of a healer, Doña Marcelina, the songs of a teacher, Doña Florinda, the smile of a fish vendor, Doña Berta Beninu, and the poet’s childhood home in “Olga’s House”, dedicated to her mother, who embroidered cloth and made hammocks:

Pendulum of thread

dwelt in my childhood patio.

Wooden needles

crisscross the fragile cotton of those days.

An untamable woman  
 embroidered the black velvet of waiting.  
 From her hands  
 emerged a handful of patterns  
 for the looms that dye her twilight profession.  
 We would sleep slung under a fisherman's *pochote*.  
 Photos of the long-haired painter  
 a trunk full of time  
 an enormous key  
 and thousands of hammocks were my home.

Olga's marriage bed was always the place of colors. (Montemayor *et al.* 73)

In her reflections on Juchitec women, Elena Poniatowska also points out their tendency to make erotic puns and sexual jokes: "Zapotec women have always been openly erotic [...]. 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 so that foreigners [...] are either scandalized or fascinated forever" (135). That popular image of Zapotec women as sexually liberated matriarchs has been questioned by Obdulia Ruiz Campbell, in "Representations of Isthmus Women: A Zapotec Woman's Point of View" (1993), who argues that their allusions to sex are only a wordplay that offers release from the tensions of their work as well as abusive and adulterous husbands. The poetry of Toledo Paz, full of sensory nuances and erotic images, offers a synthesis of domestic responsibilities and physical pleasures. She



opens one part of *Guie'yaase'/Olivo negro* with a traditional Juchitec saying: “Ni riguite xquiee nanixe ná'ora runi guendaró/En la cocina, el que juega su sexo tiene buen sazón” (59), which refers to the intimate link between food and sex. The culinary art, for the poet, has always had a transcendent and spiritual quality. She recalls the period of running her own restaurant as a festive and beautiful time of her life – a celebration of friendship, community, and hospitality. According to Toledo Paz, cooking is one of the ways of expressing love (del Ángel 42).

The intimate union between physical and spiritual aspects of life in Toledo Paz's poetry forms a holistic and ecological perception of the universe, which entails a connectedness of everything. Her vision also emphasizes God's immanence - “Dios que está en todas partes” (*Olivo negro* 37), as reflected in the poem “Pasión de los pescadores”, in which the author presents nature-based spirituality of the fishermen who celebrate God in the sea, mountains, trees, and wind. Their world view represents the Zapotec religious system centered on the natural world and indigenous cosmology, in which all the phenomena of the cosmos – material and divine – complement each other. This perspective challenges the separation of the material and spiritual, which has its roots in the modern – rational and dualist cosmology (based on Copernicus, Descartes, Galileo, and Bacon) and in the dominant Western religion – Christianity, which separates the human from the divine and conceives the earthly life as a transitory step to heaven. According to this world view, one that contradicts an ecological vision of the cosmos, human beings are masters of nature and can transform it as they wish for the sake of their progress.

The critique of Christianity is present throughout Toledo Paz's work, as for example in the poem, “Na Tacha (healer and mystic)”:

Two-colored cloud-eyes  
 flood the wrinkles of Na Tacha.  
 The shadow that paints her is full of cracks  
 and has a double job.  
 The winds of Calvary transformed her  
 turning her into a dog  
 beaten by its victims and its mother.  
 She had two children who were never born,  
 she herself drank the blood of her womb  
 to give life to her other self.  
 The hands of Na Tacha:  
 they are the strongest pleiad  
 the heart of my skin has known. (de la Torre *et al.* 569)

The protagonist of the poem, Na Tacha, had to free herself from the oppression of Christianity and reconnect with her nature in order to become a mystic and a healer. By questioning Christian rigidity and dogmas, the poem calls for the reevaluation of the Zapotec traditions, spirituality, and mysticism. The holistic vision of the universe, based on the cycles of life, is also present in “Marcelina (healer)”:

Calm and lit up  
 in her eyes and hands.  
 Being alpha and omega  
 of all the skies that do not begin, do not end.  
 Saint Teresa child of the sea makes herself present

to gather from your hands the withered sweet basil,  
 the purple onion, the lemon dark  
 with gloomy skins.  
 With the breath from your lips  
 you blow the dust from the eyes,  
 you give back color and joy,  
 you free the fever from the body  
 and sweat begins to find the senses. (575)

The healer in this poem cures the pains, the oppression, and the guilt associated with Christianity, bringing joy, celebration, and sensuality back to life. In both poems, Toledo Paz challenges the values of the dominant Western religion, contrasting them with the holistic perception of the universe of her indigenous culture.

