



Exploring the Influence of Nahua Poetry: The Case of *Cantares mexicanos* and *Yulcuicat*

Raquel Patricia Chiquillo
University of Houston-Downtown

Pedro Geoffroy (pronounced Shu-frá) Rivas (1908–1979) was a twentieth century Salvadoran poet, anthropologist, linguist and journalist. In addition to the indigenous-themed poetry collection *Yulcuicat* (1965), which in Nahuatl-Pipil means “Song to Mother Earth,” he also published the following books of poetry: *Rumbo* (1934), *Canciones en el viento* (1936), *Solo amor* (1963), *Vida, pasión y muerte del anti-hombre* (1977) and *Los nietos del jaguar* (1977). As a linguist, he was focused on studying the dialect of Nahuatl that was spoken in El Salvador, called Nahuatl-Pipil, which led to the publication of the following essays: *Toponimia náwat de Cuscatlan* (1961), *El náwat de Cuscatlan* (1969), *El español que hablamos en El Salvador*, which included a dictionary, and highlighted the influence of Nahuatl-Pipil on contemporary Salvadoran Spanish, and *La lengua salvadoreña* (1978). For his contributions to Salvadoran culture in the fields of poetry and linguistics, Geoffroy Rivas received the National Prize in Culture from the Salvadoran government in 1977.

In this paper, I argue that scholars and literary critics have overlooked the influence of pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry present in twentieth century Salvadoran poetry. The analysis of two poems will provide examples of areas in which such influences should not

be overlooked. I am focusing this analysis on the poems “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” and “Ofrenda a Itzpapalot” by Geoffroy Rivas, which form part of his collection *Yulcuicat*, published in 1965. This article-length analysis of two of the primary poems in this collection are a start to what is a book-length project. The topic merits further research and analysis, including the rest of the poems in *Yulcuicat*, as well as those in the collection *Los nietos del jaguar*. In this article, I explore this topic in two ways: by defining the main characteristics of pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry and analyzing the poems by Geoffroy Rivas to see if those characteristics are present in the two poems named above. I aim to give an overall contextualization of *Yulcuicat* alongside two influential factors in its creation: the existence of the Nahuatl collection *Cantares mexicanos* and the cultural context of the suppression of Nahuatl-Pipil, which led to its extinction as a living language. To conduct this analysis, it is fundamental to first understand the differences between Nahua poetry and contemporary Hispanic poetry. Thus, before beginning the analysis of the primary poems, an overview is given of the challenges involved in fully understanding Nahua poetry in order to better

understand its influence on twentieth-century Salvadoran poetry.

Of course, one of the difficulties in analyzing Salvadoran poetry is the uneven landscape of literary criticism that the scholar must work with. It is often a laborious task to categorize Salvadoran poetry: in general, there is a dearth of publications, of anthologies and of critical scholarly works. As the critic and poet David Escobar Galindo has stated in his *Índice antológico de la poesía salvadoreña* (1987), Salvadoran literature has evolved in fits and starts, explaining that:

- I). No se da en El Salvador un flujo coherente de escuelas, ni siquiera de tendencias,
- II). Prevalece la fuerza de las individualidades creadoras; con toda la carga subjetiva que eso trae consigo y
- III). Sobre todo a partir de Gavidia, los mejores autores son multifacéticos, con asimilación orgánica de tendencias varias. (10-11)

When speaking of Nahua poetry, I use the term “Nahua” to refer to a group of Native American peoples that coexist and coexisted in Mesoamerica for thousands of years before the arrival of the Spanish. They include the Mexica (misnamed as the Aztecs), the Tlaxcaltecs, the Texcocans, the Cholulans and the Otomí, among others; the main characteristic that unifies them is that they all spoke Nahuatl and shared a similar if not identical cosmogony and religious beliefs (Lipps). For the Nahua, poetry functioned as the primary means to preserve and transmit historical memory, as well as their mythology and conception of the world. It was through the oral tradition of “singing the paintings” found in the codices that historical memory was preserved and passed down. The glyphs found in the codices served as mnemonic devices and helped the person “singing the poems” remember the

myths, stories and dates of important historical events (Chang-Rodríguez and Filer 15). Poetry was described as both “flower and song”¹ and though the phrase is difficult to translate exactly, the flower—or *xóchitl* in Nahuatl—can be seen as a visual representation of the word, of the song, and the song—or *cuícatl* in Nahuatl—can be interpreted as spoken truth (Nicholson 95).

Unlike our contemporary understanding of poetry, where the individual poetic voice is paramount, Nahua poetry expressed a collective view of the world. Though there were some lyric poems, the majority of Nahua poetry had a ceremonial and ritual role. It was sung accompanied by rhythmic music and dance. It was not meant to be read in our sense of the word, but rather to be heard as part of a spectacle; of a ritual of remembrance of the past and of their myths and legends (Chang-Rodríguez and Filer 15). It was a communal experience, and the poems most often expressed the communal feeling of society.

In addition, from what historians, linguists and archeologists have suggested to date, Nahua poetry was almost exclusively the domain of the male aristocracy. Nearly all of the Nahua poets that we have knowledge of were nobles; warriors as well as poets, for the Nahua believed that a true warrior also had to be proficient in the art of the “flower and song” in order to be a leader who was steadfast and true, pleasing to the gods, perhaps even capable, by his sacrifice, of “feeding the sun, the highest possible fate he could wish for” (Nicholson 202). The most famous and recognizable name of these poets and warrior kings is that of Netzahualcoyotl, though Moctezuma was also a well-known poet (Chang-Rodríguez and Filer 15).