The synthesizing of indigenous traditions for the use in modern ethics is a problematic issue, as observed by John Grim in “Indigenous Traditions” (2006): “no one people can be made representative of the thousands of indigenous cultures”; however, “there are ‘family resemblances’ among indigenous religious experiences that allow an investigation of these plural forms of religious traditions among extremely diverse indigenous peoples” (285). Among those characteristics the author mentions intimacy with local environments and a holistic knowledge that includes both physical experience (observation of nature) and spiritual sources (mystical and visionary experiences). Traditional ecological knowledge is also a topic explored in Pierotti’s study, in which the author corrects the notion that the indigenous people of Americas are superstitious and demonstrates that their empirically based knowledge, is “equivalent to Western science in usefulness and insight, but different in approach” (8). Moreover, in contrast with

Western ethics (derived from the Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian tradition), which establishes a supremacy of human beings and their dominion over other species, the indigenous ethic includes all the members of an ecosystem, and consequently reflects the laws of ecology.<sup>vii</sup> Pierotti proposes to reevaluate traditional ecological knowledge, which would allow us to reestablish a connection with our local environment, absent in abstract modern scientific approach. According to his theory, both discourses (indigenous and Western), until recently considered antagonistic, not only are complementary but also productive in the process of finding solutions to our ecological problems.

Natalia Toledo Paz celebrates the traditional ethnobotanical knowledge of her native community, dedicating her poems to the healers of Juchitán - Doña Tacha and Doña Marcelina, whose medicinal practices are closely linked to the natural world. The local flora in the hands of Doña Marcelina, “the withered basil [...], the purple onion, the dark lemons with their dusky peels” (Montemayor 77), has also a sacred quality – a healing power. The poet emphasizes the spiritual connection between human beings and nature in traditional societies, as well as their knowledge that emerged from meticulous long-term observation of natural phenomena. She remembers her grandparents that could “read” nature and prognosticate weather just by looking at the sky: “nos decían hoy va a llover, va a temblar o cualquier cosa con sólo ver el cielo, que conocían mucho de su entorno y de la vida...” (Extremera 3). The concept of “reading” nature has been a common theme of contemporary indigenous writers, who problematize it in the context of Western literacy. According to Hugo Jamióy, the term “illiterate”, associated with a person who does not read or write, also refers to the one who has lost connection with the natural world (179). Nowadays, many scholars and activist see the roots of our environmental and economic crisis in the Western alienation from nature, calling for the recuperation of the

indigenous knowledge, spirituality, and traditions: “In contrast to the Western way of seeing the world, Indigenous peoples tended to view themselves not as dominant over, but as connected to and part of, the natural world” (Pierotti 1).

The Zapotec language reflects a strong connection between human beings and nature, as observed by Eugene S. Hunn, in *A Zapotec Natural History: Trees, Herbs, and Flowers, Birds, Beasts, and Bugs in the Life of San Juan Gbëë* (2008): “it is a language that has evolved in contact with the land” (27). The author points out that it contains a rich environmental knowledge, incorporating an extensive vocabulary for local flora and fauna – 700 kinds of plants, 400 kinds of animals, and 20 kinds of fungi. Natalia Toledo Paz recurs to the natural world of her native region throughout her poetry, which is evident in “First House”:

As a child I slept in my grandmother’s arms  
 like the moon in the heart of the sky.  
 My bed: cotton pulled from *pochote* pods.  
 I made oils from trees, and sold my friends  
*flamboyán* flowers as red snapper.  
 Like shrimp drying in the sun, we would stretch out  
 On a *petate*.  
 Above our eyelids slept a pleiad of stars.  
 Tortillas form a *comiscal* oven, string dyed for  
 hammocks,  
 food was prepared with the joy of rain upon the  
 earth,  
 we whipped chocolate,

and in a huge *jícara* we were served the dawn” (Montemayor 81).