In such a disorganized literary landscape, it is not surprising that the attempts to organize twentieth-century Salvadoran poetry in a cohesive fashion have focused on

¹ Bierhorst disagrees with this translation of “flower and song,” see Bierhorst 17.

classifying it according to the traditional literary movements found in Hispanic poetry. Undoubtedly this has been done for practical reasons, in various attempts to put order within the spectrum of Salvadoran poetry, but it is also due to how we, as literary critics, have been trained. Our critical base, that is, the one we refer to, is a product of Spain. We look for literary movements within Salvadoran poetry that were, for the most part, created as part of the cultural and historical processes found within Spanish literature. The traditional canon of Spanish and Latin American literature has deeply influenced Salvadoran literature and how we organize and analyze it. This is not necessarily a terrible thing. It does give us a framework and a reference point to work from, since literary analysis in El Salvador tends to lack cohesiveness. However, in doing so, we may have tied ourselves too tightly to that specific framework, and as literary scholars we may have overlooked other influences present in Salvadoran poetry. It is my position that one of these is the influence of pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry.

We must also remember that the poems that survived the Conquest are a very small portion of the total literary output of the Nahua peoples. The most important compilation of these texts is the *Colección de cantares mexicanos* (1583), more commonly referred to as simply *Cantares mexicanos*, which were transcribed by Nahua students of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and consist of several hundred poems, the majority of which are pre-Hispanic in origin (*Pre-Columbian Literatures* 16-17). This collection is also important for this analysis because it was precisely this text that inspired Geoffroy Rivas to explore Nahua poetry and led to the writing of *Yulcuicat*, the poetry collection in which “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” and “Ofrenda a Itzpapalot” are found. *Cantares mexicanos* is clearly the main inspiration for *Yulcuicat*, both thematically and structurally.

Geoffroy Rivas lived in Mexico in his youth when he was a student at the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) in the 1930s. Though he graduated with a degree in law in 1937, he also spent many hours at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia de México (ENAH) (“Pedro Geoffroy Rivas”). In 1944 he was exiled from El Salvador for political reasons and returned to Mexico City with his family, where he lived until 1957. For the purposes of this study, what is most important is that Geoffroy Rivas was knowledgeable when it came to Nahuatl-Pipil, which meant he was also familiar with the Nahuatl spoken in Central Mexico, as well as the *Cantares mexicanos*, which lends his collection *Yulcuicat* an authenticity seldom seen in poems with an indigenous theme. This is also a crucial point to make because the first complete translation of the *Cantares mexicanos* into Spanish was not published until 2011 by Miguel León-Portilla. This meant that Geoffroy Rivas must have depended on the original manuscript from 1583, or copies of it, to read and become familiar with the poems. In his introductory analysis to Geoffroy Rivas’ *El surco de la estirpe: Poesía completa*, the Salvadoran critic and linguist Rafael Lara Martínez confirms that the poet had access to colonial texts while in Mexico: “es obvio que el autor tuvo acceso a los códices, a las crónicas y a los clásicos: *Cantares mexicanos*, *Crónica mexicacoyotl*, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Fray Andrés de Olmos, etc.” (40). Lara Martínez also makes clear that when it comes to texts in Nahuatl, Geoffroy Rivas was a follower of the Mexican linguist Ángel María Garibay, who was the first to research the primary sources of Nahua poetry, and specifically, of the *Cantares mexicanos*:

Al igual que León-Portilla, Geoffroy Rivas llegó al estudio de la literatura indígena a través de una lectura de los dos volúmenes de *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*, [...]. En esa obra monumental, Garibay inició un redescubrimiento de

las fuentes primarias de la poesía indígena, y, ante todo, de los *Cantares mexicanos*.” (40)

However, *Yulcuicat* is not a translation of *Cantares mexicanos*, nor is it purely an imitation of the Nahua poems found in that collection. Rather, Geoffroy Rivas has attempted to recreate the types of poems found in *Cantares mexicanos*, using Salvadoran Spanish and some phrases in Nahuatl-Pipil. Since by 1967 Nahuatl-Pipil had become extinct as a language in El Salvador, it was also perhaps an attempt to preserve for posterity at least some of the words and imagery shared by all Nahua communities and which were also found in El Salvador. Nahuatl and its dialects, of which Nahuatl-Pipil was one, was the pre-Hispanic *lingua franca* that allowed indigenous communities to communicate with one another, especially in areas under Mexica control. It had survived well into the twentieth century in western El Salvador, until it was decimated in the aftermath of the Massacre of 1932.² One of the consequences of the Massacre of 1932 was the reprisal and persecution of the Nahuatl-Pipil speaking communities; so few people were left that within a few decades it led to the extinction of Nahuatl-Pipil as a language within El Salvador (“Jan.22, 1932”).

For Geoffroy Rivas to choose to write indigenous-themed poetry in *Yulcuicat*—deeply influenced by pre-Hispanic poetry written in Nahuatl, a dialect of which (Nahuatl-Pipil) had been driven to extinction in El Salvador by government forces after the Massacre of 1932—was a deeply political act of rebellion. Critics such as David Escobar Galindo and Rafael Lara Martínez have also pointed out that writing *Yulcuicat* was a way to create a bridge between contemporary Salvadoran society and its indigenous past. It can and should be seen as a disruptive act that tried to keep alive part of Nahuatl-Pipil

within the Spanish spoken in El Salvador. In the aftermath of the Massacre of 1932, the Salvadoran state passed laws outlawing the speaking of indigenous languages, dressing in traditional indigenous clothing as well as advocating for indigenous communities. Within this context, writing *Yulcuicat* was a disruptive act because it went against the paradigm of assimilation and cultural erasure that the Salvadoran state imposed on society as a direct result of the rebellion, which was led in part by Salvadoran indigenous leaders such as Feliciano Ama. This situation has not improved significantly since then, and in 2008 Rafael Lara Martínez wrote that: “Quizás la mayor contribución de Geoffroy Rivas sea rescatar temas indigenistas en una sociedad que rechaza cualquier lazo cultural con lo pre-hispánico [...] así como con los grupos étnicos nacionales” (18). With this I mind, I now turn to a comparison of the organizational structure of *Yulcuicat* and that of *Cantares mexicanos*, and an analysis of the two poems I want to focus on: “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” and “Ofrenda a Itzpapalot.”