As portrayed by the references to the local trees, such as *pochote*, (*Bombax ellipticum*), *flamboyán* (*Delonix regia*), and *jícara* - a recipient made of the fruit of the *jícara* (*Crescentia cujete*), there is a profound connection between nature and the author’s childhood home. Her focus on the local environment and her choice to write in Zapotec serve one of the most important missions of our time, which is the preservation of diversity. In the current ecological crisis, the loss of biodiversity is parallel to the extinction of human languages and cultures. According to James Geary, in “Speaking in Tongues” (2011), of all the approximately 6,500 languages in the world about half are endangered, and when a language disappears, the valuable knowledge about the local environment disappears with it (62). Toledo Paz undertakes the task to preserve her native language by writing poetry in Zapotec, even though she is aware that, by doing so, she reduces the group of her readers to scholars and other poets: “La poesía no tiene muchos lectores en cualquier idioma, pero en zapoteco menos, porque no se acostumbra leerlo, aunque sí hablarlo y vivirlo: en el parque, en el mercado, en la casa” (Arciniega 1). Toledo Paz’s literature is bilingual, however, she admits that whenever she cannot express an idea, an image, or a metaphor in Spanish, the expression comes naturally in Zapotec, since this language is more visual, demonstrative, and personal to her (2). Through her writings in Zapotec, the author maintains her cultural heritage and motivates the younger generation not to forget their origins and traditions. The importance of maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity is expressed in the poem, “La realidad”, which the author recited in Zapotec and Spanish at the International Poetry Festival of Medellín, in 2002. The essential question posed in this poem is: what is being native? Having portrayed the inseparable link between the indigenous language, nature and tradition, Toledo Paz concludes her reflection emphasizing the value of preserving one’s cultural identity:

“Ser indígena es tener un universo y no renunciar a él”.<sup>viii</sup> Similar message is expressed in “Para T.S. Eliot”, where the author compares her children, which have lost their language, to the homeless birds in the jungle of oblivion: “tal vez soy la última rama que hablará zapoteco mis hijos tendrán que silbar su idioma y serán aves sin casa en la jungla del olvido” (*Olivo negro* 135). In addition to the preservation of the Zapotec language, another important function of Toledo Paz’s bilingual production is its challenge of monolingualism, which, according to Ursula Heise, currently forms a fundamental limitation of ecocriticism: “the environmentalist ambition is to think globally, but doing so in terms of a single language is inconceivable - even and especially when that language is a hegemonic one” (513).

Apart from the connection between human beings and their environment, “First House” also focuses on the connections between people, celebrating family and community. Toledo Paz recalls the happiness, security, and peace of her childhood when she slept in her grandmother’s arms, which promotes the values of the extended multi-generational family. Patrick D. Murphy, in *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995), argues that the nuclear family is “the Euro-American bourgeois structure for approved human generation and the appropriation of women and children as male property” (54); therefore, the nurture of multi-generational family “constitutes one of the first lines of resistance to Western patriarchy” (55). According to Murphy’s study, which focuses on the interconnected domination of women and nature, “defense of the tribal family becomes an ecofeminist issue” (55). Ecofeminism, which is a synthesis of ecological and feminist discourse, questions anthropocentrism and androcentrism, calling for a new spiritual paradigm. Mary Judith Ressa states, in *Ecofeminism in Latin America* (2006), that ecofeminism is a new term for an ancient and indigenous wisdom, and one of its greatest insights is “the dawning conviction that everything is connected – and therefore sacred” (1). Natalia

Toledo Paz's poetry promotes recognition of such interconnectedness by focusing on a vast array of familial and communal liaisons. The author emphasizes the importance of her relationships with grandparents, aunts, and cousins in an interview with Deny Extremera: "En esos espacios fui muy feliz, porque tenía además una abuela que se hacía cargo de los niños cuando mi mamá o mis tías 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" (2).