Miguel León-Portilla classifies the poems of *Cantares mexicanos* into five categories: Myths in Pre-Columbian Poetry, The Sacred Hymns, Lyric Poetry, Religious Celebrations and Drama, and Chronicles and History. The translators Edward Kissam and Michael Schmidt also divide it into four categories, but label them: Songs of Life, Ritual Songs, Myths and Legends, and Songs of War. I find Kissam and Schmidt’s categories to be clearer and more concise, and thus I have chosen to use theirs in my analysis, but they are essentially the same as those created by León-Portilla. In *Yulcuicat*, Geoffroy Rivas divides his poetry collection into three sections: Los cuatro misterios de la creación, which contains the poems “Creación de los dioses,” “Creación del mundo,” “Creación del hombre,” and “Creación del vino.” This section clearly coincides thematically with

² See Mirla González’s “Cicatriz de la memoria: La matanza de 1932 en El Salvador.”

what Kissam and Schmidt label Myths and Legends, as they are all origin poems, dealing with the creation of the world, the gods and the Nahua people. The second section of *Yulcuicat* is called "Cuatro poemas terrenales" and includes these poems: "Canto de primavera," "Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat," "Una canción de amor," and "Breve lamento." This section coincides well with the section labeled Songs of Life by Kissam and Schmidt, emphasizing as they do all the different aspects of life: birth or rebirth, growth, love, and death. They could also fall under the category of Ritual Songs. The last section of *Yulcuicat* is called "Cuatro poemas religiosos" and contains the poems "Invocación a Xipe Totec," "Ofrenda a Itzpapalot," "Coto de las víctimas en el tem-plo de Tlaloc," and "Himno de los guerreros en la casa del dardo." The first three poems fit best under the category of Ritual Songs. The gods mentioned in these poems are associated with fertility and rebirth (Xipe Totec, Itzpapalot, Tlaloc³), but also with death and human sacrifice. The last poem fits into the category of War Songs, as the House of Darts were four armories that held the weapons of Tenochtitlan; there was one in each corner of the main plaza ("The Aztec Warrior"). Though Geoffroy Rivas does not include every category of poem found in *Cantares mexicanos* in *Yulcuicat*, the three he does include emphasize the tremendous influence of *Cantares mexicanos* over his own work. Thematically, there is a great deal of overlapping between the two works. Though written in Spanish, the poems of *Yulcuicat* strive to follow closely the formalized structure and style of the Nahuatl language poems and include words in Nahuatl-Pipil. Therefore, they are difficult to interpret for any reader not familiar with Nahuatl and its

dialects, the pantheon of Nahua gods and goddesses and Nahua poetry.

For this reason, before the analysis of the poems themselves, I would like to address some of the difficulties in understanding the poems,⁴ created by the Nahuatl language itself as well as by the hermetic thought process of the Nahua poets/singers. When we add to this our general lack of knowledge of Nahua society before the Conquest, and especially of their rituals and their songs, it is no wonder we struggle to understand, let alone interpret, what they meant. The fact is that what has come down to us is extremely limited in scope. They are colonial-era texts that were pieced together after the Conquest. In his book *Introducción a la literatura pre-hispánica*, Rafael Osuna Ruiz explains that:

La caída de Tenochtitlán el 13 de agosto de 1521 y el estrangulamiento de Atahualpa en Cajamarca el 29 de agosto de 1533 fueron decisivos en la vida de los aztecas y de los incas: a partir de allí la poesía náhuatl y la poesía quechua son *coloniales*, aun-que durante cierto tiempo expresarán todavía sentimientos nativos sin nada que denuncie influencia cristiana. (16)

Thus, while the *Cantares mexicanos*, first published as a manuscript in 1538, is the closest we can come to pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry, the critic still wonders how close it is to the originals; and if any crucial pieces are missing; questions that unfortunately, we can never answer. José Rabasa, in his study of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, even theorizes that we are being given, through these manuscripts, an image of colonial society as seen from a Native American perspective that we cannot ever occupy (7-8). In addition, as stated earlier in this study,

³ These are the some of the same gods that are repeatedly mentioned in *Cantares mexicanos*.

⁴ Undoubtedly the biggest difficulty in my case as a literary scholar in this instance is that I have no knowledge of Nahuatl or Nahuatl-Pipil.

Nahua poetry was not meant to be read—it was meant to be sung or chanted—and not in isolation but accompanied by music and dance. As twenty-first-century literary critics and readers, we may underestimate the importance of music and dance in the task of understanding Nahua poetry, and indeed, Nahua culture and society. Osuna Ruiz alludes to this when he describes how Samuel Martí, in his 1961 book *Canto, danza y música precortesianos*, uses colonial texts on dance and music to corroborate his description of the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples, stating that:

Al describir los mixtecos y zapotecos reproduce párrafos de Diego Durán, Francisco de Burgoa, Antonio de Herrera y del Códice Vaticano-Ríos, de los cuales dice: “*Todos los datos anteriores son corroborados y ampliados por el extenso y variado número de vocablos relacionados con la música, canto y danza recogidos por Fray Juan de Córdova en su admirable y valiosísimo Vocabulario de la lengua zapoteca, 1578. El material lingüístico, advierte en seguida, “es un elemento indispensable en el estudio y desentrañamiento de las actividades artísticas, científicas y filosóficas de los antiguos mexicanos.”* (17-18)

Taking this into consideration, it becomes clear that when we read Nahua poetry in print, in a contemporary book with no other adornment, we are only seeing a pale shadow of the poem’s meaning and indeed, of the power of its words on its audience, which must have been augmented and perhaps even clarified by music and dance.

Another obstacle to understanding Nahua poetry comes from the language itself. At the time of the Conquest, the three most important groups of Nahua peoples: the Mexica (Aztecs), the Tlaxcaltecs and the Tezcocans were using three main types of writing: pictograms, ideograms and a partially phonetic form of inscription (*Pre-*

Columbian Literatures 11-12). Nahuatl has been called a “synthetic language” rather than an “analytic language” because it builds phrases from smaller word units, stringing them together to create long complex phrases (Kissam and Schmidt 17). In his study of twentieth century Salvadoran Spanish, Geoffroy Rivas describes Nahuatl in this way:

[...] la lengua nahua se había fraccionado en diversos dialectos que evolucionaban independientemente debido al aislamiento de los grupos hablantes. En general, se trata de un idioma aglutinante, en el que las palabras se unen entre sí para formar nuevas palabras, las cuales pueden ser modificadas a base de prefijos, sufijos e infijos. Esta particular estructura de la lengua nos está indicando una peculiar manera de pensar, la cual, a su vez, es influida por el patrón idiomático. [...] no puede estudiarse una lengua sin adentrarse en los procesos de pensamiento que le han dado origen [...]. (27)

These characteristics of the language lend themselves to the creation of long, complex verses. Because Nahua poetry comes from an oral poetic literary tradition, the long verses also lend themselves to creating strong rhythms, alliteration, repeated epithets, syntactical repetition and refrains, all of which are essential to the memorization of Nahua poetry (Kissam and Schmidt 16). The glyphs and ideograms are to help the poet singer remember the oral text, but they do not spell out the text within the codices. The text already resides within the poet singer, as it has been memorized, and its rhythmic qualities and storytelling power are accentuated by the addition of music and dance. As has been mentioned before in this study, the Nahua did not conceive of the poem in the same way as we do in contemporary Western societies, having perhaps more in common with Celtic or Vedic oral poetry

than with contemporary poems in print (Kissam and Schmidt 16). These differences are highlighted when we think of how the poems were sung originally. In the introduction to their translation of poems from the *Cantares mexicanos*, titled *Flower & Song: Poems of the Aztec Peoples*, Kissam and Schmidt explain the process of “singing the poems” in the following manner:

In a real sense, it is misleading to speak of ‘words’ in an oral poetic tradition. The poets spoke or sang units of meaning—bundles of sound assembled into one long phrase in which the word units were so fused as to be merely tributary to a single, precise symbol or meaning. Each of these complex phrases was rhythmically constructed and related to other phrases in its context alliteratively, assonantly and semantically. (17)

This leads us to the last obstacle to understanding Nahua poetry, and that is the thought process that created it. Nahua poetry is based on creating an almost shamanistic vision of what the text wants to say or describe, within a highly formalized and stylized poetic structure (Kissam and Schmidt 17). Nahua poetry is created through putting two words together that function as a metaphor for something else (Nicholson 142). León-Portilla describes the process in this way:

The Nahuas, when they want to describe anything very fully, always mention two chief aspects of it, so that through the union of these two will come a spark which will bring understanding. Their intuitive faculty caused them to thus invent special terms which would stir in the human mind a *vision*—not abstract and cold like the *Aristotelian idea*—but rich in content, alive, dynamic, and at the same time possessing a universal application. (Nicholson 142)

One of the word pairs common within Nahua poetry is, for example, the often mentioned “flower and song” which is usually taken to mean poetry, but there are many others, such as “water and hill” to denote a village or town, “water and fire” to mean war, “my father and my mother” to express personal support, “word and breath” to signify an oration and “in clouds and mist” to express something mysterious (Nicholson 142-43). It is by using this metaphorical language that Nahua poets were able to create a complex poetry rich in layers of meaning using what we might nowadays consider to be an extremely limited poetic vocabulary. Called *difrasismos* in Spanish, these metaphors are a way for the contemporary reader to begin to unravel the beautiful and exotic allusions found within Nahua poetry (Leander 62).

The limited poetic vocabulary used by the Nahuas was composed primarily of nature imagery (birds, flowers, stones, animals), war imagery and scent imagery, but each poem also expressed various levels of thought: literal, philosophical, religious, and mythical (Kissam and Schmidt 17). We can see how this process works by taking as an example the word “*xóchitl*,” which at the literal level means flower, however as we interpret it at different levels of thought, we can see how its meaning changes, even though the word remains the same, as explained by Kissam and Schmidt:

“*Xóchitl*” on its first symbolic level, means ‘word’—the word spoken by the wise man, or the singer, who is often shown in the murals and codices as emitting flowers from his mouth in complicated ascending scrolls. In reference to the solar cult, *xóchitl* come to symbolize the heart given in sacrifice, or the warrior’s heart or body given in battle, or simply blood, the body’s flower. With regard to myth, it symbolizes the gift of life, the flower from the Tree of Life, and perhaps the

individual *nahual* or spirit-soul. Finally, in its philosophical sense, it is the prime symbol for ephemerality. [...] In the phrases that make up the poem, each element is charged with an almost ideogrammatic complexity of meaning and must always be seen as intersecting various planes of thought. (17-18)

Thus, while Nahuatl poems may at first seem to be rather simple, with a set, repetitive structure and a limited vocabulary, the deeper complex meaning of the poem becomes clear once we start to unravel the various layers of meaning hidden within each word. This pattern can also be seen in Geoffroy Rivas' poem "Ofrenda a Itzpapalotl,"⁵ especially when it comes to the various descriptions of the goddess:

Doblo la rodilla ante ti,
Mariposa del Cielo,
¡oh Madre de los Crueles!