Toledo Paz's home in Juchitán is presented, in "Olga's House" and "First House", as a place full of colors, food, and joy. The description of it creates an impression of richness and abundance: "pendulums of thread", "a handful of patterns", "thousands of hammocks", "the place of colors" (73). However, the richness that is implied here refers to the author's life experiences rather than material status. As revealed by the poet, apart from the abundance of food and aromas, her house was very modest and simple, with only a few necessary objects, like a table, an altar, a chest for clothes, and hammocks that her mother was trading in Oaxaca ("Dibujar y hacer música con palabras"). This model of a house, common for other Juchitec families, represents a striking contrast with contemporary consumer society, in which the concept of happiness is equated with economic progress, the accumulation of material goods, and the enjoyment of luxuries. Considering that our Western consumerist values and aspirations are at the very basis of today's ecological crisis, one of the central ethical concerns of many contemporary authors is the establishment of the distinction between human needs and desires, between quality of life and standard of living, as well as between happiness and the enjoyment of material pleasures. Marius de Geus, in *The End of Over-consumption: Toward a Lifestyle of Moderation and Self-restraint* (2003), provides an interesting analysis of modern society based



on instant gratification, and an explanation for contemporary consumerism, that goes beyond the idea that people only acquire possessions to fulfill certain material needs and to satisfy feelings of greed and envy. The indulgence in material consumption that further stimulates and perpetuates people's wants appears to give them a sense of satisfaction, relaxation, self-expression, curiosity, and excitement. However, according to the author, "the gap between desiring consumer goods and getting actual fulfillment or satisfaction from the products apparently cannot be closed" (173). As the accumulation of material objects leads to disillusionment, creating a clash between desires and reality and generating a permanent longing for something else, it is time we redefined our concept of happiness, relinquished our obsession with perpetual economic progress, and reestablished our relationship with the natural world.

Natalia Toledo Paz questions the Western concept of happiness based on acquisition, exploitation, and material gratification, which now is pervading the young generations of indigenous people: "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... Se mantienen las culturas, pero hay jóvenes que quieren ir a comer a Mc Donalds, comprar en Wal Mart" (Extremera 5). According to the author, one of the most important aspects that contributed to her happy childhood was the enjoyment of nature and playing outside (1). These values are reflected in the poem, "Infancia", in which the poet recreates the images from her childhood, such as "cielo", "tierra", "flores de mayo", "maíz", "juegos", "caña" (*Olivo negro*, 97), and also in "Cielo Min": "I miss the things I learned barefoot under a tamarind tree that told stories [...] Those days have gone" (de la Torre *et al.* 577). Her perspective reflects the spiritual appreciation of nature instead of an exclusive focus on its material utility. She also emphasizes the importance of the reciprocal

interdependence between economic and ethical values, such as use and respect, in the indigenous communities of Mexico: “ellos no los explotan [los recursos] en el sentido occidental, simplemente los utilizan en lo que es necesario para vivir, no quieren llevarlos a ninguna parte ni venderlos ni hacerse una empresa” (5). According Toledo Paz, the native inhabitants of Mexico, like all humans, use nature to meet their material needs; however, unlike modern people, they perceive nature as part of their society and culture.<sup>ix</sup> In her poem, “Revelation”, the author discovers that there is only one way to solve our ecological problems: to recognize that we are part of nature and we cannot consider ourselves separate from it:

Purple flowers  
 are born on the back of the wall.  
 Carpeted quarry stone in the air  
 that moves and detaches.  
 A bird’s beak wakes me,  
 takes a piece of me  
 my body jumps from the *petate*  
 it is the hen of fear.  
 There’s only one way  
 to stay on earth: Roll. (de la Torre *et al.* 577)

The symbols of Western civilization in the poem (the wall and the carpeted quarry stone) are unstable and overgrown by nature (purple flowers). The image of rolling on earth indicates close connection with it and constant repetition of the cycles of life.