¡Centla teumilco,
chicahuatica,
motlaquechizca!

Los corazones de la ofrenda
caen palpitando a tus pies
como flores sangrientas,
¡oh Reina de la Tierra!,
¡oh, Negra mariposa de Obsidiana!
¡Huiztla, huiztla, nomac temi!
¡Huiztla, huiztla, nomac temi!

¡Del País de Nuestro Origen
llegó Quilaztli,
vino el Águila de Oro,
Nuestra Madre,

la del Rostro con Máscara!
¡Malinala nomac temi!
¡Malinala nomac temi!

Con greda nueva,
con plumas nuevas
adornaremos su rostro.

Por los cuatro rumbos se rompieron
los dardos.
En cierva se convierte.

Es Nuestra Madre,
la Reina de la Tierra.

¡Itzpapalotl! ¡Itzpapalotl!
(Escobar Galindo 411-12)

Throughout the poem, the poetic voice refers to Itzpapalotl by emphasizing the different names and descriptions that were associated with this deity. The name Itzpapalotl is translated as "Obsidian Butterfly" or as "Clawed Butterfly," because the goddess was depicted as a warrior woman with butterfly wings which contain sharp, obsidian blades along the edges, with a skeletal form and face, and the claws of a jaguar. She was also often shown with the attributes of an eagle. Alternately, she was sometimes associated with bats, as they do have claws on their wings ("Itzpapalotl"). In the first stanza of the poem Itzpapalotl is referred to as "Mariposa del Cielo" and "Madre de los Crueles." "Mariposa del Cielo" is clearly another way to use the butterfly to represent the goddess, though it is worth noting that butterfly in this context really refers to the huge moth *Rothschildia Orizaba*, and not the much smaller, colorful butterflies we are most familiar with. "Madre de los Crueles" could be a reference to her roles as queen of

⁵ Geoffroy Rivas believed that the Nahuatl-Pipil dialect did not have the "tl" ending common in Central Mexican Nahuatl but rather used a "t" ending. See *El español que hablamos en El Salvador*. However, for the purposes of clarity, I have opted to use the Mexica spelling of the gods and goddesses in

my analysis as the Nahuatl dictionaries I consulted did not contain the Nahuatl-Pipil spellings. See *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*.

the Tzitzimimeh or “star demons,” who were said to eat the souls of people during solar eclipses, when they appeared in the form of black butterflies.

In the third stanza of the poem, this deity is called “reina de la Tierra” by the poetic voice, which probably refers to Itzpapalotl’s role as the goddess in charge of Tamoanchan, a mythical place where the gods created present-day humanity out of ground up human bones and sacrificed blood stolen from the underworld, called Mictlan (“Mictlantecuhtli”). Tamoanchan is also considered the place where the Nahua people originally came from.

In line 5 of this stanza, the description of Itzpapalotl sees a return of the black butterfly imagery, as she is called “Negra mariposa de Obsidiana” by the poetic voice. This description of Itzpapalotl emphasizes her role as a death deity, emphasized in lines 1-4 of stanza 3, which describe the ritual of human sacrifice: “los corazones de la ofrenda / caen palpitando a tus pies / como flores sangrientas” (Escobar Galindo 411). It is also interesting to note, however, that on a more literal level, the “Obsidian Butterfly” is also an ornament made of copper with the figure of a butterfly in the middle which was worn by the Tlatoani during the ritual of human sacrifice (“Itzpapalotl”).

Like many Nahua deities, Itzpapalotl could change form and could appear as Quilaztli (*Gran Diccionario Náhuatl; Online Nahuatl Dictionary*), a goddess that represented rebirth and new growth. This deity could also choose to appear as Cihuacoatl, the Snake-Woman (*Gran Diccionario Náhuatl; Online Nahuatl Dictionary*). Cihuacoatl and Quilaztli are both fertility goddesses, while Itzpapalotl is associated with the life cycle of birth and death, as she watches over the spirits of women who died during childbirth as well as the spirits of stillborn children (“Itzpapalotl”). In stanza 4, the poetic voice calls out to Itzpapalotl, transfiguring her into some of the most common forms associated with this deity. In lines 1-2 of this stanza,

Itzpapalotl becomes Quilaztli, who has just arrived from Tamoanchan, here described as the country or place of origin of the Nahua people (Vigato): “¡Del País de Nuestro Origen / llegó Quilaztli” (Escobar Galindo 412). Lines 3-5 witness Itzpapalotl, in the figure of Quilaztli, metamorphose into a golden eagle, then invoked as one of the mothers of the Nahua people, and last of all described as the lady with the masked face: “[...] vino el Aguila de Oro / Nuestra Madre / la del Rostro con Máscara!” (Escobar Galindo 412). These are all representations of Itzpapalotl, who can be depicted with attributes of the eagle, especially its talons. As the queen of the Tzitzimimeh as well as a member of this group, she watches over midwives and women in labor and can be seen as a mother figure. As Cihuacoatl, she is also the mother of the god Mixcoatl, whom she abandons. She repents of her actions and goes back to get him, but he is gone and only a sacrificial knife is left in his place (Saadia). Eventually she becomes a symbol of the good mother who promises the Mexica that she will watch over their children and will warn them when the end of their empire is near (Saadia).

The description of Itzpapalotl as the lady with the masked face refers to the way that the goddess was most often portrayed: a skeletal being with obsidian wings and jaguar claws, wearing a skull mask (“Itzpapalotl”). In stanza 5 the poetic voice promises to put fresh, white clay on her face and to adorn it with new feathers: “Con greda nueva, / con plumas nuevas / adornaremos su rostro” (Escobar Galindo 412). This is a reference to one of the many ways that Itzpapalotl could present herself to the Nahua, in this case, it is “[...] as a beguiling and alluring woman with long, ebony hair and an impeccably white visage [...]” (“Itzpapalotl”).

In the sixth stanza, the tone of the poem changes from devoted invocation to an abrupt statement of defeat: “Por los cuatro rumbos se rompieron los dardos / En cierva

se convierte" (Escobar Galindo 412). The broken darts represent warfare, or rather, the failure of war. It may be a reference to the defeat of the Mexicas by the Spanish. It alludes to the "House of the Darts," called the Tlacochtalco, which were actually four armories in Tenochtitlan that housed all of the armaments for the Mexica. They were positioned at the four entrances to Tenochtitlan's main plaza (García-Des Lauriers 35). If the darts are now broken and dispersed, then that alludes to the defeat of the Mexica. However, even with this defeat, Itzpapalotl does not disappear. Instead, she goes through one more transformation, which is to become a deer. The deer was considered the spirit animal of Itzpapalotl, and it was said that she was one of two deities that could transform into a divine two-headed deer (Clark). In the last two stanzas of the poem (stanza 6 and stanza 7) the poetic voice reiterates that Itzpapalotl is Mother of the Nahua and Queen of the Earth, and the poems end with a strong invocation of her name, as if to make sure her presence is still felt and venerated: "¡Itzapapalot! ¡Itzapalot!" (Escobar Galindo 412).

Through the analysis of these stanzas, it is clear this poem is connected to pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry through the invocation of Itzpapalotl, who was an important deity in the Nahua pantheon, and the representation of this goddess in the different forms she could take. The imagery of the ritual sacrifice, especially that of bloody flowers, also takes us back to the imagery found in the *Cantares mexicanos*. But perhaps the strongest link to pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry is the inclusion of words and phrases in Nahuatl-Pipil within the poem. The second stanza, for example, is written in Nahuatl-Pipil. There are also two lines at the end of the third stanza and two lines at the end of the fourth stanza that are written in Nahuatl-Pipil. Since this dialect of Nahuatl is now extinct, there are no speakers or readers

of Nahuatl-Pipil that could translate or explain them to the contemporary reader.

This is a challenge and perhaps a weakness of this study. I used the *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl* and the *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* to try to translate the words, but unfortunately, the dictionaries did not always have a translation into English, Spanish, or French, which are the languages I can read. For example, the phrase "centla teumilco" (*Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*) is found within the manuscript of the *Cantares mexicanos*, but it has not yet been translated in either of these dictionaries. It is also not found in *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* by Frances Karttunen. In addition, some phrases or words are not found within any of these dictionaries.⁶ Such is the case, for example, for the words "huiztla" and "malinala." There could be a few reasons for this. Since the dictionaries are primarily based on the *Cantares mexicanos* and the Nahuatl found in Central Mexico, it may be that the words in Nahuatl-Pipil are simply not there. It was a different dialect, after all, that was continuing to develop on its own, separate from the Nahuatl spoken in the rest of Mexico.

There could also be variations in the spelling of certain words that the dictionaries cannot pick up. For example, while I could not find "malinala," I did find "malina" ("torcer o entorchar cuerda," *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*) and "malinalli" ("matorral, enredadera, esparto, paja para la casa," *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*). There was no way of telling, however, if they were related to the word "malinala." There may also be misspellings of the words. This could be the case of "huiztla," which was not in any of the three dictionaries but could be related to "huitza" (the pluperfect of the verb "huitzeh," "to come," Karttunen 90) and "huitztli" ("thorn or spine," Karttunen 91). "Huiztla" could possibly be a misspelling of

⁶ I could not find print versions of the *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl* nor the *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, but I also

used Frances Karttunen's *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* as a reference, which is in print.

either one, though which one remains a mystery.

Another example is when Geoffroy Rivas uses the word “teponaztles” in the poem “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat.” While I did not find that word, I did find “teponaztli”⁷ and there was a translation into Spanish: “tambor de madera.” The difference between the two words is so slight that it is fairly certain that the translation is correct for the poem “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” and that “teponaztles” refers to wooden drums.

However, in “Ofrenda a Itzpapalotl” the word “chichahuatica” appears in the text but discerning the meaning of the stanza remains elusive, if not impossible, as all three lines are written in Nahuatl-Pipil: “¡Centla teumilco / chichahuatica / motlaquechizca!” (Escobar Galindo 411). According to the *Gran Diccionario Nahuatl*, “chichahuatica” means something firm, stable, permanent. Perhaps Geoffroy Rivas is describing other qualities held by the goddess Itzpapalotl. However, it is impossible to tell what the complete phrase would be.

Something similar happens at the end of the third stanza, with the last two lines: “¡Huiztla, huiztla, nomac temi! / ¡Huiztla, huiztla, nomac temi!” (Escobar Galindo 411). There are definitions for the words “nomac,”⁸ which means “sadness,” and “temi,”⁹ which is a verb meaning “to fill something up.” Perhaps the phrase could be filling up with sadness, or experiencing a great deal of sadness, but without knowing what “huiztla” means, the phrase remains incomplete.

Again, the same situation presents itself at the end of the fourth stanza with the lines: “Malinala nomac temi! / ¡Malinala nomac temi!” (Escobar Galindo 412). Without knowing what “malinala” means, it is not possible to complete the phrase. Having a complete phrase is especially important when it comes to Nahuatl and its dialects,

because as has been mentioned before, Nahuatl creates phrases by adding words together to form longer, complex phrases which may have more than one meaning.