Our attitude towards the natural world forms one of the most fundamental questions in environmental ethics. Mark Sagoff, in “Do We Consume Too Much?” (1997), argues that even

though we must use nature to survive, it does not only have material or economic value: “We take our bearings from the natural world - our sense of time from its days and seasons, our sense of place from the character of a landscape and the particular plants and animals native to it. An intimacy with nature ends our isolation from the world. We know where we belong, and we can find the way home” (217). According to the author, the task we need to accomplish in order to solve our environmental problems is to recognize that nature has intrinsic and not just instrumental value. The author embraces virtues such as affection and reverence for the natural world, and by putting emphasis on our character - our capacity to respect and care for nature, represents the ideas of the emerging field of environmental virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics, which has its origins in ancient Greek philosophy and in the Christian tradition and is one of the major approaches in normative ethics, has become influential in environmental ethics in the last three decades (Jamieson 90). The discipline emphasizes the importance of the question of what kind of person we ought to be and how we should live; therefore, in the field of environmental ethics, it is concerned with the character traits and attitudes of human beings, such as gratitude, practical wisdom, humility, and respect, regarding their interactions with the environment. In recent years, many philosophers and environmentalists have perceived the lack of certain human virtues and the presence of vices as the ultimate cause of our ecological problems.<sup>x</sup> In the Latin American context, the recent book of Leonardo Boff, *Essential Care: An Ethos of Human Nature* (2008), promotes the concept of care as a fundamental ethos of the human being, and blames the crisis of our civilization for the attitude of disregard and neglect, arguing for the virtue of care for the Earth, the environment, a sustainable society, and care for all human beings and God. Ana Patricia Noguera de Echeverri, in “Horizons of Environmental Ethics in Colombia” (2007), examines various ethical approaches to environmental problems that

contributed to the current debate on “environmental society” on the continent, emphasizing virtues such as responsibility, respect, love, moderation, and solidarity. Natalia Toledo Paz’s writings articulate all these themes, and her values and ideas reflect a close relationship between environmental issues and social justice. In an interview with Deny Extremera, the author criticized the unjust treatment of the indigenous people of Chiapas, who were expelled from their land in order to exploit its natural resources. She emphasized the attitude of respect to the environment and to other people as a vision for our future, quoting a phrase in Zapotec, *guendanavani sicarú*, which means “beauty and justice” (6).

Natalia Toledo Paz offers a synthesis of environmental and social concerns, which represents a mission of social ecology, a discipline that expands the boundaries of environmental studies and seeks to comprehend a process that is both environmental and social. According to Murray Bookchin, who is established in the field as a pioneer, “social ecology provides more than a critique of the split between humanity and nature, it also poses the need to heal them” (87). Hence, one of the goals of social ecology is to emphasize the interdependence of social and natural relationships and conceive them holistically. In the analysis of Latin America’s distinctiveness in the field of environmental ethics in “Themes in Latin American Environmental Ethics: Community, Resistance and Autonomy” (2004), Thomas Heyd defines social ecology as “a properly Latin American perspective on the problems concerning the natural environment” (231).<sup>xi</sup> The author explains that this culturally based, distinctive environmental practice in the region stems from the economic and political policies of dominant foreign powers – European colonization and economic engagement with North America.

Natalia Toledo Paz has made a significant contribution to the field of environmental ethics on regional and global scale. Firstly, by recuperating indigenous traditions and knowledge,

she proposes a new system of ethics for our civilization based on a holistic perception of the universe and a spiritual relationship between human beings and nature. Secondly, she has achieved the significant task of promoting cultural and linguistic diversity (maintaining the Zapotec traditions and language), which reflects one of the most important recent ecological concerns. Thirdly, by emphasizing the anti-consumerist values, like moderation, self-restraint, and respect for nature, the author's idea of a sustainable and just future is inseparably linked with the emerging field of environmental virtue ethics. Finally, the integration of the issues of social justice with the present challenge of ecology represents the fundamental principles of social ecology, a field that has a particular expression in Latin America. To conclude, the bilingual nature of Natalia Toledo Paz'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, the author strives for preserving her indigenous roots, but also puts emphasis on communication and solidarity, which are indispensable in the process of solving our global ecological problems.