One may well wonder: what happens to the meaning of the poem, to its message if the reader does not speak or read Nahuatl-Pipil? I propose that the words in Nahuatl-Pipil then become an onomatopoeic recourse within the poem. They add sound and rhythm, Hispanicized, of course, because the reader does not know where the tonic accents would fall when reading the words in Nahuatl-Pipil. The overall meaning of the poem may still be the same, since the aim of the poem is to venerate the goddess Itzpapalotl.

One could also argue that “Ofrenda a Itzpapalotl” is actually two poems—one that exists when the reader knows Nahuatl-Pipil, and one that exists when only the lines in Spanish are present. Since Nahua poetry operates on various levels of symbolism and interpretation, it is fitting that there are at least two possible ways to read the poem.

Curiously, the poem “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” does not have the same possibility for multiple interpretations based primarily on the reader’s ability to read Nahuatl-Pipil, because Geoffroy Rivas only uses two words in Nahuatl-Pipil throughout the poem.

Another difference between the two poems is that in “Ofrenda a Itzpapalotl” the focus is on invoking and appeasing the goddess Itzpapalotl, whereas in “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” Geoffroy Rivas emphasizes the ritual of the dance itself, as we can see in the first two stanzas:

Tiembla la tierra.

Ya comienza la danza.

Que un viento de alegría hinche los
caracoles.

⁷ See “teponaztli,” *Gran Diccionario Nahuatl*.

⁸ See “Nomac,” *Gran Diccionario Nahuatl*.

⁹ See “Temi,” *Gran Diccionario Nahuatl*.

Canten las chirimías un canto de
alabanza.
Marquen los teponaztles el ritmo
trepidante.
Que todos los guerreros golpeen sus
Escudos
y hagan sonar los cascabeles que
adornan sus tobillos.
(Escobar Galindo 410)

Just like in “Ofrenda a Itzpapalot,” the poetic voice in this poem represents a collectivity, it is speaking to society as a whole but especially to the musicians, the dancers, and the warriors. Geoffroy Rivas gives us a vivid description of the beginning of the dance: one can almost hear the conch shells that are being blown to begin the dance, as well as the strum of the *chirimías* (a stringed instrument¹⁰) and the beat of the *teponaztles* (“teponaztli,” *Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*), with the dancers keeping time with the sound of the jingling bells that embellish their ankles. It is a joyous dance in honor of Chiconcoat, the goddess of fertility, agriculture and maize, who becomes Chiconcoatl (*Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*) in the Nahuatl of Central Mexico, but is better known as Chicomecoatl (*Gran Diccionario Náhuatl*), which means Seven-Serpents.¹¹ Her name represents maize, as the “seven serpents” represent seven maize kernels (“Chicomecóatl es la gran diosa”) to be planted for the next harvest. However, the focus of the poem is the dance, rather than the goddess. The detailed description of the dance continues in the third stanza:

¡Venid, venid!
¡Ya comienza la danza!

Que los altos penachos
estremezcan el aire con delirio de
plumas.
Que salgan las mujeres sagradas
y bailen sobre el ara de los sacrificios.
Que sus desnudos torsos se cubran de
sudor
— ¡oh licor deleitoso! —
y sus labios nos brinden saliva
perfumada
con semillas de bálsamo.
(Escobar Galindo 410)

Here we can imagine the warriors dancing with their tall, plumed headdresses, and the young priestesses dancing over the sacrificial altar¹². The poetic voice calls out to the people to come to the dance. In stanzas four through six, the poetic voice exhorts the dancers to greet the deity and to worship her:

¡Danzad, danzad, Señores de la Tierra!
Saludad a la Reina que llega.
Inclinad la cabeza
Frente a la Montaña de los Alaridos.

Danzad, danzad en la ribera
donde el agua se pinta de amarillo.

¡Danzad, danzad, oh Príncipes!
(Escobar Galindo 410)

In these stanzas, however, we notice that the dance has been moved from the sacrificial altar to the sacred mountain where sacrifices were made to Tlaloc, the god of rain, and then to the banks of a river that has turned yellow. This would seem to indicate that the ritual dance that Geoffroy Rivas is describing, or rather, invoking, is not a specific dance that existed, but rather a composite of

danced on the sacrificial altar. This appears to be an image based on poetic license by Geoffroy Rivas.

¹⁰ See “Chirimía,” *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*.

¹¹ Because the goddess Chiconcoat is most commonly known as Chicomecoatl, rather than Chiconcoatl, I have opted to refer to this deity as Chicomecoatl in my analysis of this poem.

¹² Though there were priestesses dedicated to the cult of Chicomecoatl, I have found no evidence that they

different moments and places found in the worship of Chicomecoatl and Tlaloc.

This can be explained when we consider that the Nahua gods and goddesses have many different aspects and often transform from one aspect to another, as we can see in the following description of the goddesses Coatlicue and Chicomecoatl:

La diosa Coatlicue también es madre de la diosa Chicomecóatl la diosa del maíz, interpretándola como la misma diosa que fecunda, que es fértil y que provee el maíz y el sustento. De igual forma relacionada con las serpientes puesto que su significado es (siete serpientes), hermana de Tláloc, cuya identificación de esta representación se manifiesta en la misma Coatlicue [...]. (Zanaboni Velázquez)

Thus, the inclusion of the Cerro Tláloc, called “Montaña de los Alaridos” in the poem, as well as of the river, makes sense, because while Chicomecoatl is the goddess of agriculture and of maize, it is Tlaloc who controls the rain that will be needed for the crops to grow.

The use of yellow to describe the river is also symbolic of Chicomecoatl as the goddess of maize:

Yellow: this bright hue, reminiscent of maize—a staple in the Aztec diet—represented food, abundance, and prosperity. It was a nod to the golden fields of corn that sustained their civilization. These colors, whether splashed on temple walls, woven into garments or painted in their sacred codices, were more than just aesthetic choices. They were the Aztecs’ way of understanding their world, their gods, and themselves, a visual language rich in symbolism and deep cultural significance. (“What are the Aztec colors?”)

Taking this into consideration, the river water turning yellow makes perfect sense as another representation of Chicomecoatl. In stanza eight the poetic voice continues the imagery of the dancing princes, who are also warriors, as it tells them to raise the banners over the obsidian points of the spears: “Levantad las banderas / sobre las obsidianas de las lanzas. / ¡Que se rompan los dardos” (Escobar Galindo 411). However, with the call to break the darts—which is a reference to a weapon called the *atlatl*, used by Mexica warriors—the joyous tone of the poem becomes somber.

Stanza nine focuses on the rite of human sacrifice, and in stanza 10 the poetic voice urges the dancers to tear their clothes, perhaps in penance:

Que el pedernal sagrado
abra los pechos de cuatro mil doncellas.
Que los virginales corazones,
como flores vivientes,
caigan a los pies de Nuestra Madre,
la Alta Flor Amarilla,
la del divino Muslo.

¡Danzad, danzad!
¡Golpead sobre la tierra!
¡Rasgad los atavíos!
(Escobar Galindo 411)

The human sacrifice that Geoffroy Rivas describes is another sign that the poet is creating a composite image of many ritual dances in this poem, because it is well-documented that the human sacrifice made to Chicomecoatl during the festival in her honor that occurred in September, consisted of one young girl that was decapitated and whose blood was then poured over a statue of the goddess. The sacrificial victim’s skin was then flayed and worn by the priests (“Chicomecóatl es la gran diosa”). It was not four thousand virgins, as Geoffroy Rivas states in the poem. Nevertheless, the poet may be referencing the number of sacrificial victims that was estimated by the Mexica

themselves to have been sacrificed when the Templo Mayor was dedicated in Tenochtitlan in 1487 (“Human Sacrifices”), so the number may not be an exaggeration. But this was not a part of the human sacrifices made to Chicomecoatl.

In this stanza we can also see the vivid imagery of the hearts of the sacrificial maidens (“virginales corazones”) turned into living flowers (“flores vivientes”) that fall at the feet of the deity. Chicomecoatl herself is referred to as our mother (“Nuestra Madre”) and as Tall Yellow Flower (“Alta Flor Amarilla”), emphasizing her role as mother goddess, as stated by León-Portilla, who refers to her as “La diosa madre, pero esta vez relacionada con el maíz, sustento de todos los hombres” (Zanaboni Velázquez). Yellow reiterates her role as the goddess of maize, agriculture and fertility.

The last attribute that Geoffroy Rivas gives Chicomecoatl is that of the deity that is associated with an image called the divine Thigh. This is confusing, because the image of the divine Thigh is usually associated with Itzpapalotl (“Itzpapalotl,” *Academic Accelerator Encyclopedia*). However, Itzpapalotl is also known as Quilaztli, and another aspect of Quilaztli is Cihuacoatl. Cihuacoatl, in turn, may also be an aspect of Chicomecoatl (“Chicomecoatl, Seven-Serpents”). If this is indeed the case, then naming Chicomecoatl “la del divino Muslo” is a coherent addition to the description of the goddess.

In stanza ten the poetic voice continues to encourage the dancers, but this time, it also tells them to tear their clothes, which can be seen as a form of ritual penance and humbling of oneself. The poem has turned somber, and the cries of the poetic voice acquire a desperate edge, which is revealed in the last, climactic line of the poem: “¡Se está quemando el corazón del agua, / oh Escogidos!” (Escobar Galindo 411). The poem ends with an anguished cry of what is happening outside of the ritual, which also explains why the offering to Chicomecoatl is needed in the first place: there has been no

rain, and the water is drying up. The ritual dance is desperately needed to appease Chicomecoatl, so that the maize will grow, and the crops will be abundant.

It is hoped that the analysis of the poems “Ofrenda a Itzpapalot” and “Danza ritual en honor de Chiconcoat” has shown that Pedro Geoffroy Rivas used the *Cantares mexicanos* as inspiration for the writing of these two poems. They are an extraordinary fusion of Hispanic poetic form and Nahua poetics. To analyze them, one must use a method of comparison: first of the poems of *Cantares mexicanos* to the two primary poems in *Yulcuicat*, and second, of the words themselves written in Nahuatl with the definitions found in different dictionaries, which then must be put back into the context found in Geoffroy Rivas’ poems.

Even though the poems are written primarily in Spanish, the imagery used to describe the goddesses and the dancers, the allusions to the rituals of human sacrifice, the use of the word “flower” to describe the hearts of the sacrificial victims, the use of a poetic voice that is speaking to and for a collectivity, and the inclusion of words in Nahuatl and Nahuatl-Pipil within the poems point to the profound influence of Nahua poetry on this twentieth-century Salvadoran poet. This is a topic that merits further research not only within the work of Pedro Geoffroy Rivas, but also in the work of other Salvadoran poets, such as José Roberto Cea, Uriel Valencia, Alfredo Espino, and Francisco Gavidia. This analysis demonstrates that despite the enthusiastic embrace of Euro-pean aesthetics predominant among Salvadoran poets during the twentieth century, there was also a strong undercurrent of appreciation and knowledge of Nahua poetic discourse. The desire to incorporate it into their poetry into the latter may be related to a desire to redefine Salvadoran national identity, as well as a refusal to forget their Native American roots. Only time – and more research – will tell.

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