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<sup>i</sup> In the last decade, the reevaluation of indigenous knowledge and traditions has been the subject of scientific, philosophical, religious, and literary studies. Raymond Pierotti, in *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (2011), argues that traditional ecological knowledge can complement Western scientific tradition as “a valid alternative as well as possible solution to some of the most pressing problems in contemporary society” (4). In the relatively new field of religion and ecology, that reexamines religions' attitudes toward nature, John Grimm emphasizes the importance of holistic perception of the universe (a connectedness of the material and spiritual aspects of life) and the spiritual relation of the aboriginal peoples to their environment (“Indigenous Traditions”, 2006). The ecocritical study of Niall Binns, *¿Callejón sin salida? La crisis ecológica en la poesía hispanoamericana* (2004), considers the revival of ancestral myths and indigenous cultures as one of the tasks of environmental literature in its mission to recuperate the sacred dimension of nature.

<sup>ii</sup> The Christian belief in human stewardship of nature has been examined by Lynn White Jr. in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, as one of the main causes of our ecological problems. The author refers to Christianity as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (11).

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<sup>iii</sup> Francisco Toledo's art and activism are dedicated to the ecological and cultural preservation of his native state, Oaxaca, for which he received the Right Livelihood Award in 2005. He works in pottery, sculpture, weaving, graphic arts, and painting. He is the co-author (with his daughter, Natalia) of *Guendaguti ñee sisi/La Muerte pies ligeros* (2005), a bilingual short story for children.

<sup>iv</sup> The reader may want to consult the following interview with Natalia Toledo Paz: <http://laventana.casa.cult.cu/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2990>

<sup>v</sup> As an example of such a romantic cliché, Pierotti quotes a fragment from *North American Indian Ecology* (1996), by J.D. Hughes: "Somehow they had learned a secret that Europe had already lost, and which we seem to have lost now in America – the secret of how to live in harmony with Mother Earth, to use what she offers without hurting her; the secret of receiving gracefully the gifts of the Great Spirit" (158).

<sup>vi</sup> Among the indigenous authors who question stereotypical views of their cultures it is important to mention Javier Castellanos Martínez, whose essay, "La narrativa de los que hablamos en Dilla Xhon" (1992), criticizes "las demandas de las instituciones folkloristas que consideraban que la ingenuidad y la fantasía son el eje de nuestra manera de contar" (39). Jaime Huenún, in "La poesía es necesaria como los sueños" (2002), also challenges the conventional, exotic, and touristic view of the indigenous cultures: "El paisaje mapuche, [...] no puede ser en mi poesía sino el escenario de una degradación permanente y no el lugar ameno que muchos snobs amantes de lo exótico buscan en la lírica escrita por autores indígenas" (Osorio 4).

<sup>vii</sup> Among the studies that criticize this ethic it is important to mention "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967) by Lynn White, which examines the causes of our ecological problems in the context of Christian religion - "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (11). However, Baird Callicott proposes to reexamine Judeo-Christian tradition, arguing that one should not dismiss one of the most influential and lasting intellectual traditions because its implications have been "both the cause and cure of our contemporary global environmental malaise", so they can serve as a familiar model "of how a traditional cultural worldview may support one or another environmental ethic" (24).

<sup>viii</sup> The reader may consult this website to listen to Toledo Paz's poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcKlFJQ-q6g>

<sup>ix</sup> Similar view is also expressed by Miller in *An Environmental History of Latin America* (2007): "Like Europeans, Indians perceived nature primarily as provisions to be extracted and consumed [...] However, while Europeans exploited nature's resources with a clear conscience, for their Christian god had given them unchallenged dominion over plants, animals, and 'all creeping things', Indians faced nature with trepidation [and] did not paint the same stark line that Europeans did between themselves and nature" (27).

<sup>x</sup> Thomas E. Hill, Jr. "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments" is one of the foundational articles on environmental virtue ethics.

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<sup>xi</sup> Heyd includes two other theoretical approaches, determined by professional, cultural, and economic-historical situation in the region: ethnoecology and liberation/restorative ecology (61-65).

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